

# Performance Practice In The Anthems Of Orlando Gibbons

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The anthems and sacred madrigals of Orlando Gibbons provide today's choral musician with a wealth of accessible and appealing pieces with English texts. That this composer and his work are popular is obvious by the large number of publications of his anthems in church music anthologies and octavos. It is unfortunate, however, that with the variety of published editions, the choral musician is faced with a corresponding variety in the quality of editing and authenticity of the numerous sources. This writer was drawn to the study of the works of Gibbons by the anthem "O Lord, increase my faith," which, although continuing to be published as a work of Gibbons, has been discovered to be the work of Henry Loosemore. This fact should not disqualify such a lovely work from being performed, but illustrates the inconsistency of information about Orlando Gibbons.

Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) belongs to the last generation of major Pre-Restoration Anglican composers, and his music represents the final flowering of the English Renaissance church music style.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this article is to provide some basic information about the anthems of Gibbons, to cite some reliable sources of the works, and to provide the reader with relevant information about performance practice as it relates to the anthems of Gibbons and their performance in today's churches and concert halls.

Three types of anthem-like compositions were prevalent in late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century England: the full anthem, for choir throughout; the verse anthem, for soloists in alternation with choir; and the sacred madrigal (pieces which stem from secular sources and which probably functioned as private devotional chamber music). Among the extant works of Orlando Gibbons are fifteen complete verse anthems, seven complete full anthems, and two sacred madrigals.

## Collected Works

No complete works edition of the music of Orlando Gibbons has yet appeared, but two editions of the complete anthems of Gibbons are available to the modern performer, *Tudor Church Music*, Volume 4 (1925) and *Early English Church Music*, volumes 3 (1962) and 21 (1978). *Tudor Church Music*, which has been reprinted by E.F. Kalmus in the *Tudor English Church Music Series*,<sup>2</sup> includes all of Gibbons' sacred music. The works appear at the original pitch and with the original note values. Irregularly placed barlines are added, but no meter is indicated except for the original mensuration sign. Although this is an important source, it should be noted that eight of the anthems have, since their publication in *Tudor Church Music* in 1925, been discovered to be the work of other composers.<sup>3</sup>

The second, and more recent, complete edition of Gibbons' anthems can be found as volumes 3 and 21 of *Early English Church Music*, edited by David Wulstan.<sup>4</sup> Wulstan transposes the works up a minor third and reduces the note values by half. The original clef, key signature, mensuration sign, and first pitch are given at the beginning of each part. Barlines and time signatures have been added by the editor. In some cases, an extended measure is used for a particular textual stress. Other editorial procedures have been explained in Wulstan's Preface, with reference to the *Critical Commentary*.

The performance of Gibbons' anthems today requires of the conductor an understanding of the standards of pitch and tempo, the kinds of voices and instruments, and the positioning of performers (due to the cathedral choir seating arrangement) which were the rule in the composer's day. Thorough knowledge of the capabilities of the singers who will perform the anthem and of its score are also required of the conductor who would arrive at a concept of the anthem which is attainable with contemporary performers in today's concert halls and churches.

## Pitch

While pitch standards of the early seventeenth century must have varied in much the way that modern symphony orchestras do, evidence from extant organ pipe specifications and from the comparison of Gibbons' own secular (unaccompanied) and sacred (accompanied by organ) music vocal ranges supports the practice of transposing Gibbons' anthems up between two and three semitones from the original written pitch.<sup>5</sup> This accounts for the difference in pitch between the *Tudor Church Music* edition and the *Early English Church Music*, vols. 3 and 21 (discussed above). It should be reiterated, however, that no uniform pitch standard existed in Gibbons' time. What performers were probably most concerned with then, and must be now, was the proper character of the music. The modern performer should carefully consider the historical information along with his own performing ensemble to arrive at a concept which is authentic in spirit and attainable.

## Voicing

Five types of voices were commonly used in early English church music: bass, tenor, and countertenor men's voices and mean and treble boys' voices. Of the three men's voices, the countertenor was the most often used in solo writing, and Gibbons shows this partiality for the countertenor in his choral writing, almost all of which requires two countertenor parts. Of the two boys' voices, the mean was more commonly used. When the three-semitone transposition discussed above is applied to the written pitch of Gibbons' anthems, the actual vocal ranges of the five voice-types used in the anthems are as seen in figure 1.

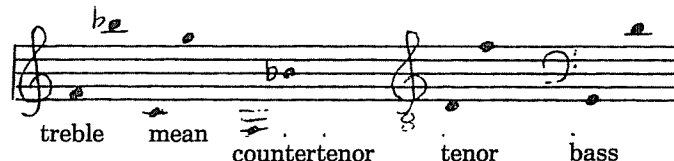


Fig. 1. Vocal ranges in the anthems of Gibbons (transposed)

Evidence about the number, balance, and combination of voices in Gibbons' day point to choral ensembles of from twenty-five to forty-four singers.<sup>6</sup>

The use of female soprano and alto singers in modern performances presents special problems. Even after transposition, the tessitura of the countertenor part is very low for the female alto. In performances by this writer, it was discovered that the addition of one good countertenor to each alto section helped to attain a more focused sound and clearer tex-

ture in the lower register. Soprano voices need to be light in quality and freely produced. Excessive vibrato should be avoided, but normal vibrato should only be removed at cadences.

### Positioning of Singers

In the Anglican Church, the choir is divided into two parts. The *decani* is seated on the right with the Dean and the *cantoris* is seated on the left with the Cantor. Both sides contain mean, countertenor, tenor, and bass voices and when combined, they often sang the same notes, creating a dynamic rather than textural change.<sup>7</sup> Antiphonal writing often consisted of cross-chancel duets between, for example, *decani* mean with *cantoris* alto answered by *cantoris* mean and *decani* alto. This type of antiphonal duet imitation is seen as example 1, the beginning to Gibbons' "O Lord, in thy wrath."

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of Gibbons' "O Lord, in thy wrath." It consists of four staves of music, each with a vocal line and the lyrics "O Lord, in thy wrath" written below. The staves are labeled as follows: "Dec. Mean" (top), "Cant. Mean", "Dec. Alto", and "Cant. Alto" (bottom). The music is in 4/4 time and features a mix of eighth and quarter notes.

Ex. 1. Gibbons' "O Lord, in thy wrath," mm. 1-3, SSAA.

In modern performance, the placement of singers must take the concept of *decani-cantoris* seating into account when arranging the singers on the stage. In the case of "O Lord, in thy wrath," the tenor and bass voices are not *divisi*, and, in a concert performance, they can be undivided and facing the audience with the *divisi* soprano and alto voices downstage and facing across, as seen in figure 1.

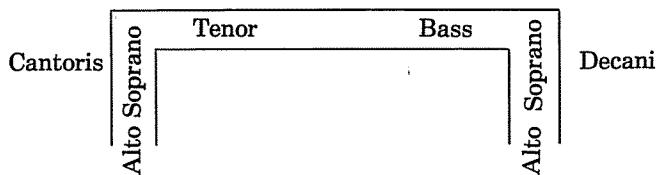


Fig. 1. Placement of singers for "O Lord, in thy wrath."

### Use of Instruments

The organ was the most commonly used instrument in the music of Gibbons. The English organ of that time had no pedals and only a limited number of registrations available. The use of 16-foot stops of modern organs is inappropriate, as is the use of the pedalboard. According to Peter LeHuray, stop combinations including diapason and flute stops can be used to create the necessary variety of dynamics called for in the anthems.<sup>8</sup>

It is not clear how much improvisatory work organists did. The extant organ books look more like conductor's scores than organ parts. In the obligato organ parts of the verse anthems, the players may have ornamented the parts. In the full anthems and full sections of the verse anthems, the organ probably doubled the vocal parts. In modern editions, the organ part is ordinarily a reduction of the vocal parts.

In the verse anthems with textless parts, an instrumental consort presumably played the textless parts. To what extent viols were used to double the solo voices is uncertain. The effect of such doubling is not entirely satisfactory and the words are often obscured; yet, no directions are given in the sources as to when the viol player should start and stop playing. There is simply texted and untexted music.

LeHuray points out that the cornett and sackbut were frequently used in the Anglican church during Gibbons' time.<sup>9</sup> These instruments may be used in the "full" sections of anthems, particularly when the text suggests a louder dynamic (such as "with great triumph" in "O God the King of Glory.")

