Hello, and welcome to the Renaissance English History Podcast. I’m your host, Heather Teysko. If you’re tuning in for the first time and you’re from the Renaissance Festivals podcast, where I recently did a guest spot, a special welcome to you. I’ve done an episode on music of the English Renaissance before, but it was quite short, and I’ve been meaning to add more to the information that I presented before. Specifically, this week I’m going to talk about the Chapel Royal, which was the personal chapel of the King, which sang the Mass for him in all of his great houses or when he traveled, and specifically some of the changes that the coming of the Reformation, and the back and forth during Edward and Mary’s reign, brought to sacred music in England. I have a Spotify playlist from the earlier episode I did on music and I’ll be adding to that over the next few days, so go to the site at englandcast.com, go to Resources and then Listen, and see the link for the Spotify playlist that you can listen to.

But before I get started, just a couple housekeeping reminders. First, if you like this podcast, please rate it in whatever service you use to listen to it. Second, I have new website up at <http://www.englandcast.com>, with buttons to donate and links to the Patreon page if you are so inclined to support this podcast, either by giving a one time tip, or by making a regular subscription contribution. Both are appreciated. Third, you know sometimes when you’re driving on the freeway you see an empty billboard that says Your Ad Here? Consider this the podcast equivalent. If you are responsible for marketing for say a museum, historical tour company, or any other similar kind of business or organization, and you’d like to reach 100,000 listeners a month, send me an email.

So, with that out of the way, let’s get started.

In his book, Music and Monarchy, which will be my book recommendation this episode, Dr David Starkey begins with Henry V’s victory over the French at Agincourt in 1415 which was the high point for the British in the 100 years war. Before he fought, in his preparation for battle, Henry didn’t do anything that we would imagine a modern statesman or general to do. He didn’t have meetings with military leaders. He heard a beautiful mass sung by his Chapel Royal with an altar completely decorated with cloth and gold candlesticks, crucifix and reliquaries, some of the most important military supplies that Henry had. Henry believed that he was fighting a holy war and so singing a Mass was an obvious thing to do before going into battle. Surprisingly, Henry V was also a composer, and several movements of a mass attributed to Henry have been found in a contemporary choirbook. It is in the Hundred Years war that we see the beginning of a national identity for English for the first time since before the Norman Conquest. It’s a little bit before our time, but we’re going to go back there in order to really start to understand the building need for English polyphonic music.

The Chapel Royal performed the daily services for the king. It wasn’t a chapel as in a place or building, but it was a mobile group of the King’s personal priest, singers, composers who traveled with the king to wherever he was. The Chapel had existed since the time of William the Conquerer, but it first took shape during Edward I in the late 13th century. Edward III expanded it to include 32 adult singers adn 16 boy choristers.

So in 1337 Edward III started the Hundred Years War when he claimed the throne of France. In 1542 he founded The Order of the Garter, an order of warrior knights that would encourage each other in the French war. He established the Order at Windsor and dedicated it to the Virgin Mary and St. George. St. George became the patron saint of England, and the red cross on white background became the national flag. St. George’s chapel became the model for a new kind of religious foundation, called a college, which were then founded all over the country by nobles and knights of the Garter who wante to imitate Windosor. The colleges were funded to include choristers who would sing for the founders’ prosperity in life and pray for them in death.

After the battle of Agincourt Henry won some diplomatic victories in the next few years, and to celebrate he multiplied the daily devotions of the chapel royal. He added three sung anthems to the morning high mass, and six to the evening service. There was suddenly a huge demand for new music. There is a manuscript in the British Library called the Old Hall Manuscript, which is the earliest English choirbook with settings, from around 1415-1421. It has different parts of the mass (the Gloria, Credo, Sangtus, Agnus Dei) together with the additional music that Henry added, and seems to have been created for Henry’s brother Thomas, wh kept a similarly large Chapel. When Thomas was killed in the war in 1421, the book passed to the Chapel Royal, and some of those musicians added in their own works.

Henry V’s son, Henry VI, was completely incompetent as a military leader and lost the land in France that his father gained. He also lost the English throne and saw the start of the Wars of the Roses. But one positive legacy is that he founded some of the most famous and influential colleges that still exist today. The King’s College of our Lady of Eton besides Windsor, now known simply as Eton, and King’s College Cambridge are two of the most prestigious schools in the world were founded as colleges to sing and pray for the souls of Henry VI and his family. King’s College still has regular evensong services, and if you get there early enough you can sit next to the choir stalls and soak up the music that has been sung there for 600 years, and is still sung daily.

The thing that made all of these colleges unique was that they were secular and open to the public, as opposed to closed like monastaries. The fad for founding colleges was really one of the best things to happen to English music. They had more money than other groups, and could spend a lot on music. They could draw on a wider pool of musical talent than a monastary. Choirs got bigger and the sounds became more complex. Hundreds of colleges had been created during this time, and it became a huge source of employment for musicians, which then begat even more creativity as these musicians created more and sang more music than ever before.

We still have today the Eton Choirbook, which survived the Reformation and is one of the sole surviving collections of medieval and Tudor polyphony. It was designed for use at Eton College, written about 1500 it is large enough for 20 choristers to use to sing from because they wouldn’t have had individual copies of the music. It contains about 50 complete works from 24 different composers.

It is also divided up into time periods showing the rise of English polyphony. The English polyphony was, rather than a plainchant, composed of several independent parts, all weaving in together. It was a highly specialized art form, which meant that only the wealthy patrons could afford it given the skill that it took to write and perform it. One of the greatest early polyphonic composers was John Dunstable who wrote music for every member of the royal family, but also had a reputation outside of England that allowed him to travel to the Continent and study music from around Europe, as well as introducing his own style to courts he visited.

The works of John Dunstable start out the Eton Choirbook, with pieces from John Browne in the middle including a six part setting of Stabat iuxta Christi Crucem (near the cross of Christ stood Mary) which was probably composed for Henry VII’s wife Elizabeth of York after the death of their son Arthur, Henry VIII’s older brother. Robert Wylkynson belongs to the last group of musicians in the Eton Choirbook. If you listen to the Spotify playlist I created, I highly recommend wearing good headphones and imagining that you are in one of these cavernous college chapels like Kings where this music would have been originally sung, and you can start to get a taste of just how extraordinary of an experience it would have been for people to have heard this music, and why the courts of Europe imitated it.

By the middle of the 15th century the Chapel Royal had become the most distinguished musical organization. The Chapel followed the King and didn’t have any kind of separate home or endowment, simply trailing around with the King wherever he went. But the staff included the dean, chaplains, Gentleman of the Chapel Royal and boy choristers, and it followed the collegiate reportory of polyphony in daily devotions to the king and the court. And because the King backed it, it recruited the best composers and singers from other colleges, and had a training program. As a result there was this network across the country of colleges where promising choirboys were poached and adult performers moved freely, and the musical life of late medieval England flourished as a result. European monarchs were envious, and English composers had their works copied and performed all over Europe. English music set the fashion for the rest of Europe, and the choirs were marvelled at.

By the early 1500’s Henry VIII was ruling, and he was famous as a musical king who saw the late medieval flourishing of English music reach its crescendo, before pulling one of his well known reversals which threatened English sacred music with complete destruction.

Henry was a trained musician, skilled in theory and practice. He had been the second son, groomed for life in a monastary, before his brother Arthur died, and as such he was taught to play instruments and compose music, able to compose polyphony including a five part mass. He grew up listening to this music in his father’s Chapel Royal and it was a huge part of him. His Chapel Royal choir had a reputation throughout Europe, but it was sometimes even bested by the choir of his cardinal Thomas Wolsey. The King and Cardinal would actually fight over promising boy trebles, who became stars themselves, poaching them from each others choirs Henry also employed more foreign musicians at his court than any other monarch before him..

Henry finished the work of his predessors, completing construction on the King’s College Chapel, and then Henry VII Chapel at Westminster. The choir screen at King’s in fact demonstrates how English sacred music was under threat, though. Completed by Henry it has very ornate and intricate carvings, but there are interlaced repeating H and A’s tied with knots. This stood for Anne Boleyn, the woman who inadvertently or not was the opening for the Reformation in England.

In a psalter presented to him in the early 1540’s Henry VIII is represented as a musician. The illumination for Psalm 53, “the fool hath said in his heart, There is no God,” shows henry seated, playing on his harp, while his Fool listens uncomprehendingly. God was the Chief Musician, but Henry was a new King David, leading his people into true worship of God. There are about 33 complete compositions of Henry left that we can listen to. They range from sacred to love songs, like the melancholy O My Heart, which was presumably to Anne Boleyn. Henry was a fan of all the music played in his court, sacred and secular, and he also wrote his most famous piece, the words and music of a number one hit song, Pastime with Good Company” which swept the nation even more than Carly Rae Jepson and Call Me Maybe.

Henry grew and invested in the Chapel Royal during the early part of his reign. It now consisted of 12 boy choristers and 32 adult males who would have sung services, most likely in rotation rather than all at once. The boys were between 7 and 14 years old depending on when their voices broke, and were looked after by a Master of the Children for the Chapel Royal who was responsible for their education, board and lodging.

Henry wooed Anne through song, but in order to have her, he had to break with Rome, which threatened the entire infrastructure of sacred music in England. In Roman Catholic England, mass was very rarely ever said, it was sung. But Protestants wanted to get rid of all of the showy rituals of religion that they said separated people from God. They wanted the Word of God to be spoken. Music might have moved emotions, but they still were ritual, and that was wrong.

England was suddenly preoccupied with translations of the Bible into English rather than the creation of an English musical tradition. The first official English translation of the Old and New Testamanets was the Great Bible, and it was published under Henry VIII’s patronage in 1539. Then he began translating the liturgy which was complete with the publication of the Book of Common Prayer, published in 1549 and revised again in 1551, which was overeen by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.

Cranmer himself differed from Henry regarding the importance of music in the worship of God. Cranmer rejected it, and wanted the liturgy to be spoken without processions and processional singing. Since the words were spoken in English instead of Latin, people could understand and meditate on the words rather than being moved by show and pomp of processions. Henry never supported this, but after his death, Cranmer was able to put his plan into action. Music was now sung in simple unison with words in English. The ruling was thus: “That the choir shall from henceforth sing or say no anthems of our Lady or other saints, but only those of our Lord, and them not in Latin, but choosing the best and most sounding to Christian religion they shall turn the same into English, setting thereunto a plain and distinct note for every syllable one: they shall sing them and none others”. Though the rules were a little bit different at each Cathedral. But by way of example of what they were talking about, listen to this sample from Thomas Tallis’ If Ye Love Me Keep my Commandments. No flowing polyphony. Just simple words that people can understand, sung in a way that focuses on the words themselves rather than the music.

With the break from Rome, the monastaries were dissolved and the money went into the King’s pocket. Some monastaries had very professional choirs singing in Lady Chapels, dedicated to the virgin Mary, and they had services that were open to the public. The music was of the highest quality, but these choirs were dissolved when the monastaries themselves were dissolved. One of the chief roles of these monastaries and colleges was to pray for the souls of those who had died, and were in Purgatory. But Protestants rejected the idea of Purgatory, and so the need to have a choir singing masses for the soul wasn’t necessary in their view.

Once Henry died, Cranmer moved ahead with dissolving choral institutions and as he was one of the major advisors to the young King Edward, he was able to have a big impact on the view of the new young king. The whole Latin liturgy and performance of the music was now considered illegal. Choirs were disbanded. Organs were torn out of churches. Choirbooks and other manuscripts were burned or recycled. Even the Chapel Royal was disbanded, and had Edward lived and ruled longer, English polyphony might have completely disappeared.

When Edward died at age 15, he was succeeded by his Catholic sister Mary. She restored music along with the other practices of the pre Reformation church. But before England could move entirely back to Rome, Mary died and Elizabeth was the new Queen.

Elizabeth was Anne Boleyn’s daughter and as such she was a Protestant. But she also loved ceremony and she was a skilled musician. But she also didn’t want to force her beliefs on the entire country, as england had seen years of arresting and burning heretics with every new succession, and she was tired of it. But in her palaces, she brought back the ceremony. She brought back the choirs of the Chapel Royal and brought back the pre-Reformation musical tradition. But the music itself was hardly ever sung outside of the Chapel Royal. Though by the end of her reign, the fashions were beginning to change again. Nobles were becoming tired of the stripped down harshness of Protestantism, and they missed the music and ceremony.

Elizabeth was succeeded on her death by the Stuarts, who came from Scotland, and were all very musical as well. After the English Civil War, upon the Restoration of the monarchy, one of the first institutions to be restored was the Chapel Royal, which also now included, in addition to voices, twenty four violins, which eventually provided the structure for the English form of orchestral anthem.

The Chapel Royal throughout its history provided musical training from boyhood, it exposed a chorister to the best music and offered the best creative opportunities to men who continued on. He could learn composition and be certain that some of his work might be performed for the King. A product of all of this was the great Henry Purcell, who is a bit later than our time period, but needs to be recognized as the great musical genius he was, which was nurtured in the Chapel Royal.

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So that’s it for this week. The book recommendation is Music and Monarchy by Dr. David Starkey, I’ll put a link up on the blog. There’s also a great tv series that he did based on the book, and episodes are available on youtube - I’ll put a link up there as well. Again, please check out the new site at <http://englandcast.com> and let me know what you think about it. Finally, a reminder of the Spotify playlist if you’re interested in listening to some of this music yourself. I’ll put a link up to that on the facebook page where you can also send me notes and show ideas - facebook.com/englandcast.

Thanks so much for listening. Talk to you soon!