



STUDIES IN MUSIC

Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court

John Stevens



Tudor Court

31
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Music & Poetry
in the Early Tudor Court

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Preface

The reprinting of this book has enabled me to make a number of small corrections (including the Addenda to Appendix D, on p. 476); but this is in no substantial sense a revised edition. In the labour of correction I have been greatly helped by the demanding and unwavering attention to detail of Dr Michael Smith and of the staff of the Cambridge University Press.

I should like, if I may, to draw to the reader's notice a volume which in a sense completes the contribution I hoped to make when I first began to study the songs of the early sixteenth century. The publication in 1975 of *Early Tudor Songs and Carols*, Musica Britannica, vol. xxxvi, means that virtually the whole corpus of surviving early Tudor song is now available in print, forming a 'musical companion' to the texts printed in Appendix A of this book.

JOHN STEVENS

St Mary Magdalene's Day 1978

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank – the Royal Musical Association and Stainer and Bell Ltd for permission to quote from my edition of BM Add. MS 31922 (*Henry VIII's MS*) which will appear shortly as *Music at the Court of Henry VIII*, *Musica Britannica*, vol. xviii; the Royal Musical Association also for permission to reprint in chapter 11 some material published in 'Carols and Court-songs of the Early Tudor Period', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, vol. lxxvii (1951); Mme Nanie Bridgman, and Professor Rossell Hope Robbins for giving me copies of their unpublished dissertations; Dr Arthur Brown, Dr A. W. Byler, Dr David Lumsden, and Mrs Catharine K. Miller for allowing me to use and quote from their unpublished dissertations; the Trustees of the British Museum for permission to publish in full the words of three early Tudor song-books, BM Add. MSS 5465, 5665 and 31922, and to reproduce as frontispiece f.27 of Add. MS 5465.

From among many who have kindly read this book in whole or in part I single out a few who have earned my special gratitude: Mr Thurston Dart greatly helped me, particularly in the early stages, with many musical problems; Dr Macdonald Emslie and Mrs H. M. Shire have regularly allowed me to discuss words-and-music with them over many years; Mr Arthur Sale kindly undertook to read the whole book in typescript and offered many comments on substance and on detail; Professor Bruce Dickins advised me about the Literary Text and its notes; Mr A. Bonvalot, Mr Thurston Dart, Rev. A. J. Denney, Dr A. I. Doyle, Dr Macdonald Emslie, Mr P. J. Frankis, Dr R. L. Greene, Dr F. Ll. Harrison, Dr D. Lumsden, Professor R. H. Robbins, Mrs H. M. Shire and Mr Denis Stevens helped me with contributions or corrections to Appendix B, Index of Selected Songs; Miss Carolyn de Sainte Croix, Mr John Daw and the Revd Michael Waters rendered invaluable help in the correction of proofs.

Finally, a particular debt to Mr H. A. Mason will be obvious to anyone who has read his book, *Humanism and Poetry in the Early Tudor Period*, 1959. But my sense of indebtedness is of much longer standing than this, for it was under the stimulus of his encouragement and scepticism that I first began to see the problems of music and poetry in a proper social context.

Author's Note

The letter H or F or R in brackets followed by a number, e.g. [H50], refers the reader to Appendix A, Literary Text, where he will find the texts of all the poems in the three main song-books together with information about musical settings, related poems, etc. Small numbers in the text refer to the Notes at the end of each chapter.

The word 'Song' followed by a number, refers the reader to Appendix B, Index of Selected Songs, where he will find a note about the source of the song and its musical setting (if any), and other references.

Works cited more than once are described throughout the footnotes either by abbreviation, or by author's name, or by name and short title. The Reference List (Appendix D) provides an alphabetical key and gives fuller details. Thus, 'Huizinga, 56' refers to J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Eng. edn, 1924), p. 56; GGB no. 60 refers to *A Compendious Book of Godly and Spiritual Songs, commonly known as 'The Gude and Godlie Ballatis'*, ed. Mitchell, A. F., Scottish Text Society, 1897, no. 60.

Throughout the quotations in this book I have standardized the old spellings and orthography in accordance with the principles described on p. 337, second paragraph.

