

*SHAKESPEARE AUTHORSHIP ROUNDTABLE*  
*Sunday, January 22, 2012*  
*Home of Sally Mosher*

*ENGLISH MUSIC IN THE 16<sup>th</sup> CENTURY*  
*Talk by Sally Mosher*

*SONGS:*

<i>Now Is the Month of Maying</i>	<i>Thomas Morley</i>
<i>What If a Day</i>	<i>attr. Thomas Campion</i>
<i>The Three Ravens</i>	<i>Traditional Ballad</i>
<i>The Willow Song</i>	<i>Time of Elizabeth</i>
<i>The British Grenadiers</i>	<i>Traditional</i>

*Sylvia Holmes*

*MUSIC FOR THE VIRGINAL:*

<i>Alman</i>	<i>William Byrd</i>
<i>The Queen's Alman</i>	<i>William Byrd</i>
<i>Amarilli di Julio Romano</i>	<i>Peter Phillips</i>
<i>Toccata Prima</i>	<i>Frescobaldi</i>
<i>Variations on Byrd's Ashdon</i>	<i>Sally Mosher</i>

*Sally Mosher*

# ENGLISH MUSIC IN THE 16<sup>th</sup> CENTURY COURT AND COUNTRYSIDE

By Sally Mosher

January 22, 2012

Many of you know that Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth were ardent, gifted amateur musicians. They sang, performed competently on several stringed instruments (high ranking people didn't play wind instruments then), and danced the often very athletic court dances with gusto. Henry was also a composer. About three dozen of his compositions survive, among them Motets and Masses (both of these are sacred choral works). His best known composition is one of the lighter works, a rollicking song titled "Pastime with Good Company." Henry considered musicians "ministers of pastime."

Under Henry, the English court became a haven for gifted musicians. Indeed, England as a whole came to be regarded as a uniquely musical place. Elizabeth enthusiastically carried on Henry's tradition of royal patronage.

Born in 1491, Henry was the son of the first Tudor monarch, Henry VII, who defeated Richard III in 1485 at the Battle of Bosworth Field. Henry VII spent most of his energy bolstering his rather dubious claim to the throne, fostering European alliances, and repairing damage from the bloody, internecine strife of the Wars of the Roses.

The younger of two sons, young Henry was educated for a high church office, probably destined to be a Cardinal. Because of

this, music was a substantial part of his training. His older brother Arthur's death in 1502 during one of the epidemics of a mysterious illness called "the sweating sickness" changed everything for Henry. However, young Henry's talent for music had already shown itself, and so he continued to study music until he succeeded to the throne in 1509.

Throughout Henry's reign, music was a vital part of court life, and was prominent in all the ceremonies and entertainments there. Beginning with a musical performance during Henry's coronation banquet, music regularly enriched such events as meetings between heads of state, processions, banquets, revels, plays, and tournaments. For a parallel, imagine that the performance of an oratorio or a chamber symphony were considered an essential feature of the ceremonies surrounding a formal meeting between the US President and British Prime Minister.

At the time of Henry's death in 1547, his group of professional instrumentalists (The King's Musick) numbered about sixty, about half of whom were from the continent, while the professional vocal group (Gentlemen of the Chapel Royal) numbered 32 men, supplemented by a choir of twelve boys. These numbers were somewhat reduced during Elizabeth's reign, only because she was often short of cash. This organization of court music into two groups continued until the English Civil War of the 1640's.

Intellectually precocious, Elizabeth showed musical talent from the first. Aside from Henry's abilities, Anne Boleyn was an accomplished player on the virginals, and sang to Henry during their "Courtship," accompanying herself on the lute. An Italian

made virginal in the Victoria and Albert Museum has the Boleyn coat of arms, and it's thought that Elizabeth played on it.

From the time of her Mother's death when she was two, until her accession to the throne at age 25, Elizabeth led a retired, and often precarious, life. Among the positive aspects of this was the opportunity it afforded for study and the development of her abilities. Among her priorities when she came to the throne was the importance of music in the life of her court, including the dance. She declared that she started each day with a few galliards (a lively dance involving jumps).

Although England was considered a second rate power until the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and regarded as a provincial backwater by supercilious visiting French and Spanish nobles, English royalty and members of the nobility were usually very well educated at home, and often well-travelled on the continent as well. In addition to music, Henry's education and later Elizabeth's included instruction in Latin, Greek and several foreign languages, extensive reading of Greek and Roman classical literature in the original languages, as well as dancing, horsemanship, exquisite penmanship, and other appurtenances of a life of high position (read about this type of education in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*

Elizabeth could converse and orate fluently in Latin, and communicated with foreign diplomats in their own languages. Intervening Tudor monarchs - the sickly Edward VI, the luckless Lady Jane Grey of the nine days, and the unfortunate Mary I - were equally well educated.

