

BOOK REVIEW

Kerry McCarthy. *Tallis*

New York: OUP, 2020

ISBN 9780190635213 (Hbk)/9780190635220 (e-book)

xviii+280 pp., 26 ill.

E-book reviewed by Suzanne Cole

In a 2005 article commemorating five hundred years since the estimated date of Thomas Tallis's birth, Peter Phillips (conductor of the appropriately named Tallis Scholars) lamented the lack of published scholarship on the composer. At that time, the only book dedicated solely to Tallis was Paul Doe's extremely slim (seventy-one page) book, published in 1968.¹ This gap has since been filled by not one but two books on Tallis: John Harley's 2015 *Thomas Tallis* (Ashgate), and Kerry McCarthy's 2020 addition to the Oxford University Press (OUP) Master Musicians series, *Tallis*.²

The lack of Tallis scholarship is particularly striking when compared with his younger colleague and friend, William Byrd. The Byrd bibliography—ranging from E.H. Fellowes's 1923 *William Byrd: A Short Account of his Life and Work*, to more recent studies including Jeremy Smith's *Verse and Voice in Byrd's Song Collections of 1588 and 1589*—is rich enough that Richard Turbet's most recent research guide weighs in at a hefty 348 pages.³ McCarthy has published

¹ Peter Phillips, 'Signs of Contradiction,' *Musical Times* 146 (2005): 7–19.

² My own *Thomas Tallis and his Music in Victorian English* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008) is concerned with the 'afterlife' of Tallis and his music rather than the composer in his own time.

³ Edmund H. Fellowes, *William Byrd: A Short Account of his Life and Work* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923); Jeremy L. Smith, *Verse and Voice in Byrd's Song Collections of 1588 and 1589* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2016); Richard Turbet, *William Byrd: A Research and Information Guide* (London: Routledge, 2020).

two previous books on Byrd, including an earlier volume of the Master Musicians series, while Harley had already devoted three volumes to the younger composer.⁴ There are numerous possible reasons for this disparity, some of which can be traced back to the reception history of the two composers, and to the politics of the revival of this music in the early twentieth century,⁵ but the simplest is the dearth of primary sources of Tallis and his music. Harley takes a fairly traditional approach to tackling these challenges: he divides his chapters between 'life' and 'works', with the emphasis on the works, grouped into rough chronological periods defined by the reigns of the 'fower sovereygnes' that Tallis so famously served.⁶

McCarthy, on the other hand, takes an altogether more original (or to use her own word 'eccentric') approach, constructing the chapters around 'original documents of Tallis's life or ... handwritten or printed sources of his music' (p. x). Again, there is a 'life and works' division: the first five chapters deal with 'Documents of Tallis's life,' a sixth chapter depicts a trip down the River Thames 'exploring the sites used by the musicians of the itinerant Chapel Royal' (p. x), and is followed by eleven chapters on 'Documents of Tallis's music,' concluding with 'Remembrances.' Her rationale for this approach is her desire to build her book 'around what we still have, rather than lamenting or trying to extrapolate what we no longer have.' While she admits that the remaining documents are 'limited, eclectic, and occasionally exasperating,' she argues that 'they give us the best chance we will ever have to meet Tallis on something like his own terms' (p. x).

The challenges thrown up by the limited primary sources are further exacerbated by the intended audience. While Harley's *Thomas Tallis* seems to be intended for an academic audience, McCarthy's handsomely produced *Tallis* is a 'trade' book, pitched at the general reader.⁷ This is spelled out in the description of the Master Musicians series on the OUP website, which focuses on 'engaging' and 'captivating' the audience with vivid and accessible discussions of 'the lives and work of music's geniuses.'⁸ (As an aside, the unapologetically masculine series title is disappointingly accurate: not only are all the musicians 'masters', with the exception of Charlotte Erwin, who co-authored the Berg volume with Bryan R. Simms, McCarthy is the only female author.)

McCarthy's book unambiguously satisfies this brief. It is a surprisingly easy read: the chapters are short and accessible, and the breadth and depth of her knowledge not only of Tallis

⁴ Kerry McCarthy, *Liturgy and Contemplation in Byrd's Gradualia* (London: Routledge, 2007); Kerry McCarthy, *Byrd* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); John Harley, *William Byrd: Gentleman of the Chapel Royal* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997); John Harley, *The World of William Byrd: Musicians, Merchants and Magnates* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); and John Harley, *William Byrd's Modal Practice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

⁵ Suzanne Cole, 'Who is the Father? Changing Perceptions of Tallis and Byrd in Late Nineteenth-century England,' *Music & Letters* 89 (2008): 212–26.

⁶ Tallis's epitaph records:

He served long time in Chapel with great praise,
Four sovereigns' reigns (a thing not often seen)
I mean King Henry and Prince Edward's days,
In time of Mary and our gracious Queen.

⁷ These different audiences are reflected in the pricing structure of the two books. According to the Routledge website (Ashgate is now part of the Routledge imprint) the hardcopy retails for \$201.60 AUD, the paperback for \$62.39 and the e-book \$56.79, while McCarthy's *Tallis* sells for £25.99 (~\$50 AUD) in hardback, with the Kindle version a comparative bargain at \$20.54 AUD on Amazon.

⁸ 'Master Musicians Series,' *Oxford University Press*, <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/m/master-musicians-series-mmu/?lang=en&cc=au>.

and his music but of the social, musical, and religious context in which he lived and worked is worn lightly. The standard trappings of the academic text are kept to a minimum: unlike her earlier book on Byrd, in which McCarthy eschewed footnotes altogether, there are endnotes, but they are simple references: 'Digressions, reflections, and speculations of my own have been strictly excluded from the footnotes' (p. xii). There are also no modern typeset musical examples, although some facsimiles of the original sources are provided. The accompanying discussions of the music do not, however, require the reader to be able to 'read' these excerpts, nor do they refer explicitly to musical features of the examples provided. In a further nod to the non-musically literate reader, an accompanying website provide links to brief sound clips (<http://www.oup.com/us/tallis>). While each example refers to a page in the book, their usefulness is limited by the lack of references in the book to the examples. Nevertheless, McCarthy provides evocative descriptions of what she describes as 'the astonishing richness' (p. 208) of Tallis's music that would be generally accessible to the informed lay person, enlivened by her characteristic dry wit. For example, she concludes her discussion of Tallis's setting of the *Benedictus* in the Lumley partbooks by observing that 'Tallis even indulges in a brief victory lap of more ornate music in the final Amen: there can be no mistaking the text at this point, and the lower parts are at liberty to roam for a couple of bars underneath a long-held note in the soprano' (pp. 143–44).

Elsewhere, when discussing Cranmer's famous desire that the music written for the new English liturgy should have 'for every syllable a note,' she observes that despite some brief polyphonic elaboration in Tallis's much-loved anthem 'If ye love me,' 'Cranmer would have been pleased at the syllable-to-note ratio, which hovers reassuringly close to 1' (p. 140).

Musical sources are not the only physical objects to catch McCarthy's eye. Her chapters are studded with fascinating nuggets about the physical world in which Tallis lived, from the food recorded in the accounts of Dover Priory—including 'eggs, butter, oatmeal, Suffolk cheese, a suckling pig at Christmas, leeks in early spring, and vast quantities of fish on just about every possible occasion' (p. 5)—to the 'wicker mats' provided for the choir at St Mary-at-Hill to stand on to protect them from the chill of the hard stone floors (pp. 15–16). Other physical descriptions conjure up a sense of the soundscape in which Tallis lived and worked. Her discussion of the clock at Hampton Court, for example, bridges the gap between Tallis's time and our own:

The hours of the festive season were rung out by the imposing astronomical clock in one of the inner courtyards, a technical tour de force installed in 1540 by a German clockmaker. Its original large bell is still in use. It makes the same sound that would have been heard by Tallis and his colleagues as they hurried across Clock Court on their way to the chapel (p. 62).

Something similar is attempted in her description of the 'Doom' painting in the Lady Chapel at Waltham Abbey: 'Tallis would have stood in front of this painting in the course of his everyday musical duties. In fact the raucous trumpeting of the seven angels is one visual depiction of music-making he definitely saw' (p. 23).

Perhaps of more direct musical interest are her discussions of the spaces in which Tallis would have worked, particularly during his four-decade stint at the Chapel Royal. McCarthy points out that, contrary to popular belief, the members of the Chapel Royal did not perform in

large public spaces, such as the chapel of St George at Windsor Castle, which, she argues, 'is an unusually apt illustration of the kind of church that the sixteenth-century monarchs and their household musicians did *not* use' (p. 60). Not only did the Chapel Royal musicians perform in smaller private chapels, but these spaces were swathed in carpets and tapestries when the monarch was in attendance, turning them into 'small, muffled and unforgiving spaces' (p. 63).

McCarthy's thoughtful and nuanced discussion of the various manuscript sources and the music contained in them takes us beyond popular oversimplifications of the musical and religious upheavals endured by Tallis and his contemporaries with each change of monarch. Her discussion of the four-part music contained in the Gyffard partbooks, for example, places it within the rhetorical tradition of the 'low' style, despite the Latin texts, challenging the simplistic binary of florid Latin-texted music and plainer Anglican music (p. 129). She sums this up in her closing paragraphs:

[Tallis] was much more than a chameleon who took on the colors of his volatile environment, writing with Calvinist severity or with unreconstructed Catholic extravagance as his current monarch demanded. Like the best literary and visual artists of his time, he was at ease with a broad range of styles and could move freely among them while keeping a distinctive voice of his own (p. 208).

She draws a parallel with Tallis's contemporary Holbein, 'who was equally able to produce life-size portraits of overwhelming grandeur ... and miniature devotional images for private use' (p. 208). And it is to Holbein that McCarthy turns for the cover image of her book, which features a detail from the double portrait *The Ambassadors* (1533), showing a lute, some music manuscript, and the arm of a man leaning on a table. McCarthy explains that 'the hand ... does not belong to Tallis, but it belongs to a man who may well have met Tallis in passing' (p. vii).⁹ The choice of image is apt, in that throughout her book, McCarthy never entirely overcomes a sense that Tallis remains elusive and that we are at a slight remove from the man himself. With the scant surviving material, anything more may well be impossible, without indulging in unjustifiable speculation or invention. McCarthy's *Tallis* nevertheless achieves the difficult task of making a major contribution to Tallis scholarship in a way that is accessible to the general reader. She provides a rich, yet approachable, overview of Tallis's music and the times in which he lived, and achieves her goal of bringing the reader 'closer, in some small ways, to the everyday realities of Tallis's musical life' (p. xi).

About the Author

Suzanne Cole is an Honorary Fellow at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, the University of Melbourne. She is the author of the 2008 *Thomas Tallis and his Music in Victorian England* (Boydell) and is working on the revival of English church music in the early twentieth century.

⁹ McCarthy also chose a cover image for her *Byrd* volume that did not depict the composer. Several of the people represented in the painting of the Somerset House Conference of 1604 can be connected directly with Byrd, rather than simply depicting someone who may have 'met him in passing.' The difference in degrees of separation between the composers and the respective images is indicative of the far greater challenges facing the student of Tallis than of Byrd.