

Mind the Gap: Antiphonal performance practice in 17th-century English choral works

by Ben Byram-Wigfield

Having been born and bred within the Anglican choral tradition, I am well used to singing Morning and Evening Canticles by late 16th / early 17th-century composers, such as Amner, Batten, Bevin, Gibbons, Hooper, Tomkins and Weelkes. These works frequently contain antiphonal phrases: one side of the choir (Decani) would sing one phrase, immediately followed by the other side (Cantoris), after which both sides would unite to sing together. The whole process would then begin again.

Most modern editions present these passages as one continuous sequence of notes, which could be sung without any antiphony by a single choir 'unit', or by a single voice on each part, if choir numbers were not sufficient. And this is consequently how the music is sung today: the incoming side begins exactly at the point where the outgoing side finishes.

Sometimes, choirs take things even further, and cut the final note short, as if it were just one choir, breathing between the phrases.

The figure displays four staves of musical notation, each representing a different rendering of an antiphonal passage. Each staff is divided into two parts: 'Dec.' (Decani) and 'Can.' (Cantoris). The lyrics are: 'our. For ___ he hath re - gard - ed the low - li - ness of'. The notation shows the melodic lines for each part, with the 'Dec.' part starting first and the 'Can.' part following. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across notes.

Fig. 1: Standard rendering of antiphonal passages. (*Tomkins 1st Even. Service*)

However, a perusal of the source material reveals a very different practice. If we take the example above, from Tomkins' First Service, and look at the Former Caroline Set of partbooks in the library of Peterhouse, Cambridge, the Decani Medius has this:

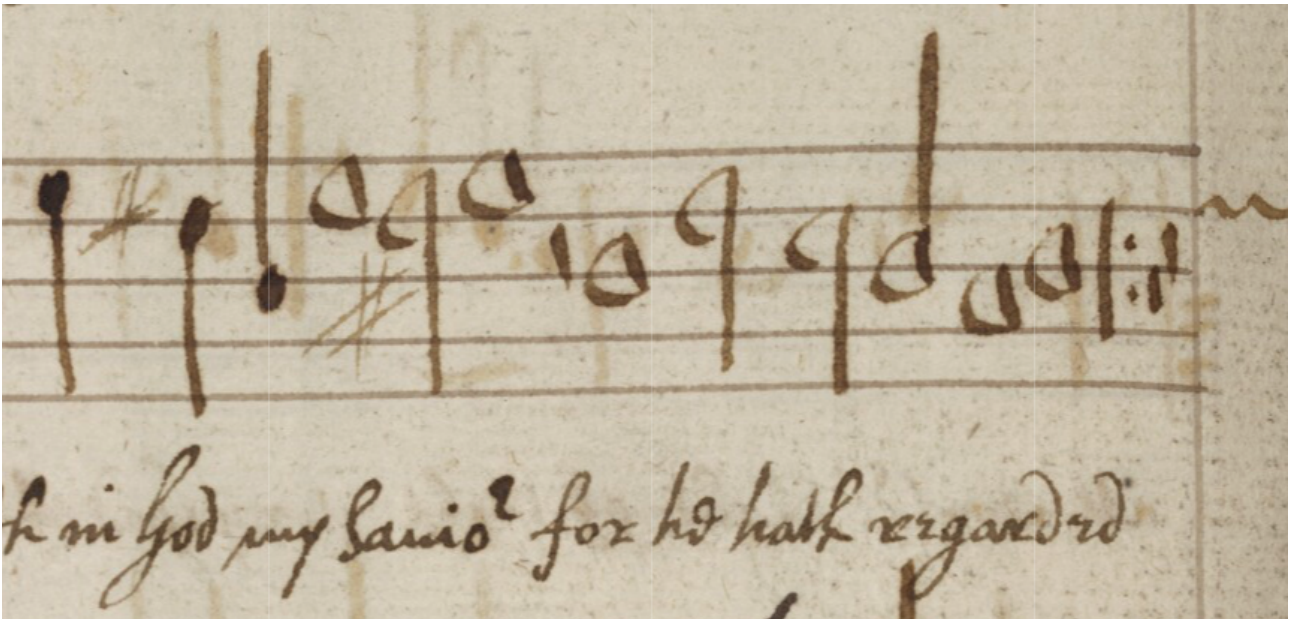


Fig.2: MS 47, f.65v Decani Medius part

Here we can see that after 'Saviour', from the minim rest to the next rest, there are 5 semibreve beats. The Cantoris part has the following:

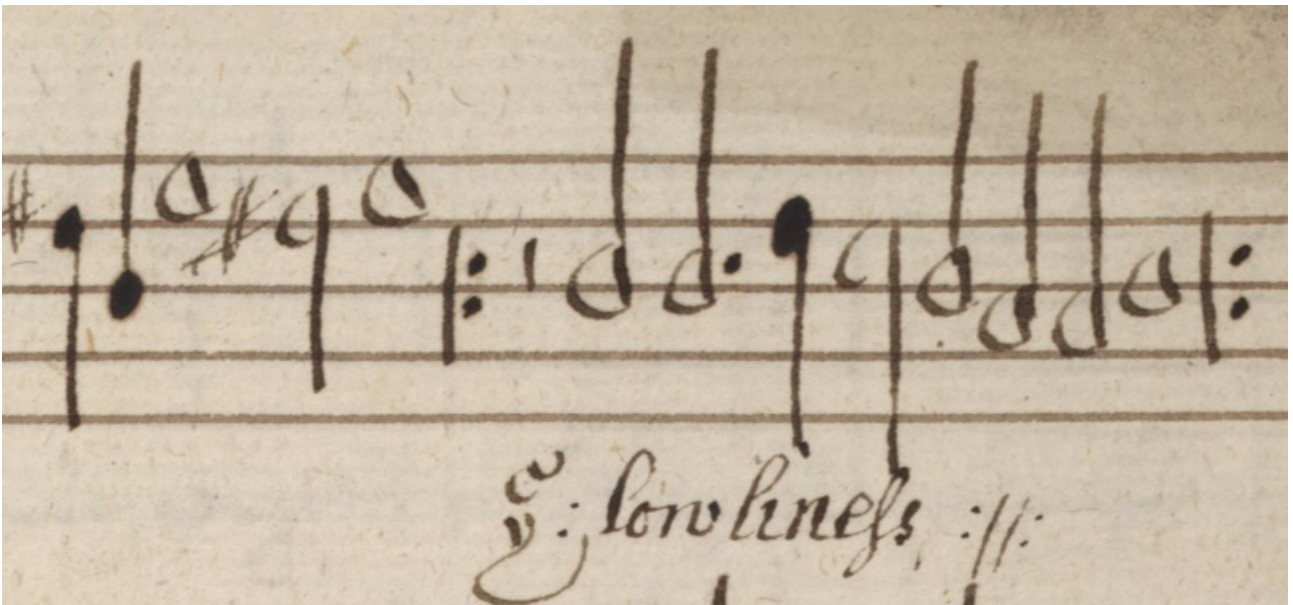


Fig. 3: MS 34, f. 67. Cantoris Medius

This shows the same 'Saviour' phrase, with 2 breves' worth of rest (4 semibreves), followed by a minim. This means that Cantoris will start singing midway through Decani's last semibreve. Of course, rests are frequently inaccurate in partbooks, particularly in lengthy tacet sections; and it could be argued that the double-bar rest with two dots is just some sort of cadence marker. However, the behaviour is clearly observed throughout the entire piece.

We can check other sources of the same work, such as the published *Musica Deo Sacra* anthology of 1668. This has only one Medius part, with Dec and Can indications; and thus inevitably cuts the outgoing notes short. But if we compare it to the individual Peterhouse books, we see the following:

The figure shows three staves of music for the same text. The top staff is labeled 'MDS: Medius (Dec & Can)' and contains a full melodic line with a 'd.' above the first half and a 'c.' above the second half. The middle staff is labeled 'MS 47 (Dec Medius)' and contains the first half of the melody, ending with a bar line, with a 'd.' above it. The bottom staff is labeled 'MS 34 (Can Medius)' and contains the second half of the melody, starting with a bar line, with a 'c.' above it. The lyrics are: 'Godmy Sa - vi-our; for he hath re-gard - ed the low - li-ness of his hand-maid-en.'

Fig. 4: Musica Deo Sacra alongside the Peterhouse parts

So there can be no doubt that the notes were intended to overlap. Any notion that these outgoing notes were lengthened before the other side's entry can be discounted by the disposition of notes and rests in organ books and other parts.

Nine such examples of overlapping chords at antiphonal cross-over points can be found in Tomkins' First Evening Service. As one Service does not make a summer; plenty of examples can be found in other works:

- Amner 'Caesar' Service, (Venite): 3 examples.
- Batten Short Service: 3 examples.
- Batten Evening Service for Men: 11 examples.
- Bevin Evening Service: 1 example.
- Farrant High Evening Service: 4 examples.
- Gibbons Short Service: 1 example.

This is far from an exhaustive list. Such instances can be found throughout the Peterhouse Caroline sets, the York Gostling partbooks, Barnard's publication of 1641 and the associated partbooks, and other contemporary books at Durham, Ely and elsewhere. It is also found between Chorus and Verse sections in Verse-style works.

These overlaps occur where the chord is the same, even if the arrangement of the notes across the parts is different.

The practice is even seen where the third of the chord varies across the sides, such as in the Magnificat of Hooper's Full Service (Gloria b. 125), where the overlapping antiphony is clearly marked in all five parts on each side:

123 Chorus

Medius Decani
Medius Cantoris
Contratenor Decani
Contratenor Cantoris
Tenor Decani
Tenor Cantoris
Bass Decani
Bass Cantoris

Glo - ry be to the Fa - - ther, and to the
Glo - ry be to the Fa - - ther,
Glo - ry be to the Fa - - ther, and to the
Glo - ry be to the Fa - - ther, and to the
Glo - ry be to the Fa - - ther,
Glo - ry be to the Fa - - ther,
Glo - ry be to the Fa - - ther, and to the
Glo - ry be to the Fa - - ther,
Glo - ry be to the Fa - - ther,
Glo - ry be to the Fa - - ther,

Fig. 5: Hooper Full Service (transposed edition)

(In bar 127, it can be seen that the notes don't overlap where the chord is different.)

Generations of editors have meticulously 'tidied' these notes, cutting them short to avoid any overlap, be it consonant or dissonant. This seems to have been done with a concern for the economies of publishing, presenting the material without the addition of extra voices on the staff or extra staves on the page, rather than with any consideration for performance practice of the period.

Michael Howard, in his editions of Batten's services for the *Church Music Society* in the 1950s, pioneered the use of an asterisk over a note, as a means of indicating that the outgoing side should hold onto it. Sadly, this was neither imitated by other editors, nor (largely) observed by performers. I have continued this practice in my editions as an effective method of indicating these overlaps.

The image displays four staves of musical notation, each representing a different voice part in an antiphonal setting. Each staff begins with a 'Dec.' (Deceus) marking and ends with a '* Can.' (Cantus) marking. The lyrics are: 'our. For ___ he hath re - gard - ed the low - li - ness of'. The notation includes various note values (minims, crotchets, quavers) and rests, with some notes beamed together. The first staff is in a soprano clef, the second in an alto clef, the third in a tenor clef, and the fourth in a bass clef. The lyrics are aligned with the notes below each staff.

Fig. 6: edition showing asterisks.

The purpose of this note is to inform (or remind) conductors of this practice, so that it will inform their own decisions about how the two sides should perform these antiphonal phrases.

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Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Library of Peterhouse, Cambridge; and to the Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music.