Some years before Henry became the de facto founder of the Protestant Church of England (he considered himself a Catholic minus those bossy folks in Rome), his most famous written work was a Latin essay defending the Catholic Church, for which the Pope proclaimed him a “Defender of the Faith.” This is the ironic basis on which the Protestant English monarchs’ designation as Defenders of the Faith rests.

There were many European influences at the English court, and much intermingling through marriage. Henry’s first wife was the Spanish Princess Catherine of Aragon, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, and aunt of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (one reason the Pope didn’t want to permit Henry’s divorce from her), while his second wife, the elegant Anne Boleyn, has spent many years being polished at the French court. Henry’s brief fourth marriage was to a German Princess. His sister Mary married the King of France, and his daughter, Queen Mary I, married a Spaniard (later King Philip II), who in his brief visits to England in the 1550’s was accompanied by a large entourage, including the composer Antonio Cabezón. Music from these European countries was known at the English court, although right from the first English music was distinctively English.

Throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there was increasing self-consciousness about the ideal comportment for a courtier or a gentleman, with the most influential book on the subject being the Italian Baldessare Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano*, first published in 1528. This was widely read throughout Europe, and translated into English as “The Book of the Courtier” by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1561. The aristocratic Castiglione was a courtier himself, also serving as an ambassador for both Urbino and Mantua, and later as a Papal Nuncio. He regarded his writing as a pastime, a spare-

time avocation, and thought that this was how any courtier should regard both literary and musical pursuits. Of course, he wrote, a courtier should be competent in music. Indeed, music was “not only an ornament, but a necessity for the courtier.” The courtier just wasn’t supposed to play music as a professional.

In the 1580’s, composer William Byrd, a special favorite of Queen Elizabeth, wrote eloquently about the many benefits of singing. He thought everyone would be better off in all ways, including their physical and mental well-being, if they practiced singing. By 1597, the English lutenist and composer Thomas Morley in his *Plain and Easy Introduction to Practical Music* said that it was expected that all educated people could read music, and sing at sight from a page of printed vocal music. Henry VIII was certainly able to do this, but it only became common and fashionable in Elizabeth’s reign. This requirement for competence in music continued throughout the reign of James I (1603-25), and in 1622 Henry Peacham wrote in his famous book *The Compleat Gentleman* that a gentleman was expected to possess “the ability to sing your part sure, and at the first sight, to play the same upon your violl or lute.”

Throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century, music was a vital, integral part of life for all English people, not just for courtiers, with popular song and dance tunes arranged for aristocratic consumption by most English composers, notably the pre-eminent William Byrd. Further, during the 16<sup>th</sup> century there wasn’t the prejudicial distinction between “popular” and “high” music which came to exist throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and which continues to color the thinking of classically trained musicians.

The English music publisher William Chappell, in his wonderful 1893 classic *Old English Popular Music*, describes the musical life of the English people during Elizabeth's reign: "Tinkers sang catches, milkmaids sang ballads, carters whistled; each trade, and even the beggars, had their special songs; the bass viol hung in the drawing room for the amusement of waiting visitors; and the lute, cittern, and virginals for the amusement of waiting customers, were the necessary furniture of the barber's shop. They had music at dinner; music at supper; music at weddings; music at funerals; music at night; music at dawn; music at work; and music at play."

Religious music at court was the charge of the Gentlemen of the Chapel Royal, an organization dating from the Middle Ages. The 32 professional male singers were supplemented by a choir of twelve boys. At this time, all professional singers were male. Voices were far more natural-sounding during the Renaissance, and generally smaller in volume, since they were not developed for operatic demands. In addition to the male choristers and the boys, there was at least one organist. From the 1570's on, William Byrd shared this position with his mentor, Thomas Tallis, until Tallis's death, and later Byrd's protege John Bull held the post.

The Gentlemen were an elite group, and gaining admission was difficult. However, once a member, you generally were there until death. Since recommendations were important for gaining admission, connections counted. There is a record book of the chapel called *The Old Chequebook of the Chapel Royal*, which lists all the members from 1561 through 1744, telling of each new member's appointment upon the death of an old member, listing the appointments of dignitaries and describing special services, including a few weddings.

Both Henry and Elizabeth made a circuit of their palaces every year, since the court could number as many as two thousand people, and the palaces were sorely in need of cleaning after the court had been in residence for a while. Elizabeth's regular circuit included about ten palaces, and most summers she went on a "progress" to visit areas of her realm, another purpose being to save money by staying as a guest at the estates of favored courtiers. Some of these "favored" nobles were plunged into debt entertaining her. Some of the Gentlemen of the Chapel traveled with her. Thus, the "Chapel Royal" was not so much a place as it was an institution, and it existed wherever the sovereign was.

Agents searched throughout the kingdom for talented singing boys for the chapel, and some of these were "pressed" into the chapel's service. Of course, the singing boys had a supervising teacher, who was an employee of the chapel, and they were provided with lodging, food, and appropriate clothes for performing.

Some of the members of the chapel, including Tullis, Byrd and Bull, had an extensive musical life beyond their duties providing religious music. William Cornysh was Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal during the first part of Henry VIII's reign. Cornysh was charged with providing the elaborate music and pageantry for the famous Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, a meeting between Henry and King Francois I of France, and throughout his career he provided many plays, interludes, and various sorts of secular entertainments for the court.



The Gentlemen of the Chapel and boys were paid by the day, a custom dating to the Middle Ages for most English workers, which survived in some instances through the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Gentlemen received seven and a half pence per day in the time of Henry VIII, and about the same during Elizabeth's reign, plus a generous allowance for special apparel, which might be as high as twelve pounds for cloth and the making of a garment for performing. At this time, the English pound contained twenty shillings, with each shilling broken into twelve pence (pennies). Translating into contemporary money, each penny had at least \$5 to \$10 in buying power.

Instrumental music for all non-religious occasions was provided by The King's (or Queen's) Musick, which was arranged into groups of instruments called consorts. A consort consisted of members of the same family of instruments, from the highest down to the lowest pitch. Either the groups of players, or the instruments themselves, were called consorts.

From about 1575 on, there were also groups called "mixed" or "broken" consorts. The broken consort originated on the continent, and supposedly made the first appearance at the Kenilworth entertainments the Earl of Leicester staged for Elizabeth during her summer progress of 1575. The broken consort was so appealing to the English - they thought the sound just heavenly - that it came to be particularly associated with them. Whenever Shakespeare speaks of "broken music," he is referring to a broken consort.

Among the instruments used in consorts were viols, violins, lutes, citterns (guitar like instruments with wire strings), flutes, cornets, (wood trumpets), shawms (precursors of the oboe), and

sackbuts (early trombones). The usual grouping for a broken consort was treble viol, flute, bass viol, lute, cittern and pandora (bass lute; wire strung, invented by John Rose of London in 1562). Not surprisingly, the softer-sounding instruments were used indoors, and the louder ones were more often used in the open air. Elizabeth's dinners and dancing were generally accompanied by consorts of viols or violins.

In addition, there was an elite group of royal trumpeters numbering about a dozen players, which together with drums played for the entrances, processions, and in general any situation requiring a fanfare. Trumpets were employed to play a personal fanfare announcing the entry of nobles at court, or when then traveled to cities and towns. A nobleman's own personal fanfare tune was called a "tucket." Less exalted personages were introduced by a kind of generic fanfare called a "sennet." There are a number of references to tuckets and sennets in Shakespeare's plays. Iago speaks of hearing "Othello's trumpets," which tell him that the moor has arrived, although he is still offstage. See also "All's Well That Ends Well."

At this time, all wind players anywhere were professionals, as were all the string players at court. Music in the towns and cities was provided by groups of wind players, mostly trumpets and sackbuts, called "waits." These were in the pay of the townships, and by the 16<sup>th</sup> century might include other instruments and singers, even acrobats.

Separate from the consorts was the virginal. While it was occasionally pressed into service as an accompanying or ensemble player, including use for vocal accompaniments, the virginal was principally a solo instrument. None of the famous

virginalists of the era were part of the Musick “staff.” During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the word “virginal” (or virginals, or pair of virginals) was used to describe any plucked string keyboard instrument.

Members of The Queen’s Musick earned twenty pence per day, often rounded out to thirty pounds per year, and many of them supplemented this income substantially by making instruments, which they sold in England and on the continent. A number of foreign-born players were members of the same family. Best known are the Bassanos, about six of whom arrived in the 1530’s. Their descendants continued to work for the crown until the last family member died in the 1660’s. In the 1970’s traditional Shakespeare scholar A. L. Rowse proposed that one of the Bassanos (Emilia) was the mysterious “Dark Lady” of the sonnets.