Contents

PREFACE	<i>page</i> ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	x
AUTHOR'S NOTE	xi
INTRODUCTION: THE SONG-BOOKS	I

Part One: Music and Poetry

1 THE PROBLEM – ASSUMPTIONS AND DISTINCTIONS	27
2 THE TRADITION AND THE DIVORCE	33
3 POPULAR SONGS	40
4 IDEAS AND THEORIES, MEDIEVAL AND HUMANIST	58
5 THE REFORMATION	74
6 MUSIC AND THE EARLY TUDOR LYRIC, I: SONG-BOOKS AND MUSICAL SETTINGS	98
7 MUSIC AND THE EARLY TUDOR LYRIC, II: THE 'LITERARY' LYRIC AND ITS TUNES	116

Part Two: Courtly Love and the Courtly Lyric

8 INTRODUCTORY: 'A NEW COMPANY OF COURTLY MAKERS'?	147
9 THE 'GAME OF LOVE'	154
10 THE COURTLY MAKERS FROM CHAUCER TO WYATT	203

Part Three: Music at Court

11 MUSIC IN CEREMONIES, ENTERTAINMENTS AND PLAYS	233
12 DOMESTIC AND AMATEUR MUSIC	265

Contents

13 PROFESSIONAL MUSICIANS	<i>page</i> 296
EPILOGUE: THE SONG-BOOKS REVISITED	329
APPENDICES:	
A. LITERARY TEXT AND NOTES	337
Postscript: The Drexel Fragments	426
B. INDEX OF SELECTED SONGS	429
C. LIST OF SOURCES	461
D. REFERENCE LIST OF BOOKS AND ARTICLES	469
INDEX	477

INTRODUCTION

The Song-books

There is something deeply fascinating and stirring to the imagination in handling an old book or manuscript. Like any household stuff, a book is the thing itself. This cover was held, these pages were turned, these lines were read by people long dead who have left perhaps scarcely a name behind them. At moments like these we feel the closeness of the living past, its solid physical presence. And yet, this sense of 'the warm reality' quickly and inevitably gives way to a sense of bafflement. What fascinated us by its closeness now fascinates by its mystery. How little we know, how little we can ever know, of those who wrote and read and owned the very books that lie in front of us. We should like to see – or, better, hear – them reading to themselves or one another, observe their gestures, accent and intonation, enter into their world of feeling and thought, into their certainties and doubts. But, because we cannot now challenge *them*, their familiar and well-loved 'objects' present a perpetual challenge to *us*. We are enticed so warmly, possession seems so near; and then a veil descends.

Those who are interested in early Tudor music and poetry can, if they go to the British Museum, have in front of them at one time three manuscripts which must for them exercise this peculiar kind of fascination to a marked degree. They are the three song-books which contain virtually all that is known of early Tudor song. They are not big; the largest is only $12'' \times 8\frac{1}{4}''$. The original binding of one is still preserved. It would be worth a great deal to have seen even one of them in use – to have seen the singers or instrumentalists, to have sensed the spirit of the occasion, the style of the performance and its reception. Unfortunately, the books can only stimulate, they cannot satisfy our imaginations.

The stimulus towards the exercise of historical imagination is powerfully, if crudely, aroused by a fairly typical song in the latest of the three song-books, the one which I shall refer to as *Henry VIII's MS*. Alongside the verses of a carol, 'Whilles lyve or breth is in my brest' [H50],¹ are

The Song-books

faintly scribbled the words – ‘henr[y?] henr[y?]’. The following two verses will give the tone of the poem:

My soverayne lorde for my poure sake
Six coursys at the ryng dyd make,
Of which four tymes he dyd it take;
Wherfor my hart I hym beqwest,
And of all other for to love best
My soverayne lorde.

My soverayne lord of pusant pure
As the chefteyne of a waryowere,
With spere and swerd at the barryoure
As hardy with the hardyest,
He provith hymselfe that I sey best,
My soverayne lorde. [H50]

The song clearly reflects the ‘correct’ chivalric attitude for a woman to adopt whose knight is jousting for her at a tournament. The ‘soverayne lord’, verse 3 makes clear, must be Henry VIII himself; the composer of the music was William Cornish; the author of the words is unknown.

A host of questions spring to mind: were the words written by a lady of the court? If not, by whom? Was her love part of real life? or was it a courtly game, fitting for a season of jousts and tournaments? Why was Cornish chosen to set the poem to music? And why did he, or the author, choose carol-form? Why is no music provided for the verses (only the burden – that is, the external refrain – is set)? What singers and instrumentalists performed it? On what occasions? Ceremonially, during a tournament, or privately, for the king’s pleasure? Finally, who scribbled ‘henr’, and what, if anything, does it signify? This list does not by any means exhaust the interesting questions that might be asked; it does not include all the questions, for instance, about the relationship between the words and the music. But it shows, I hope, the extent, the many-sidedness and the fascination of the problems involved in an understanding of early Tudor music and poetry. This book was written to provide some aids towards an understanding. It must start, where its author’s enquiry started, with an examination of the song-books themselves.

The Song-books

into the next reign but figure prominently in the manuscript. A younger generation of court-composers, however, is not represented – Lloyd ('Flude'), Farthing, Cooper, Pygott. Topical songs refer to the union of the two houses of Lancaster and York, and to the welfare of Prince Arthur, Henry VII's eldest son who died in 1502. The natural conclusion is that the song-book was written about the year 1500 or earlier, and reflects the taste of the court under the first Tudor king. The songs, which are all in English, are of three kinds: two- and three-part songs on themes of courtly love; others, designed on a larger scale, treating of the Passion and Christ's Pleading with Man; lastly, topical, satirical and humorous songs.

The next song-book, *Henry VIII's MS*,⁵ forms, as it were, a sequel to *The Fayrfax MS*. It is a manuscript of about the same size, beautifully written on vellum, with some initial letters decorated in blue, red and gold. It was, it seems, intimately connected with the life of the court. The convenient title must not be allowed to beg the question of its original ownership; it is meant chiefly to acknowledge the fact that thirty-one pieces in the manuscript bear the superscription, 'the kynge h.viii'. Numerically speaking, Henry VIII (with thirty-four compositions) is by far the most important composer of the book; the others, mostly musicians of his chapel, contributed as follows: Cornish, twelve pieces; Farthing, seven; Lloyd and Dr Cooper, three each; Fayrfax, two; and so on. One in every three pieces is anonymous.

Most of the items are English part-songs on courtly and chivalric themes, such as 'Adew, adew, my hartis lust' [H16] and 'Departure is my chef payne' [H56]. There are also, as in *The Fayrfax MS*, songs on topical and political themes: 'Englond, be glad' [H96] probably refers to Henry VIII's 'personal' invasion of France, in 1513, complete with the Chapel Royal and many members of the Household; 'Adew, adew, le company' [H68] must have been written for the festivities which celebrated the birth of a prince on New Year's Day, 1511. A likely dating for the manuscript on these and other grounds is c. 1515.

Henry VIII's MS differs from *The Fayrfax MS* in containing various other items besides English part-songs: foreign songs, instrumental pieces, musical puzzles, and rounds. The foreign songs include compositions by Hayne von Ghizeghem (fl. 1470), Agricola (fl. 1480) and Isaak (fl. 1480), as well as such 'international song-hits' as *En frolyk weson* [H4] and *Fors solemant* [H99]. One group of pieces without words is generally thought to be for instruments, probably recorders or mixed instruments,

The Song-books

since consorts of viols were, apparently, not fashionable in the English court until after about 1525. Another group of pieces without words consists of puzzle-canon: usually all the parts of the piece are written out except one which has to be reconstructed from a Latin riddle ('canon', here, simply means 'rule'). The rounds, lastly, are among the earliest, as well as the most complicated, English examples of the form; all except one are for three voices – perhaps, as the following verse suggests, for three soloists:

Now let us syng this rownd all thre;
Sent George, graunt hym the victory! [H97]

This manuscript differs again from *The Fayrfax MS* in having no religious songs. The moving Lullaby carol, *Quid petis, o fly* [H105], is the single exception.

Both *The Fayrfax* and *Henry VIII's MSS* belong indisputably to the court circle. They contain music by the principal composers of the royal chapel; the words of the songs point to a courtly audience. In some way, yet to be defined, they had their place in the life of the early Tudor court. However, the third principal source of secular songs is of a rather different kind: it has little obvious connection with the court; it was compiled over a number of years by a number of different scribes; its composers are either anonymous, or, if named, difficult to trace; and it contains, besides secular songs, forty-four carols, four Latin masses, many Latin motets and an English canticle. It is usually called *Ritson's MS* after its nineteenth-century owner.⁶

Ritson's MS comes from the West Country. As a book it is less tidy than the other two; at least eight different hands have been traced in it. The principal composer of the carols, all written in the traditional style of the medieval carol, was Richard Smert, rector for thirty years of the village of Plymtree (near Exeter), with which his name is linked in the manuscript itself. A fair-sized choir of skilled men and boys is required by the music; and the presence of ceremonial carols suggests elaborate ritual. Perhaps Exeter Cathedral was its place of origin. At a first glance, therefore, it might seem that the manuscript had changed hands before the secular songs were entered in it. There are two groups of these: some love-songs in the style of the Burgundian chanson of the fifteenth century, and a later group of songs similar to various English songs of *The Fayrfax* and *Henry VIII's MSS*. But a varied repertoire does not necessarily imply varied ownership. Every large ecclesiastical establishment had its social

The Song-books

responsibilities, such as entertaining princes and bishops, as well as its own internal needs. The convent of Glastonbury, for example, retained a harper, an 'idiot', and a 'French poet'.⁷ *Ritson's MS* contains just the items one would expect in the general-purpose song-book of a provincial establishment – songs suitable for many kinds of civil and religious occasions. The book may have been augmented, revised and kept in use over a period of fifty years (1470–1520?). Perhaps it passed at the end of this period into private hands, for there are signs in the last pieces of less professional composers and scribes at work.

The comparative intricacy of musical notation even in the early sixteenth century makes it possible to detect amateurishness with some certainty. Compared with contemporary church-music or with the secular songs of fifty years earlier, the songs of these three Tudor books are elementary. But they are certainly the work of professionals. There are signs (not only in puzzle-canon) that notation was still not, and was not intended to be, a means of easy communication. The three song-books show considerable variety. *Henry VIII's MS*, the latest, is also the simplest, because the songs are mostly in duple time; the carols of *Ritson's MS*, by contrast, written in black and red full notes, employ the standard devices of late medieval notation, designed for writing music in triple time – 'coloration', 'ligatures', 'alteration', 'imperfection', and so forth. *The Fayrfax MS* occupies a midway position.

The carols of *Ritson's MS* are also set out in a different way from the other songs. They are presented in what seems to us the natural way of presenting part-music – that is, in score. The voices are one above the other – *triplex* (treble), *medius* and *tenor* – though the chording, the vertical alignment, is very rough-and-ready. One traditional feature of this style of writing is that only the bottom part, the tenor, has the words. The arrangement of the other two books is that known as 'choir-book' arrangement. Each part is presented separately, not in separate books, as later became the fashion, but all on a single 'opening' of the manuscript. If the song is a long one, all the performers turn the page together. The large church manuscripts of this period and of this design meet the needs of a group of singers standing together at a lectern. Hence, the name 'choir-book'. *The Fayrfax* and *Henry VIII's MSS* copy the prevailing mode but are only large enough for a small group of singers.

Many poems of the period are known only from these musical manuscripts, and reconstruction of the original text is not always easy. Songs written in score present the words once only; so also do rounds. But they

The Song-books

at least spare an editor the trouble and difficulty of deciding between different readings in the different voices of a part-song.

These three song-books contain between them almost the whole repertory of early Tudor songs – that is, of poems set to music. There exist a few complete songs besides, such as those at Ripon and Wells; and a few fragments, mostly in Oxford and Cambridge libraries. Two more substantial books contain only single parts of songs. The printed *Twenty Songs* (1530), of which the bass only survives, is useless from the musical point of view. A manuscript from the Royal collection at the British Museum, which has tenor and counter-tenor parts to various songs, has at least some good ‘tunes’ (tenors) in it, such as the famous ‘Westron wynde’. There is a further bass-part in the Public Record Office, but of slightly later date.⁸

Other musical manuscripts survive, of course, from the early Tudor period, and some of them have a direct bearing on this study. But they are of a different kind and do not contain vernacular songs. Among them are the huge ecclesiastical ‘choir-books’ just referred to, such as the *Caius Choirbook*, which stands a yard high; anthologies of keyboard pieces, mostly for organ but some having secular titles, like ‘Fortune unkynde’ [Song 95];⁹ and musical treatises containing puzzles in musical notation. No English lute-music can be dated earlier than 1540; and there are no instrumental tutors or books of that sort. The great majority of surviving musical manuscripts and printed books are liturgical service-books and contain only plain-song to Latin words.¹⁰

The surviving English songs, then, are few. But poems (verses without music) can be numbered in their hundreds. The three main song-books contain only a small fraction of the total corpus of early Tudor verse. ‘Literary’ manuscripts are far more numerous than ‘musical’ ones. This is not a peculiarity of the early Tudor period. It applies throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Perhaps the most striking fact about the native sources of English medieval music is their paucity: important manuscripts, except of plain-song, can be numbered on the fingers. But nearly a hundred Middle English poems survive in ten or more versions: *Piers Plowman*, *The Canterbury Tales* and *Confessio Amantis* are each represented by fifty or more; and Richard Rolle’s celebrated poem, *The Prick of Conscience*, has over a hundred sources.¹¹ Allowing for the greater difficulty of writing music, these figures nevertheless prove that the public for verse was incomparably larger than that for written music. Nor has poetry been exceptionally favoured by the ravages of time.

The Song-books

Treatises on alchemy, grammar, medicine, theology, cooking, outdoor sports, etc., quite clutter the pages of late medieval manuscripts.¹² Music was in this respect the Cinderella of the arts and sciences. There are several reasons for this scarcity – among them, the vandalism of the Reformers. (A minor vandal has even scarred the carols of St Thomas of Canterbury in *Ritson's MS.*¹³) But one very likely explanation is that musical manuscripts were never numerous. Written part-music, I hope to show later, was until Elizabethan times a luxury only to be afforded by the few.¹⁴

The 'literary' sources of the early Tudor lyric are a fascinating study in themselves. Lyrics are found in many unexpected places, such as the work-books of lawyers, students and priests, in household account-books and on the backs of legal documents. But the two richest sources are commonplace-books, of private individuals or of communities, and poetical anthologies of various kinds. The best-known example of the first is perhaps the book owned by Richard Hill, servant to Mr Wyngar, an alderman of London – it contains, besides poetry, treatises on good behaviour, puzzles, riddles and recipes.¹⁵ The second, poetical anthologies, are of many kinds – from collections of minstrels' songs to the courtly anthologies of noble families.¹⁶ The total number of surviving poems must run into thousands, compared with the mere 200 or so found with music. Nevertheless, although only a small proportion of the whole, the poems of our three chief song-books, *The Fayrfax*, *Henry VIII's* and *Ritson's MSS*, illustrate most kinds of lyric which survive. There is no great dissimilarity, in fact, between the 'literary' lyrics and those with musical settings. A description, therefore, of the poems in the three song-books will serve as a synopsis of the extant 'secular' lyric as a whole, though it will have a bias towards the courtly.

II

There is really no such a genre as early Tudor lyric – for two reasons. First, because the description 'early Tudor' applied to poetry is scarcely a term of distinction at all. At least, in the absence of the known writings of courtiers ten or twenty years senior to Wyatt, it seems so. To take a few examples, the heyday of the medieval carol was the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century; the carol died, not at the accession of Henry VII but at the Reformation. Again, the Lydgate tradition in poetry flourishes still unchecked in Hawes's *Pastime of Pleasure* and in Barclay's *Eclogues*. To

The Song-books

describe the categories of early Tudor lyric is to find oneself describing the medieval lyric. The second reason is the misleading nature of the word 'lyric'. If the period 'early Tudor' is not an entity, so neither is the genre 'lyric', defined as it usually has been defined. The Romantic conception of a lyric as the record of an intimate personal experience ('a lyric is simply a perception') has no validity in this period; and the term itself is an anachronism.¹⁷

A conventional survey of early Tudor lyrics, based on the customary classification by subject-matter, does not ultimately prove of much use for understanding them. The songs, as later chapters will show, were much more closely bound up with the life of their times than the purely 'literary' lyrics of later ages. But as a preliminary it will be helpful to say briefly what they are about, what styles they are written in, and with what music they are generally found.

There are three main groups of poems. The first is on religious and moral subjects, including most of the carols from *Ritson's MS*, the very different carols of *The Fayrfax MS*, and one song from *Henry VIII's MS* [H105]. From a literary, as well as from a musical point of view, *Ritson's MS* stands at the end of a tradition – the tradition of the medieval carol. In origin a popular song with a strong didactic flavour, the carol, even in the late fifteenth century, still retained its basic form of alternating burden and verse, its qualities of vigour and directness and its traditional subjects.¹⁸ These subjects are summarized by the Latin rubrics of *Ritson's MS* – *de Maria, in die nativitatis, de innocentibus, de Jobanne*, and so on. A typical carol is

Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell,
Tydynges gode Y thyngke to telle.

1. The borys hede that we bryng here
Betokeneth a Prince withowte pere
Ys born this day to bye us dere;
Nowell, nowelle. [MC, 79]

Among the others are one or two poems which had been in circulation for years, as, for example, 'Pray for us, thou prince of pesse' [MC, 13, 106, 115].

By contrast, the religious verse of *The Fayrfax MS* deals almost entirely with the Passion; a typical poem is Lydgate's 'Uppon the cross nailid I was for the', in which Christ pleads with man.