

***Elizabethan Choral Music: A Primer for Beginners  
(With curated playlist for History Podcasts Peeps!)***

*Heather Teysko @teysko  
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Hey there! I'm so glad you came to the website, and signed up for the mailing list, and the curated Spotify playlist of music of the English Renaissance. How great to have you be part of this community!

To start your journey into the music of the English Renaissance, start listening to the special Spotify playlist here:

<https://open.spotify.com/user/hteysko/playlist/1mq731VAv70E2ETFoWJtkX>

Before I go into the details on each piece of music, and why I chose it, I want to give you some background both to the history, and the music scene in 16th century England. For those of you who are already knowledgeable about this time period, forgive the redundancies. But if you're new to this time period, I hope this will give you a good background and context in which to enjoy the music, which is such a beautiful expression of both the turmoil and excitement of this period. This is the century in which England truly evolved from a medieval society to a modern one that we would recognize.

**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 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 and passion.

The unique thing about music, and especially choral music which is created solely through the human voice, is that it is constantly available to reinterpret and experience as a new creation. With paintings and books, thrilling as they are to see and as moving as they can be, it's a different sort of experience because they are static. People can sketch paintings, or reprint books, but with music it is literally recreated with each new ensemble that performs it.

And when you sing it again, and recreate the music, it's as if you are connected not just to the composer, but to all of the other people who have sung and experienced that piece of music

over the years. **It's as if the composer breathed a soul into the music when it was composed**, and every time we listen or sing the music again, we are able to connect to that soul, and breathe more life into it, and be filled from the life that is already there.

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...

## Spotify Playlist!

Okay, now you have the background, it's time to listen. I have created this playlist mixing both sacred and secular works from the 16th century.

### William Byrd: Ave Verum Corpus

William Byrd is the Granddaddy of 16th century composers. He was a Catholic living under Protestant Elizabeth, and he actually received special permission to practice his faith from the Queen. He continued to write for underground Catholics, including settings of the Mass that were designed to be sung in small places while the service was being held in secret.

The Ave Verum Corpus is a setting from a handwritten 14th century document written by an unknown author. The verse is clearly Catholic, and therefore would have been dangerous, especially as it was composed after the death of Elizabeth, when a very Protestant James I ruled England. It was Elizabeth who had given Byrd permission to practice his faith, not James. On top of that, it was written in 1605, the same year as the Gunpowder Plot, which threatened to blow up Parliament and the King. It wasn't a good time to be writing Catholic music in Latin.

Still, it is considered one of Byrd's greatest works, and is the piece of music that made me fall in love with this music.

The translation is:

Ave, verum corpus	Hail, true body
natum de Maria Virgine,	born of the Virgin Mary,
Vere passum immolatum	Who truly suffered, sacrificed
in Cruce pro homine,	on the Cross for man,
Cujus latus perforatum	Whose pierced side overflowed
unda* fluxit (et)* sanguine,	with water* and blood,
Esto nobis praegustatum	Be for us a foretaste**
in mortis examine.	In the test of death.

The final lines: "O Dulcis, O pie, O Jesu fili Mariae, miserere mei" mean "O sweet, O merciful, O Jesus, Son of Mary, have mercy upon me."

### Thule, The Period of Cosmology and The Andalucian Merchant

I chose these secular madrigals because they are such a brilliant example of the excitement in England during this time as trade and exploration made whole new worlds available.

Both were written by Thomas Weelkes, and were meant to be sung together. *Thule* talks about the wonders in the newly discovered worlds.

*Thule, the period of cosmography,  
Doth vaunt of Hecla, whose sulfurious fire  
Doth melt the frozen clime and thaw the sky;  
Trinacrian Aetna's flames ascend not higher.  
These things seem wondrous, yet more wondrous I,  
Whose heart with fear doth freeze, with love doth fry.*

The second madrigal in the set talks about the new goods, and news of strange events coming from Spain, and other magical mysterious places far away. It refers to China dishes, cochineal (an expensive dye) and other wonders.

The Andalusian merchant, that returns  
Laden with cochineal and China dishes,  
Reports in Spain how strangely Fogo burns,  
Amidst an ocean full of flying fishes!  
These things seem wond'rous, yet more wond'rous I,  
Whose heart with fear doth freeze, with love doth fry.

### **Spem in Alium**

This piece has received a fair amount of attention lately because it was used in the movie *Fifty Shades of Grey*. But it's been around, enticing and heightening our senses for over 400 years. Tallis is another Big Guy of English choral music, who composed under all four Tudor monarchs, and managed to thrive under each.

It is a 40-part Renaissance [motet](#) by Thomas Tallis, composed in c. 1570 for eight choirs of five voices each, considered by some critics to be the greatest piece of English early music. Along with Tallis's *Lamentations*, H. B. Collins described it in 1929 as Tallis's "crowning achievement". It was performed at Nonsuch Palace, the dream palace of Henry VIII which fell into ruin and no longer exists.

### **Come Again**

John Dowland wrote this piece which plays on double entendre. It's a secular madrigal, sung to a loved one. I will leave the interpretation of the title to your imaginations. We're all adults here, and the English Renaissance was full of bawdy humor. I chose it because it's playful and witty, and shows the lightness of this period.

### **When David Heard**

This is a piece of music written by Thomas Weelkes to honor a tragic event, the death of a prince, King James' son Henry Prince of Wales at age 18. It's taken from a text in 2 Samuel when David found out that Absalom had died:

When David heard that Absalom was slain  
He went up into his chamber over the gate and wept,  
and thus he said: my son, my son, O Absalom my son, would God I had died for thee!

### **Now is the Month of Maying**

A famous madrigal celebrating the return of springtime with all of the flirting, laughter, and celebration that involves.

Now is the month of maying,  
When merry lads are playing,  
Fa la la la la la la la,  
Fa la la la la la lah.  
Each with his bonny lass  
Upon the greeny grass.  
Fa la la, etc...

The Spring, clad all in gladness,  
Doth laugh at Winter's sadness,  
Fa la la, etc...  
And to the bagpipe's sound  
The nymphs tread out their ground.  
Fa la la, etc...

Fie then! why sit we musing,  
Youth's sweet delight refusing?  
Fa la la, etc...  
Say, dainty nymphs, and speak,  
Shall we play barley-break?  
Fa la la etc...

### **Christe Jesu pastor bone**

#### **O My Hart and O My Hart**

One of the things people don't really know about Henry VIII is that before he became a fat tyrant, he was actually a true Renaissance man who was an athlete, well read, and a composer. This is one of his compositions, and shows that he actually did have skill in writing music.

O, my heart! and O, my heart,  
It is so sore!

Since I must needs from my Love depart;  
And know no cause wherefore!

### **If Ye Love Me**

This is a classic example of the changes in the liturgy during the mid 16th century. As England moved towards Protestantism, and destroyed icons, idols and symbols of the Catholics, one of the things that had to go was music sung in Latin. And so composers learned how to write religious music in English. This is another anthem by Tallis, showing his versatility in composing.

If ye love me, keep my commandments.  
And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another comforter, that he may 'bide with you forever;  
E'en the spirit of truth;

### **Pastyme with Good Company**

This is another one by Henry VIII, and it was a huge hit when it first came out, sung not just at court, but at pubs and in homes throughout England. The early years of Henry VIII's reign were filled with exuberance and extravagance at court because of the political stability and the fortune that Henry VII left in his coffers. Royal banquets and feasts were held on a continual basis, as were outdoor sports and pastimes, such as hunting, hawking, and jousting and archery tournaments. The young King himself was a skilled sportsman, excelling in horse riding, archery, wrestling, and tennis. The song was penned during this period, and presents a general praise to all these entertainments and diversions, depicting the general state of mind of leisure and unconcern that prevailed in the royal court at the time. At the same time, the text provides a moral justification for all this merriment: company is preferable to idleness; for the latter breeds vice.

**I hope you've enjoyed this guide, and that it has sparked an interest for you in the music of this time period. Here are some links where you can dig deeper in discovering the music from this time period. I'd love to hear from you and find out what you think about it!**

### **Heather's Shared English Renaissance Spotify Playlist**

<https://open.spotify.com/user/hteysko/playlist/3SsafVJ4eGbW5Onz3l8bY>

### **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>

Thanks for reading, and stay in touch!

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