

Tudor and Elizabethan Choral Music
a beginner's primer



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Renaissance English History Podcast

<http://www.Englandcast.com>

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Introduction:

I believe in the power of history to transcend barriers and bring humanity closer. I believe that understanding of historical events helps us connect more deeply to our own times and our own events, and to each other. I believe that history is still alive, still developing, still changing as new research sheds light and new perspectives on the past. Thanks to modern technology and continuously developing research, **we all have immediate access to this history through the artistic expression of those who lived it.**

My favorite way to look at history, and what first hooked me on history as a discipline in the first place, is music. In high school chamber singers we sang William Byrd's *Ave Verum Corpus*, a piece which was written by a Catholic under a Protestant monarch (a life threatening prospect). That was it for me - I had found my true love.

I had always enjoyed history, having grown up in an incredibly historic place in the US, near Philadelphia, and my first job in high school was a weekend student docent at the home of a Revolutionary War officer. But hearing that music, for the first time I felt like I had **literally transcended the boundaries of time and space**, and I clearly understood Byrd's struggle and felt so connected to his life through his artistic expression.

That kind of experience - your soul connecting to humanity - is available through artistic expression; the ways people would literally expose their deepest emotions to others. And great art always sounds new and exciting when you understand the context in which it was created. Five hundred years ago, mostly only the wealthy people could experience music by William Byrd, or Thomas Tallis, or any of the famous composers of the English Renaissance. Unless you lived close to one of the famous colleges who had an amazing choir, chances were that you weren't going to get a chance to listen to these compositions at all.

Now we have Spotify and YouTube. Hooray for technology.

But where do you start? If you've never been introduced to this kind of music before, how do you know where to begin and what to pull up on Spotify? And how can you understand the context?

I have had people ask me this after some of my podcast episodes on music, and so I devised this beginner's guide with handy links so you can click right over to Spotify or YouTube and listen all day.

Let's first just go over some basic history so you have an understanding of the context in which this music was being created...

Your quick five minute guide to 14th and 15th century England:

In the decades before the Tudor dynasty was founded by Henry VII, England was in the midst of a civil war that we now call **The Wars of the Roses**. It was precipitated by a crisis in the monarchy when the poor Henry VI wound up losing a bunch of land in France that previous monarchs had captured in the Hundred Year's War. Then Henry went a bit loopy. Meaning that he stopped talking. For months. Years. There are a number of theories as to what kind of malady plagued him, and I'm not an expert there, so I will leave it to the historians to judge. All I can do is report the facts, which are that Henry checked out, and the country was left wondering who would rule.

During that time, his cousin, the Duke of York, believed he could do a better job ruling the country, and he formed an army to get the chance. There were lots of battles, and for three decades the wars were fought with varying intensity. There were periods of peace, when the Yorkist Edward IV reigned for example. Then things would flare up again when someone died, or a rival claimant gained enough strength to fight again. By 1485 when Richard III, Edward's younger brother, had usurped the throne from Edward's sons (probably killing them in the process), the House of York and Lancaster were both out of nobles. **They had simply killed each other off.**

There was room for a side branch of the family to come into play. This branch was comprised on their mother's side of descendents of John of Gaunt, Edward III's middle son, through his mistress, Katherine Swynford. They had been barred from ever inheriting the throne. On their father's side, the Tudors, they had the blood of a Queen running through them - a Queen, Katherine of Valois, who had married her squire, Owen Tudor, upon the death of her husband, Henry V (checked-out Henry VI's father).

So they weren't really the pride and joy of the House of Lancaster.

But they were all that was left.

So when Henry Tudor killed Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 and was crowned Henry VII, his position was dubious, at best. For many contemporaries, this seemed like just one more chapter in the never ending wars in which England was tearing itself up. Henry would fade, and then some other branch would rise to power. But Henry was determined to hang on. When pretenders popped up, claiming to be the missing sons of Edward IV, Henry dealt with them firmly. He crushed rebellions. He hung on to his money so that he was never without financial means. He married the Yorkist princess, Edward IV's daughter, so their children would have both Lancaster and York blood running through them.

