

Liberating Tudor music

In the good old days, before around 1600, the choral singer knew his place. At least, one has to hope he did, because if he got lost, he had precious little chance of finding his way back in – just one part in front of him; no cues to show him what others were singing during long rests; and of course no bar-lines to help him guess where any downbeat might be. ¹

Singing homophonic and polyphonic pieces is – or should be – entirely different experiences for a choir.

In a homophonic piece (a very simple example would be a four-part hymn), the desired harmonic progression dictates what notes the non-melodic parts are to sing. The parts providing the harmony are *subordinate* to the melody – which is why less inventive hymn composers give the altos and tenors rather boring parts when they “fill in” the harmony: those bits are obviously composed last. In my simplistic way, I call this “vertical music”: the lower parts depend on the melody.

But in Renaissance (“Tudor”) polyphony (what I term “horizontal music”), the piece is built out of individual, independent lines of music: the parts are all *equal*: each has its own “melody” and rhythm. The harmony is generated by the combination of these voices. For a choir, learning the individual lines, each with its own melody and rhythm, bringing them together and finding out how they complement one another to produce a glorious whole, has to be one of the finest choral experiences.

And yet, when I first tried some Tudor music with my own choir, I couldn’t make it work – that is to say, I couldn’t make sense of the score and transform it from notes into music. OK, we’d gone through Gibbons’ *Nunc dimittis* from the Short Service, and could sing all the notes, but it didn’t sound like a piece of music.

I recall sitting out in the garden the following weekend with the score, reading through the parts – and realising the obvious – that each part had its own rhythm, and that the bar-lines not only were not helpful, but that they were a real distraction.

So at the next rehearsal I gave each voice in my choir its own part, without bar-lines. But the dangers far outweigh the benefits, and one can understand why choral music is printed in systems, so that people can see not only when their note comes, but also where to get it from. It is even possible that the sopranos may occasionally notice what is happening beneath them!

The solution was obvious: to combine the best features of both approaches, i.e. to type out the parts without bar-lines but in a normal system, so that each part can see how it relates to the others. Music software is ideally suited to producing this.

There was initially a fair bit of resistance – or perhaps it was just shock – in the choir, but people got used to the idea surprisingly quickly. In fact, they were quite chuffed to be taking part in the experiment, and this sense of pride was reinforced when we performed a whole concert of Byrd, Gibbons, Tomkins & Co. and it worked.

¹ I was therefore fascinated to note that the new “Definitive Guide to Music Notation” by Elaine Gould is entitled “Behind Bars”!

Since then we have sung various pieces, including the Byrd 4 and 5-part masses and even Gibbons' 8-part "O clap your hands", in editions I have produced without bar-lines.

Prior to gaining the insight out in the garden, I had assumed that Henry Washington was right when he wrote in the preface to the standard edition of Byrd's 4-part mass: "A system of regular barring has been applied having regard to the fact that the training and equipment of the present-day choral singer bear little relation to those of his 16th-century counterpart. Experience has shown that any visual advantage to the rhythmic flow derived from irregular barring is diminished in practice by difficulties of counting and place-finding."

He is well aware of the problems, though, and goes on to say: "The sign ^l, a short vertical stroke placed above or below a note, is freely used in this edition with the twofold object of *defending verbal rhythm against the accentual power associated with the modern bar-line*, and of defining the true agogic rhythm where an original long note has been replaced by two tied notes of shorter duration." [my italics]

Interestingly, Washington doesn't even mention the possibility of using no bar-lines at all, as in the original! And I doubt that, when he wrote those words in 1959, there were any printed (as opposed to hand-written) scores available with barless parts placed in normal systems like the ones my choir now uses.

The challenge is aptly described by Kenneth R. Long in "The music of the English church" (London, 1972). He writes: "Since bar-lines were not written in the part-books at this time, the singer was left free to group his part in twos, threes or larger groups, depending on the rhythm of the words and the shape of the musical phrase. ... The rhythms were offset against each other, resulting in an intricate pattern of cross-rhythms sometimes known as 'rhythmic counterpoint'. ... Only when actually sung in this way does such a passage come to life: so often choirs find Tudor music dull because they will persist in singing it in a lumpy four-square manner."

His book gives a simple illustration using Gibbons' "Almighty and everlasting God".

Let me try and provide a similar illustration, taking the beginning of Byrd's "O sing joyfully" (omitting the tacet parts) as an example.

Here is the "standard" barred version as edited by John Morehen, which is in common usage:

