

Blue Heron
Scott Metcalfe, *director*

St. Cecilia Parish, Boston
Wednesday, June 25 & Thursday, June 26, 2014, 3:30 p.m.

Ave cujus conceptio

Nicholas Ludford
(c. 1490–1557)

Songs from the Fayrfax MS & Henry VIII's Songbook

Alas it is I
Round: Downbery down
Round: Alone I leffe alone
Madame d'amours

Edmund Turges (c. 1450–?)
William Daggere
Doctor Cooper
Anonymous

Missa Spes nostra

Gloria
Credo
Sanctus
Agnus Dei

Robert Jones
(fl. 1520–1535)

Blue Heron Singers

Treble

Julia Steinbok
Sonja Tengblad
Shari Wilson

Mean

Jennifer Ashe
Pamela Dellal
Martin Near

Contratenor

Owen McIntosh
Jason McStoots

Tenor

Michael Barrett
Mark Sprinkle

Bass

Cameron Beauchamp
Paul Guttry
David McFerrin

Program Sponsors

This program is generously supported by David Belville and Ray Cornils.

Program Notes

This program is part of Blue Heron's long-range project of performing and recording long-unsung music from the so-called Henrician set of partbooks now at Peterhouse, Cambridge. The partbooks contain a large collection of masses, Magnificats, and votive antiphons. They were copied in the latter years of the reign of Henry VIII at Magdalen College, Oxford, by the professional singer and music scribe Thomas Bull, just before Bull left Oxford to take up a new position in the choir of Canterbury Cathedral. Canterbury had been recently re-founded as a secular (i.e., non-monastic) institution; it aspired to considerably more pomp and circumstance than its monastic predecessor, which typically did not attempt virtuosic polyphonic music, and so it quickly moved to hire a choir of professional singers, like Bull, and to recruit choirboys. The new choir required a new library of up-to-date polyphonic repertory. This Bull supplied, bringing about seventy works with him from Oxford.

The new choral establishment at Canterbury would not last long. Henry died in 1547, and the Protestant Reformation that ensued took a dim view of such popish decorations as professional choirs and the highly sophisticated Latin music they sang. All the elaborate polyphonic music of late-medieval English Catholicism became, at best, obsolete; at worst, it was viewed as gaudy ornament to a despicable ritual. Very few collections of church music survived. The main sources extant from the entire first half of the sixteenth century are a mere three choirbooks, four sets of partbooks, and one organ manuscript. (Compare this paucity to, for example, the *sixteen* choirbooks owned in 1524 by Magdalen College alone.) We do not know what happened to Bull's five partbooks after 1547, but, by the 1630s, they had made their way to the library of Peterhouse, where they would survive yet another cataclysm of destruction, wrought by the Puritans in the 1640s.

Most of Bull's partbooks survived. The tenor book disappeared, along with several pages of the treble. Of the seventy-two pieces in the set, thirty-nine are transmitted uniquely, while another dozen or so are incomplete in other sources. The result is that some fifty pieces of music—a significant portion of what survives from pre-Reformation England—now lack their tenor, and some of these are also missing all or part of their treble. In the Peterhouse repertoire, music by the most famous masters of the early sixteenth century, such as John Taverner and Thomas Tallis, sits next to music by less-celebrated but nonetheless first-class composers, such as Nicholas Ludford and Hugh Aston, and a number of wonderful pieces by musicians whose careers are poorly documented and who have been virtually forgotten for the simple reason that so little of their work survives: Robert Jones, Richard Pygott, John Mason, and others.

We are able to sing the Peterhouse music today thanks to the extraordinarily skilled recomposition of the missing parts by the English musicologist Nick Sandon. Sandon completed his dissertation on the Peterhouse partbooks in 1983, including in it recompositions of most of the missing lines; in the years since, he has been refining his work and gradually issuing it in Antico Edition. For Robert Jones's *Missa Spes nostra* and Nicholas Ludford's *Ave cujus conceptio*, Sandon recomposed the entire tenor line.

Ave cujus conceptio

That anyone today knows much about the music of Nicholas Ludford is due largely to the accident of his music being preserved in some quantity: his music is found in four of the seven choral sources mentioned above. The three sources besides the Peterhouse partbooks can all be connected in some way to his place of employment for most of his life, the Royal Free Chapel of St. Stephen in the Palace of Westminster. *Ave cujus conceptio* sets five stanzas on the Five Corporal Joys of Our Lady: her Conception, Nativity, Annunciation, Purification, and Assumption. The text was a popular one, printed in many books of Hours and set by several other English composers. Ludford's antiphon is warm and genial, filled with cascades of melisma.

Secular Songs

If we have very few early Tudor sources of sacred polyphony, the situation for secular song is even more dire, for a mere three manuscripts transmit virtually all that we know of the repertory. The *Fayrfax MS* contains music mostly by composers at the court of Henry VII and dates from c. 1505. We sample a serious song, "Alas it is I," by Edmund Turges (or possibly Robert Fayrfax). The other three songs come from Henry VIII's songbook of c. 1510–1520, which, although not actually owned by Henry VIII, contains thirty-four pieces ascribed to him and seems to represent a courtly repertory, lighter in tone than that of the *Fayrfax MS*, from the early years of Henry's reign. It cannot be said that Henry's are the best works in the volume, and we have chosen instead a pair of elaborate, virtuosic, and rather odd rounds by characters named Daggere and Cooper, and the lovely, anonymous "Madame d'amours."

Missa Spes nostra

Virtually nothing is known about Robert Jones's life except that he was a singer in the Royal Household Chapel from around 1520 until about 1534. The *Missa Spes nostra* and a Magnificat (both found only in the Peterhouse partbooks), plus the bass part of a song, are all that remain of his music. He quotes the melody of the chant *Spes nostra*, an antiphon for Matins on Trinity Sunday, in its entirety in the tenor in every movement of the Mass, and the chant's striking first gesture, rising from the final of the mode through the triad above and up to the seventh scale degree, is given to the treble at the beginning of each movement. (As usual in sixteenth-century English polyphonic settings, the *Missa Spes nostra* does not include a Kyrie.) Full of supple melody and lustrous harmony, the Mass is the unique creation of a highly skilled and inspired composer with a distinct individual voice, singing out to us across a divide of more than four and a half centuries.

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