His oldest son Arthur was named after the legendary king in an effort to bring a sense of destiny to the new ruling family. Henry VII negotiated a kickass marriage for Arthur with Europe's biggest Power Couple, Ferdinand and Isabella of Aragon and Castille, respectively. Their daughter Katherine would come to England and marry Arthur, thus uniting the Tudors with a powerful ally in Spain. Gorgeous family, international recognition from Europe's other rulers, stability at home, a growing

fortune...what more could Henry Tudor want? Then his son Arthur died. Then his wife died giving birth to a new baby. Life started to become very messy.

By the time Henry died and his son, the second son who wasn't supposed to be the heir, Henry VIII, was crowned, **it was the first bloodless transition of power in over half a century.** Henry immediately married Katherine, who had been kept in England during the years after Arthur's death while Henry's father figured out what to do with her; such a powerful bride was worth hanging on to. It was a fairy tale romance with Henry the gallant knight who was rescuing the Princess in distress. Twenty five years later the whole thing had fallen apart because they had no living sons, and Henry blamed the fact that Katherine had first been married to his brother, contradicting a law in Leviticus. Add in Henry's infatuation with the intriguing Anne Boleyn, and the stage was set for a Reformation.

It would have been one thing if England just became Protestant and that was it. Things would have changed, and there still would have been internal strife like in the rest of Europe, but England became particularly touchy for several reasons.

First, Henry never really turned his back on the Catholic church. He never really doubted the Catholic religion. Even at the very end of his reign he was executing Protestants for denying the True Presence of Christ in the Mass - the belief that the bread and wine literally turn into the body and blood of Christ, an important Catholic tenet. He just didn't want the Pope telling him who he could and couldn't marry. Like many English monarchs before him, he resented the power of the Pope in Italy to have such power over his policy, and he saw an opportunity through the growing Protestant Reformation to reclaim that power.

Then things got messy with his children. It was always going to be complicated because he had children by three wives with different degrees of devotion to different religions. But it got even more complicated when one became King, ushered through drastic reforms, and then died, leaving the throne to his older sister, who wanted to turn back the religious clock thirty years. The ten years after Henry's death were incredibly confusing liturgically, and this had a big impact on the music of the time.

Henry's heir was the longed-for son he had with Jane Seymore, Edward, who was a child raised by firmly Protestant tutors. Though Henry wasn't really a Protestant, Edward was devoutly and firmly against anything that smelled of Catholicism. He sanctioned the destruction of many icons and stained glass windows, whitewashed churches, and got rid of much of the music. His reign lasted five years, and during this time composers had to compose in English, and write music for a Protestant service.

When Edward died as a teenager, the next heir was Mary, Henry's daughter with his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, who was firmly Catholic. Plus, she was going to be extra stubborn about her faith because she blamed the Protestants for the trials that plagued her mother and the annulment of her marriage. She tried to bring England back into the Catholic fold, and reconcile with the Pope. She married a Spaniard (Philip of Spain, who would later oversee the famous Spanish Armada

invasion of England), brought back the Mass, and all the same icons that had been destroyed just a few years before. The music, which had changed so drastically for five years, was back to being Catholic, for a Latin Mass.

After five years Mary died, bringing Elizabeth I to the throne. The stage was set for the Elizabethan Golden Age of choral music. **Elizabeth wanted a middle way.** A monarch in charge of an English church, but one that kept many of the same familiar mystical practices as the Catholics, and which her people found so comforting. A stable monarch who ruled for half a century allowed composers the freedom to experiment with music as they hadn't been able to before. While many Catholics were persecuted (torture was used more than any other time in English history against Catholics who were perceived to be a threat against Elizabeth), many, like the previously mentioned William Byrd, flourished and wrote some of the most beautiful music full of contemplation and meditation.

English composers who had seen liturgical changes under four monarchs in a short span of time learned to become flexible in their composing. They learned to write music in English as well as the standard Latin. There was a demand for music because of the new services that were being introduced; for example, the Evensong service came out of Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer and required entirely new compositions and text settings.

Elizabeth reigned until 1603, and after that England began to turn more and more Protestant until finally the English Civil War threatened the very existence of the English monarchy.

But that's a different story...

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A note on the links below: I link to both YouTube and Spotify albums. If you don't have a Spotify account, you can create one for free. If you use the free version you'll hear ads. But that's a small price to pay for this music. Not all YouTube or Spotify content will be available in every country. Often videos are restricted by geography. I tried to pick videos that worked both in the US and Europe. If you find one that doesn't, please let me know (@teysko) and I'll find another and update this guide.

English Composers To Explore:

Orlando Gibbons

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/2NkIVq5pAflojxXjuaRVes>

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsKNeH-p0kIMUVgo20JoH4g>

Listen to:

Gibbons Church Music recorded by the King's College Chapel Choir

<https://open.spotify.com/album/2C2mW7DvtPFK4n49TiHXog>

John Taverner (not to be confused with the contemporary British composer John Tavener)

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/0ZGj6vmZUz4vk80EfPLjxP>

Listen to:

Votive Antiphons recorded by Alamire

<https://open.spotify.com/album/1c3Fr9I8c6bkXh9orujRO5>

Thomas Tallis

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/1XmMnFJ9jhW4tl7bQuNYFG>

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCo_ZXYok-GNfgZR06OFUJ8A

Listen to:

Thomas Tallis: Latin & English Motets and Anthems recorded by the Rudolphus Choir

<https://open.spotify.com/album/6PpEpKJtQmi0W2bxY19Amv>

Thomas Weelkes

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/5ftm4NtQXNcAiJ0awT0A12>

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0DIPtJz45IXhYRSMA3PRsQ>

Listen to:

Weelkes: Anthems recorded by the Oxford Camerata

<https://open.spotify.com/album/6tWG7g8xEVeW1fAmb8MWUx>

William Byrd

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/2j7yGPnVrdIHjHwtyLPJ2z>

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCe2R-mOJWQPpbK1KmjpgC7w>

Listen to:

Tudor Anthems and Motets from the Clare College Chapel Choir

<https://open.spotify.com/album/0P8VJ4yzm8Z8RFUxzqpLoj>

Christopher Tye

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/2oAW1zHwCJo8RT0HPbEXNO>

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJk6UPQYXkJ_jKzxxLt0A1w

Listen to:

Christopher Tye: Latin and English Church Music from the Choir of Magdalen College, Oxford

<https://open.spotify.com/album/1rPfubDGAAAdvUYVxTcd6uf>

Artists to Follow:

The King's Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/user/kingssingersvideos>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/5IR7yDVN4z9kahOiUSIMhe>

A British group that started in King's College Cambridge. Comprised of 6 men, using the countertenor voice to sing the high lines. They sing a lot of pop choral arrangements, but their early music projects are always spot on historically.

Start with *English Renaissance*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/6Bu1mNNkzBm6iw5GL9whcu>

It's an older album, from 1994, but it's what finally got me hooked on this music!

David Skinner and Alamire

<https://www.youtube.com/user/AlamireSkinner>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/4tbw1zKAjeOghhCu6gRCYU>

David Skinner is a musicologist and the Professor and Choir Director at the College of Sidney Sussex, Cambridge. He also has a group called Alamire, comprised of a rotating group of members, who perform his research projects (most recently recording Anne Boleyn's Songbook).

Start with *The Spy's Choirbook*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/3QvWxoDnW3vVlf6u7qywdt>

Music from a choirbook given to Henry VIII from the workshop of a double agent!

The Tallis Scholars

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCNdnXz6sMYuVrBbUfcwL7Q>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/3vENFkiF5PZRluBBtQiwG>

A British consort consisting of 10 members with generally 2 voices to a part.

Start with *Playing Elizabeth's Tune (Sacred Music by William Byrd)*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/5UGsXcUOKdteyJKyaPtpio>

Includes music with a distinctly Catholic flavor composed during Elizabeth's reign.

The Hilliard Ensemble

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCS7AKKzG8lqgDLaeabXJ-ew>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/0L8W3JzyTX29RLKZgc3bqS>

Active for 30 years, this British vocal ensemble is named after the Elizabethan miniaturist portrait painter, Nicholas Hilliard.

Start with *Music for Tudor Kings: Henry VII and Henry VIII*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/6ZeKkyKTKvMXACvuY6bsd0>

Pieces that would have been heard in the Tudor Courts.

The Orlando Consort

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=The+Orlando+Consort

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/42YCCI0ImBcMB7s5gmXVDF>

A British vocal quartet that sings sacred music with just one voice to a part

Start with *The Call of the Phoenix - Rare 15th Century English Church Music*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/3BmGG1Fzx4yIjCzzJT9uzb>

A bit older than most of the music here - it will be interesting to listen for the differences between this, and later pieces by Tallis or Byrd, for example.

