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Peter M. Lefferts
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, plefferts1@unl.edu

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Music for Holy Week and Easter

The later medieval church celebrated Holy Week and Easter with many unique liturgical forms and ceremonies, often of an intrinsically dramatic character. These included major processions on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday; the singing of the passions during mass as the New Testament Gospel on Palm Sunday (St. Matthew Passion), Wednesday (St. Luke Passion), and Good Friday (St. John Passion); and in many locales in northern France and England, the performance of two Latin liturgical dramas—the *Visitatio sepulchre* performed at the end of Matins on Easter Sunday morning, and the *Officium peregrinorum,* performed at Vespers that same evening or on the Monday or Tuesday following. Music is a less significant if still salient component of the extraliturgical, primarily spoken vernacular dramas and cycles of Eastertide and Corpus Christi.

Before the 15th century only a few of these occasions attracted written polyphony in England. There are motets on the Passion of Christ, the Resurrection, and on Mary Magdalene at the tomb, but their performance contexts are uncertain. There are also polyphonic settings of the refrain hymn *Gloria laus et honor* for the Palm Sunday procession, the *Alleluia pascha nostrum* for Easter mass, and the verses of two antiphons sung in processions to the Cross on Easter and subsequent weekdays (*Crucifixum in carne* from *Sedit angelus* and *Dicant nunc Iudei* from *Christus resurgens*). In the 15th century, however, the written repertoire was expanded into a significant corpus of liturgically rooted, functional polyphony for the processions and passions. This was music distinct in its sources and patterns of transmission from the elaborate English polyphonic mass cycles, motets, and antiphons that circulated so widely at home and on the Continent in the same time period. Several of its sources, including Shrewsbury School, Manuscript VI (ca. 1430, from Lichfield Cathedral), and BL Egerton 3307 (ca. 1440, perhaps from St. George's, Windsor), are relatively comprehensive in coverage and arranged in clear liturgical order.

The 15th-century music for Holy Week and Easter consists of unpretentious settings, mostly for two or three solo voices, some based on chant but most freely composed; it is highly probable that a tradition of simple, improvised settings lies behind these only slightly more sophisticated pieces and continued alongside them well into the 16th century. The music for processions includes settings of processional hymns, antiphons,

psalms, and litanies. In the passions, a more extended form mixing chant and partsong, polyphony was applied to all direct speech apart from the words of Christ, thus including the words of the crowd (*turba*) and other individual characters. The narrative passages of the Evangelist and the words of Christ remained in plainsong following traditional "Passion tones." Performance of the passions had from an early time taken an essentially dramatic approach, indicated by *litterae significativae*, or letter symbols, that distinguished roles in the biblical text and prescribed qualities of performance for the reader. In missals of the English Use of Salisbury these letters were *m* (*media vox*) for the Evangelist, *b* (*bassa vox*) for Christ, and *a* (*alta vox*) for the rest. The English passions, setting only the *a* words polyphonically, are the earliest in a lengthy and distinguished European musical tradition.

Peter M. Lefferts

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