Factsheet

Music in the reign of Henry VIII

1. Henry VIII and music

Henry VIII himself was an accomplished musician and composer.

- He played several instruments, including the lute, harp, keyboard instruments and recorder and he also sang.


- Henry VIII composed both part songs and instrumental pieces. His music is preserved in a manuscript ‘Music at the Court of Henry VIII’, now in the British Library (Additional MS 31922), together with the music of other composers attached to his court, and continental musicians as well. There are 33 pieces by ‘the kyng h. viii’ in this manuscript. This music is available within Musica Britannica Volume 18 *Music at the Court of Henry VIII*, edited by John Stevens from Stainer & Bell in a special edition to mark the quincentenary of Henry VIII’s accession.

- Henry had a large musical instrument collection of his own including:
  - 78 flutes
  - 76 recorders
  - 10 trombones
  - 14 trumpets
  - 5 bagpipes

- Evidence that music was very important at the Tudor court comes from the fact that Henry VIII employed nearly 60 musicians.

2. The Chapel Royal from Henry VIII to today

Church music, as well as secular, was very important in Henry VIII’s reign.
• Henry had his own ‘Chapel Royal’, an institution dating back to the 12th century which provided a sovereign with everything required for worship: clergy, choristers, clerks and musicians.

• Henry VIII engaged the foremost performers and composers of the day as ‘Gentlemen of the Chapel Royal’. As with everything, Henry liked to impress and musical excellence was a high priority for him. The Chapel Royal was with Henry VIII’s court at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, the famous meeting between Henry VIII and Francis I of France, just outside Calais.

• In the 18th century, the Chapel Royal was given a permanent ‘home’ at the Chapel of St James’s Palace to serve the monarch. Other Chapels Royal were also maintained at the Royal palaces of Hampton Court and the Tower of London.

• They have a special status in the ecclesiastical establishment, a tradition which is still in place today. The Chapels Royal fall under the jurisdiction of the Dean of the Chapels Royal (currently the Bishop of London, The Right Reverend Richard Chartres), the Lord Chamberlain and ultimately, The Queen.

• In 1966 provision was made for the establishment of a professional choir to continue the highest standards of music for services at The Chapel Royal at Hampton Court and Chapels Royal of St Peter ad Vincula on Tower Green and St John’s Chapel in the White Tower at the Tower of London. Today the choirs of the Chapel Royals maintain this tradition and reputation for excellence, comprising professional singers who perform with some of the most distinguished music groups and companies in the UK and abroad.

3. **Tudor musical instruments**

There were a wide variety of musical instruments in Tudor times:

- **Keyboard instruments**: spinet, harpsichord, virginal and church organ.

- **Wind instruments**: flute, trumpet, pipe, shawm, hautboy (similar to the oboe today), recorder, bagpipe, crumhorn, and sackbut.

- **Stringed instruments**: harp, fiddle, rebec, psaltery, dulcimer, hurdy-gurdy, viol, viola da gamba, lute, cittern.

- **Percussion instruments**: drum, cymbal, triangle, tambourine.
4. **English composers in Tudor times**

English composers during the reigns of both Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth I, whose music will be heard at the Hampton Court Palace Tudor Music Festival, include:

- **William Byrd (c.1543-1623)** was a pupil of Thomas Tallis and the foremost composer of Latin and English church music, madrigals and keyboard pieces. He was an organist and member of the Chapel Royal during the reign of Elizabeth I.

- **Thomas Causton (c. 1520 -1569)**. There is a reference to Causton in the choir of Thomas Wolsey which performed for the opening of Cardinal College, Oxford (later King’s College, and now Christ Church). Causton was a gentleman of the Chapel Royal under Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth.

- **William Cornyshe (1465-1523)** was attached to the courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII. From 1509, the year of Henry’s accession, he was employed at Court as the Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal and trained the choir. His choral and instrument compositions appear in the ‘Music at the Court of Henry VIII’ manuscript. He wrote music for the court banquets and masques was also an actor, poet and dramatist.

- **William Mundy (1529-1591)** was an English composer from London who was a singer at Westminster Abbey and St Paul’s Cathedral and a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal between 1563-91. His church music compositions include masses, anthems, antiphons and psalm settings.

- **Robert Parsons (c. 1535-1572)** was a gentleman of the Chapel Royal, who wrote English church music. He was certainly known to William Byrd, and may have been his teacher.

- **Thomas Ravenscroft (c.1582-1635)** was an English Composer who wrote rounds, dances and catches and also compiled three collections of British folk music. He sang in the choir at St Paul’s Cathedral.

- **John Sheppard (c1515-1558)**. Not much is known about this composer, but it is believed he may have been a member of Thomas Wolsey’s household, a singer at his chapel and that he held a musical post at Magdalen College, Oxford.

- **Thomas Tallis (1505-1585)** is one of the most famous composers of the Tudor period known as the “Father of English Church Music”. His career spanned the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth I. He was an organist at the
Benedictine Priory at Dover, at Waltham Abbey, and Canterbury Cathedral and was appointed Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1542. Tallis lived in Greenwich, London, at the end of his life, and was buried in St. Alpege Church there in 1585.

- **John Taverner (1490-1545),** from Boston in Lincolnshire, was the leading composer of church music during the reign of Henry VIII and wrote many masses. He was appointed Informator Choristarum of Cardinal College, Oxford (later King’s College, and now Christ Church) in 1526, to direct the choir, the foremost choral institution in the land.

- **Christopher Tye (1505-c.1572) was a composer, organist and poet, whose best known work is the Western Wind Mass, a mass based on a secular tune, the love lyric ‘Westron wynde when wyll thow blow?’, popular at the court of Henry VIII. John Taverner and John Sheppard also wrote Western Wind Masses.**

- **William Whytbroke (1520-1550).** Not much is known about this composer, but he may have been the ‘Whitbrooke’ who was chaplain of Cardinal College Oxford in 1529-20 (later King’s College, and now Christ Church), in which case he would have known John Taverner.