The Choir of King's College, Cambridge

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzaXHYpwnLtCj25IDYMJ8Kw>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/0f3PsS9IQ6whvNMFFKnpjI>

One of the oldest chapel colleges in the world and founded by Henry VI, the King's choir is ethereal and still performs sung services regularly

Start with *Tudor Masters - Byrd and Gibbons*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/3MeeADanEVxECPIjDjDinz>

The Choir of Clare College, Cambridge

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiseui1s02Aa8MITsb2Naxg>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/0sHmVvDwPMhpgcFLBtiDPd>

Another well known Cambridge choir that performs regular services in an ancient chapel.

Start with *Tudor Anthems from the Oxford Book of Tudor Anthems*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/1KQXHnTAoBLwYRap6Vlf7B>

The Choir of Trinity College, Cambridge

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7Z69K6YDTPoKAFgS7WjKw>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/3x8rZy1i6FwWOWKwfRT1Ab>

Trinity was founded by Henry VIII, and the chapel choir still sings music for regular services.

Start with *Byrd: Cantiones Sacrae*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/4ME7rSyXbq9Ss8DEgVhGnZ>

The Choir of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge

<https://www.youtube.com/user/SidneySussexChoir/feed>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/0saCC0FL0Yn5kRgwn6L1F1>

With David Skinner as their Director, how could they be anything but amazing?

Start with *Weelkes: Grant the King a Long Life (English Anthems & Instrumental Music)*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/3y1YHqWle2Q6SCHHPF1qRC>

Stile Antico

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLH8PiaHdp4zkledC2AtEKQ>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/050HYLDzYAPj4f334VbaKG>

Another British ensemble specializing in music pre-18th century

Start with *The Phoenix Rising*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/0FnjBRi4DFivfj8sh2hZDF>

Choir of New College Oxford

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOTEjflYIBBAitbwfkMtCUA>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/37f8YYDNWUstg5p859gMxe>

Performing since the 14th century when William of Wykeham set up a choir within his “new” college.

Start with *Gibbons: Second Service and Anthems*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/0n4HT4MrHk8nGcYhOM4Jkh>

Choir of Magdalen College Oxford

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/1iZZQ9LJg4rERzOzLwjRW>

Founded in 1480, it was one of the leading choral foundations in late-medieval England.

Start with *Byrd: Second Service & Consort Anthems*

<https://open.spotify.com/album/3quPWLkiN7FT6wixDQSRzs>

Oxford Camerata

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9qZqiFgwINM8o9Q5O58NfA>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/1r5Se2Ts0fmLzFreCTOy2l>

Recording early music since 1984, now comprised of 12 men and women

They have a lot of great recordings on Spotify, but there’s not one available specifically devoted to the English Renaissance.

The Sixteen

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdTQwy5VRtTS8mKtpi_Y62A

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/5y9NnD1AZPcBVbDluRgiXS>

Start with *Ceremony and Devotion, Music for the Tudors*

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/5y9NnD1AZPcBVbDluRgiXS>

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Heather's Shared English Renaissance Spotify Playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/user/hteysko/playlist/3SsafVJ4eGbW5Onz3I8bY>

Renaissance English History Podcast Episodes:

An Interview with Dr. David Skinner

<http://www.hipcast.com/podcast/HVryhY3s>

An Interview with Suzi Digby

<http://www.hipcast.com/podcast/HyTStsNs>

Music and the Chapel Royal

<http://www.hipcast.com/podcast/H6tcPBDs>

About Heather Teysko

Heather Teysko is the creator, writer, and producer of a popular podcast series, the [Renaissance English History Podcast](#), which consistently ranks in the top charts on iTunes, and has received a million downloads. She also created the Tudor Minute, quick bites of information on Medieval and Renaissance England on [YouTube](#). She blogs about history, music, and travel at <http://www.kuratory.com>. Born and raised in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, she has lived in London, New York City, Nashville, Los Angeles, and is now in Andalusia, Spain, where she writes and podcasts, and is a mom to the amazing Hannah Zen. You can learn more about her at <http://www.heatherteysko.com>

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