### Tempo

In the Tenbury copy of Thomas Tomkins' *Musica Deo Sacra*, the instruction is given that the semibreve equals two beats of the human heart. Wulstan interprets this to mean that a standard tempo would have been (in modern terms) ♩ = 76, but continues by presenting additional evidence which gives the performer freedom from strict observation of this indication.<sup>10</sup>

Factors involved in tempo selection for this music include internal musical elements such as text declamation and harmonic rhythm, and external factors such as the size of the performing ensemble and the acoustics of the performing area.

### Dynamics

The use of dynamic contrasts in the anthems of Gibbons is important to the performer. The words "loud" and "soft" appear in the seventeenth-century manuscripts of Gibbons' fantasies for viols.<sup>11</sup> References to the use of *crescendo* and *diminuendo* appear in Caccini's *Nuove Musiche* (1602) and in Monteverdi's *Combattimento* (first performed in 1624).<sup>12</sup> While Caccini's and Monteverdi's works were probably unknown to Gibbons, the use of *crescendo* and *diminuendo* by these composers indicates the realistic possibility that dynamic changes, both gradual and sudden, were not unknown to Gibbons.

Specific elements in the music must be considered when making decisions regarding dynamics. The shape of individual melodic phrases, harmonic dissonance, texture, and, most important, text should be considered by the performer who wishes to add appropriate dynamic markings. Care should be taken that the overall shape be complemented by the phrase shape and that the phrase shape, in turn, be complemented by these subtle dynamic shadings of the harmonic suspensions.

### Performing Editions

*The Oxford Book of Tudor Anthems*, compiled by Christopher Morris and published by Oxford University Press in 1978, contains particularly noteworthy editions of five of Gibbons' best anthems: "Almighty and everlasting God," edited by Peter LeHuray and David Willcocks;

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"Hosanna to the Son of David," edited by Anthony Greening; "O clap your hands" and "O Lord in thy wrath," edited by John Morehen; and "This is the record of John," edited by Peter LeHuray. Most of these are available separately and all represent fine music and excellent editorial scholarship. Other anthems of Gibbons are available in octavo form in recent editions by the above-mentioned editors and published by Oxford University Press.

*An Anthology of English Church Music*, compiled by David Wulstan and published by J. & W. Chester in 1971, is another excellent source. Particularly noteworthy are Wulstan's editions of Gibbons' sacred madrigals, "O Lord, how do my woes increase" and "O Lord I lift my heart to thee," which are published in this anthology and also available separately. Among the excellent recent editions, one should also mention the revisions by Watkins Shaw of the earlier editions of Frederick Ouseley, published by Novello.

With the excellent performing editions which are available today, the choral musician who studies these scores carefully, and who knows his performing group and something about the group for whom these works were originally composed, can hope for a performance that is both authentic in spirit and musically successful.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The reader is directed to an excellent historical survey of Anglican Church Music by Kenneth Long, *The Music of the English Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>The volume titles are as follows: *Eight Anthems, Four Anthems, Four Anthems*, and *Twenty-Five Anthems* (in four volumes).

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth Long, *The Music of the English Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971), pp. 174-5. The following spurious works are cited: *Arise, O Lord, Have Mercy, Have Pity, O Lord, increase my faith, Out of the deep, Sing me merrily, Why art thou so heavy*, and *The secret sins*.

<sup>4</sup>Frank Ll. Harrison, gen. ed., *Early English Church Music*. 23 vols (London: Stainer & Bell, 1963- ). Vol. 3: *Verse Anthems*, by Orlando Gibbons. Transcribed and edited by David Wulstan. Vol. 21: *Full Anthems Hymns and Fragmentary Verse Anthems*, by Orlando Gibbons. Transcribed and edited by David Wulstan. The two sacred madrigals of Gibbons are to be found in vol. 11: *The Tears or Lamentations of a Sorrowful Soul*, by William Leighton. Transcribed and edited by Cecil Hill.

<sup>5</sup>Arthur Mendel, "Pitch in Western Music Since 1500: A Re-examination," *Acta Musicologica* 50 (1978): 59-65.

<sup>6</sup>Peter LeHuray, *Music and the Reformation in England, 1549-1660*, Cambridge Studies in Music (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 123-4.

<sup>7</sup>Denis Stevens, *Tudor Church Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), pp. 99-100.

<sup>8</sup>LeHuray, p. 113-4.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>10</sup>David Wulstan, Comp., *An Anthology of English Church Music* (London: J. & W. Chester, 1971), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), p. 417.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 416, 421.

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