Thomas Tallis Essay Voice Methods Devon Schmidt

Called the most important midcentury English composer[[1]](#footnote--1), Thomas Tallis was lucky to be one of the first to develop a distinctly English style in music. He lived and worked at a monumental time in music history. The church Reformation and the English royal affluence each contributed to his success and recognition as a composer.

Because record keeping was not thoroughly practiced in the sixteenth century, it is only an estimation that Tallis was born circa 1505, near the end of the reign of Henry VII. Similarly, not much information remains about his early development as a musician. It has been surmised that he was a child of the chapel royal St. James's palace.[[2]](#footnote-0) His first known musical appointment was as organist of the Dover Priory (monastery) in 1530. His career took him to London, then to the Augustinian abbey of Holy Cross at Waltham until the abbey was dissolved in 1540. He also spent time at Canterbury Cathedral before he was sent to Court as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal. It was then that he entered into the business of music for the monarchy. He composed and performed for Henry VIII, Edward VI (1547–1553), Queen Mary (1553–1558), and Queen Elizabeth I (1558 until his death in 1585). The church, and thus church music, was undergoing a large change at this time in England. King Henry was married to Catherine of Aragon. He needed a male heir, but their only surviving child was a daughter, Mary. With Catherine past childbearing age, in 1527 Henry sought an annulment so he could marry Anne Boleyn and hopefully produce an heir. The pope would not grant a divorce, so in 1534 Henry persuaded Parliament to separate from Rome and name Henry the head of the Church of England. Under Henry, the doctrine of the church remained Catholic, but Edward VI adopted Protestant doctrines. The reformed Anglican liturgy was inaugurated during the short reign of Edward VI. Tallis was one of the first church musicians to write anthems set to English words, although Latin continued to be used. In the church services, English replaced Latin. The next two ruling queens differed more yet on their choice of church. When the Roman Rite was restored, more florid, elaborate music was written. In this period Tallis wrote *Gaude gloriosa Dei Mater* and the Christmas Mass *Puer natus est nobis.* Finally, Catholicism was tolerated as Protestant churches became the most common. At this point, Latin hymns, responds, and motets were still being composed and performed. Throughout the controversies, Tallis remained an unreformed Roman Catholic. He was capable of adapting his style to the differing demands of each monarch. Queen Mary granted Tallis a lease on a manor in Kent that provided a comfortable annual income.In 1575, Queen Elizabeth granted to him and William Byrd a 21-year monopoly for polyphonic music and a patent to print and publish music, which was one of the first arrangements of that type in the country.Tallis composed in English, Latin, French, Italian, or other tongues as long as they served for music in the Church or chamber. However, imported music was not to be printed in their press.Tallis had exclusive rights to print any music, in any language. He and William Byrd were the only ones allowed to use the paper that was used in printing music. Tallis and Byrd used their monopoly to produce *Cantiones quae ab argumento sacrae vocantur* but the piece did not sell well and they appealed to Queen Elizabeth for her support.People were naturally wary of their new publications, and it certainly did not help their case that they were both avowed Roman Catholics.

Tallis remained aloof from the religious struggle around him and continued to write. The earliest surviving works by Tallis, *Salve intemerata virgo*, *Ave rosa sine spinis* and *Ave Dei patris filia* are devotional antiphons to the Virgin Mary which were used outside the liturgy and were cultivated in England. Henry VIII’s break with Roman Catholicism in 1534 noticeably influenced the style of music written. Texts became largely confined to the liturgy. The writing of Tallis and his contemporaries became less extravagant. Tallis' Mass for four voices is marked with tendencies toward a syllabic and chordal style and a diminished use of melisma. Like most music at the time, Tallis provides a rhythmic variety and differentiation of moods depending on the meaning of his texts. Some composers were so successful simply because they embodied the meaning of every word with their music. He also wrote several excellent Lutheran chorales. At the time of Elizabeth I’s reign, the country was largely protestant. Tallis wrote nine psalm chant tunes for four voices.

Tallis's better-known works from the Elizabethan years include his settings of the *Lamentations (Jeremiah the Prophet) f*or the Holy Week services and the unique motet *Spem in Alium* written for eight five-voice choirs. Tallis is mostly remembered for his role in composing office hymns. Several of Tallis' anthems written in Edward's reign such as his *If ye love me* areconsidered on the same level as his Elizabethan works.

Toward the end of his life, Tallis resisted the musical development seen in his younger contemporaries such as William Byrd, who embraced compositional complexity and adopted texts built by combining disparate biblical extracts. Rather, he was content to draw his texts from the liturgy and wrote for the worship services in the Chapel Royal.

1. A History of Western Music. Burkholder. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Walker, Ernest. *A History of Music in England*, page 48. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)