

2. & 3. Linked Workshops held in Hoole, Chester 23rd January and 13th February 2010 By Roger Wilkes Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck 1562 – 1621

I humbly confess that the name Sweelinck meant nothing to me before these workshops. I may have heard it, because I have sung his 'Hodie Christus Natus Est but his name must have passed in one ear and out the other. After attending these workshops I can safely say that both my ears will prick up at the mention of his name in the future!

As we explored each piece we became aware of similar characteristics among all the varied settings. There was an underlying simplicity of approach based firstly on the rhythms created by the words, echoing his connection with psalms.. Most of the time a new syllable had a new note, its length depending on its importance within the word. This made it easier for us to cope with ancient French texts. It wasn't boring because the varying entries of the parts created rhythmic patterns across the polyphony. Where words were extended over runs or several notes it was in order to point the word meaning. The use of block harmonies was restricted to important phrases. As word painting developed during his lifetime this became more detailed among his later works, with more elaborate runs. Although all of his music was intended for private use within small groups we could envisage how the music would have sounded with one or two voices to each part because of this clear style.

23rd January

More than 30 people crowded into this workshop including 4 instrumentalist/singers. There were more men than women, with a healthy line up of tenors which was good because there were two tenor parts in most of the pieces.

Roger started by giving an outline of Sweelinck's life:-

Born in Deventer in the Netherlands, he spent most of his life in Amsterdam, dying there in 1621. His father, Peter Swybbertszoon, was organist at the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam and gave his son most

of his musical education. Sweeling was the name of his mother's family but it is not known why Sweelinck adopted this. He became the organist at the Oude Kerk after his father and was succeeded by his own son. (Surprisingly, the organist was paid by the city council, who owned the organ and this possibly accounted for the security of the post, steady increases in wages and rent-free accommodation). The church was Calvinist and allowed only unison singing in their services. However, part singing of psalms was permitted in private worship or small groups and Sweelinck wrote part settings for all of them. He was active outside the church, belonging to a circle of musicians both professional and amateur in the city. He wrote 254 vocal works which included 33 chansons (in the French Renaissance tradition), 19 madrigals, 39 motets (called 'a noble sunset' to the art of Franco-Flemish polyphony) and settings for 153 psalms.

He had a great reputation as an improviser on the organ and teacher, numbering the Germans Scheidt and Scheidemann among his pupils and holds a key position as the founder of baroque organ music, strongly influenced by English virginalists like Bull and Venetian organists like Claudio Merulo and Giovanni Gabrieli. He passed his art on through his German pupils, in time thus influencing the chorale preludes of J. S. Bach.

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We started by singing an anon chant of Psalm 134 taken from the Genevan Psalter '*Or sus, Serviteurs du Seigneur*' that we recognised as the popular melody for our hymn 'All people that on earth do dwell', and followed it with Sweelinck's SATB setting. Each part in turn had the chant with other voices repeating the text while weaving around the melody. This would have been used in a session of private worship

We spent the rest of the morning working on a very enjoyable 5 part setting of *Regina Coeli* (SATTB) taken from his book of 48 motets (*Cantiones Sacrae* for 3 – 5 voices, published 2 years before his death). This time although the word rhythms were still

as clear there was also word-painting, with dancing patterns on words like 'laetare' and 'alleluia' and extended flowing passages on phrases like 'Ora pro nobis'.

The afternoon session started with the chant of Psalm 1 *Qui au conseil des malins n'a este* (Blessed in the man who hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly) from the Genevan Psalter followed by Sweelinck's 4 part setting. Once again the work seemed to flow directly from the words in a most satisfying way, with each part having the chant while the other voices embellished it.

Then we worked on a delightful *Canticum Nuptiale* SSATB written for the wedding of his pupil Jacob Praetorius (not related to Michael) and his bride Margarita. This radiated real joy. The first half, addressed to Margarita, started with the theme in the two soprano parts, with the second half, addressed to Jacob started with the theme inverted and lead by the tenors. Again, there were lovely word rhythms ("Pia turturella" 4 crotchets, 2 minims) and trumpet fanfares between the voices (rising quaver runs on "vive" followed by "Jacob" repeated to the pattern crotchet, minim, crotchet).

We ended day by singing through *Regina Coeli* and the Wedding Cantata again which sent us on our way in a very cheerful mood.

13th February

This being the day of 'the rabbit show' in the main hall, and also a theatre workshop, we were squeezed into an even smaller room than usual. Fortunately there were not quite as many of us as in January, with only six sopranos, a similar number of altos, a row of ten basses and four tenors.

The morning session opened with a couple more settings of Psalm 134 (*Or sus*), this time by Sweelinck's contemporary, John Dowland. As an experiment we swapped the soprano and tenor lines and found that this worked equally well.

We then moved on to Sweelinck. '*Pourquoi Tournez Vous Vos Yeux*' was set in the Parisian epigrammatic style and was one of his later works, showing a more elaborate polyphony. The syllabic word rhythms were still there with extended phrases on words like 'gratius' and 'tournez' to point the meaning.

'*Au Mois De May*' was another Parisian chanson. Part one was about a lover who protests when his beloved is being bled by her doctor, who says it will improve her ardour. The second part then finds the lover bemoaning the fact that although it worked, she fell for someone else! The change in mood was emphasised by a change to 6/2 time and sections of block harmonies. There was his characteristic elaboration on words like 'May', 'fait' and 'naturelle', with short pithy notes on 'Tay toy' ('Shut up' – which we enjoyed singing) and the general staccato patterns of the French language).

'*Hodie Beata Virgo Maria*' (Cantiones Sacrae, 3-5 voices) was a more serene piece ending with a beautiful *Nunc Dimitis*. His use of clear singable text combined with developing word-painting brought out the difference between the two sections.

After lunch we returned to the Genevan Psalter for Psalm 110 (*le Tout Puissant a Mon Seigneur*) and then dived into Sweelinck's impressive 6 part setting (SSATBB). This was in four sections, with a change into 3/2 rhythm in the fourth section to draw attention to 'Par ce moyen, ayant victoire pleine, La teste haut tout joyeux levera', moving back into 4/2 for the final 'tout joyeux levera'.

My impressions of the afternoon are rather blurred, as we also ran through two other pieces quickly to give a flavour of them to several singers who had to leave early. The first one was *Beati Omnes*, (Blessed are they that fear the Lord) (SSATB) The word 'ambulant' had the parts walking in opposite directions while

'labores' was often drawn out but the text was clear. It divided into two sections, the second part starting at 'Ecce benedicetur homo', with changes into 3/2 time for 'Et videas filios filiorum' and broadening to a triumphant ending on 'pacem super Israel'.

Last but by no means least was what Roger described as "a cracking madrigal". *Che Vuol Veder* (Who wants to see what nature and heaven can perform) was written in the Italian madrigal style. Sweelinck wrote 19 madrigals in this style, of which only 4 have survived, two in complete versions. Written for SSATTB, this again divided into two sections and showed how his basic style could be adapted to this more detailed style with losing its clarity. The text was always clear and the piece retained a feeling of lightness. We returned to these two pieces after the singers had gone, but we could easily have spent another day on them.

Thank you, Roger for managing to show us so many and varied examples of Sweelinck's work and for all the research that it must have involved. As I said at the beginning, the name Sweelinck now bears a great significance for me, that was missing before.

Jeanette Burden