

The Wells Musical Slates

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Among the exhibits at Wells Museum in Somerset are items of musical interest, the so-called 'Wells musical slates'.¹ These two slates, both of which have music scratched on them, are roughly hewn fragments of grey roofing slate in which there is evidence of shaling. It is likely that both have suffered damage since the music was scratched on them, because breakage points are visible at the edges of the music. In the case of the larger slate, it is possible to reconstruct some of the music that is missing because of breakage. The larger slate measures about 6" x 5" and has four staves; the smaller measures about 4" x 3½" and has two. Each of the staves has five lines. There is an inscription on the reverse of the smaller slate and a drawing on the reverse of the larger. The music on both has been deeply scored with a hard, pointed instrument, but the scoring is shallower on the smaller and on the final staff of the larger one. This shows that the slates were either to be added to or discarded as they stood after inscription; there is no possibility of erasure or re-use in the manner of some tablets or slates.

Any attempt at precise dating or identification based on note shapes is hazardous. In contrast with the normal process of music copying, it would have been difficult for any scribe to achieve neat, consistent note shapes on slate. It is clear that the staff-lines on both slates were scratched freehand and not ruled. The music appears to be in a different hand on each slate, and it is unlikely that the two slates originally formed part of the same whole. For display purposes they have been dusted with a white powder so that the music shows more clearly; unfortunately, this has also clarified all the cracks and other extraneous marks, so it was necessary to remove the powder in order to examine the music in detail.

The description accompanying the exhibit mentions that the slates were presented to Wells Museum in 1898 by the Rev. S. Hervey, vicar of the nearby village of Wedmore; he discovered them while excavating the site of the old manor house at Mudgley, near Wedmore. The supposition that the slates were once part of the roof of this house is of limited relevance to the

slates' original provenance or musical function, since the music must have been inscribed before the slates were used for building or repair. The house was the home of successive deans of Wells Cathedral from before 1255 until the mid-16th century. Hervey concluded from this that the music was probably sung in the cathedral, but that does not necessarily follow. The description identifies the music on the larger slate as a Kyrie, in accordance with the appearance of this word as an incipit under the first staff. However, the subsequent contention that this Kyrie 'has characteristics similar to the Agincourt song' is misleading and seems to have no foundation.

As to the music on the smaller slate, a detailed commentary² suggests that it is 'apparently similar to *Vater unser* in a Gesangbuch of 1539', but the author had not made a first-hand comparison. The *Vater unser* melody from Schumann's 1539 *Gesangbuch*³ bears only an extremely vague resemblance to either of the two fragments concerned, and there is unlikely to be any connection.

Subsequent commentaries have tended to reproduce the above conclusions, and similar vagaries have surrounded the non-musical material on the slates. The word 'Kyrie' on the larger slate is fairly clear, but Bate⁴ also found an 'X' (for 'Christe'?) which my examination fails to reveal. There is a drawing of a dog's head on the reverse of the larger slate, but no drawing of a human hand, as suggested by Bate. On the reverse of the smaller slate there are several scribbles which could be referred to as pen-trials if the medium were different. There is an attempt at drawing another staff, and two inscriptions. Hervey⁵ read these as 'Wllman Anno', pointing out that Richard Wolman was Dean of Wells from 1529 until 1537, and thus tentatively assigning the writing to this period. His alternative suggestion for the first inscription was 'Wllmus', but the mystery behind 'Anno' remained. My investigation suggests that a contracted form of 'Willelmus' is the most convincing reading, and that 'Anno' is wrong. This word begins not with a capital 'A' but with 'ff', a frequent substitute for capital 'F'. Little more is clear; there seems to be

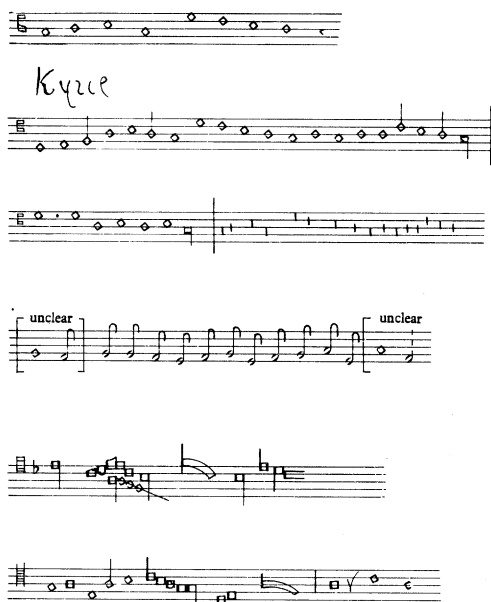
¹I am indebted to my colleague Dr Robert Orledge for drawing my attention to the slates, to the staff of Wells Museum for permitting me to examine them, and to Mr Robert Dunning, editor of the Victoria History of Somerset, for some initial references; the Wells slates are unrelated to other musical slates such as those at Keswick Museum in Cumbria which form a musical instrument (these are described by James Blades, *Percussion Instruments and their History* (London, 1970), pp.82-4).

²R. S. Bate, in *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries*, ed. G. W. Saunders and J. Fowler, xxii (Sherborne, 1958), n.50

³P. Dearmer and others, ed.: *The English Hymnal* (London, 1906), no.539

⁴op cit

⁵ibid, additional note



a superscript bar indicating scribal contraction, but the occurrence of 'n' as the next letter is no more obvious than that of any other letter made up of typographical minims.

Mudgley, where the slates were found, together with the nearby villages of Wedmore and Mark, was part of the endowment of the deanery of Wells. However, certain property in the area belonged to the nearby abbey of Glastonbury, which was an extremely wealthy house up to its dissolution and may well have maintained schools in the area. The possibility cannot be ruled out that the slates had a monastic rather than a secular origin, although there is no direct evidence for that. The office of Dean of Wells in the 15th and 16th centuries seems to have been the subject of a certain amount of dispute and controversy. Thomas Cromwell, who was executed in 1540, was succeeded as dean by William Fitzwilliam (also known as Fitzjames), and although the evidence is by no means conclusive, it could well be Dean Fitzwilliam whose name is abbreviated as 'Wllmus ff . . .' on one of the slates. In 1547 Fitzwilliam resigned as dean and surrendered the Wedmore property to the king, who granted it almost immediately to the Duke of Somerset.

The music on the larger slate can be identified with certainty as Kyrie *Pater cuncta*, in use until fairly recently as part of Mass XII for feasts of the rank of semidouble.⁶ There are two Kyrie *Pater cuncta* text tropes (*Pater cuncta/sede sedens* and *Pater cuncta/summa servans*), but insufficient melody survives on the slate to determine from which of them this Kyrie grew. The tune appears in numerous foreign sources,

⁶*Liber usualis* (Tournai, 1961), p.48

occasionally with a different text from either of the two *Pater cuncta* Kyrie tropes.⁷ The melody as it appears on the slate agrees for the most part with the standard *Liber usualis* Kyrie; clearly the portion missing from the first staff on the slate would have been a continuation beyond the first nine notes.

The second staff presents a problem. The Kyrie melody is repeated and continued in full after the first four notes, but the opening is different, misplacing the first note and adding an extra one between the third and fourth. The additional notes at the beginning of the staff could form the end of the Christe melody, resulting in a curious and erratic merger between this and the Kyrie opening. Alternatively, this variant of the Kyrie *Pater cuncta* melody could occur because of some unknown modification of the original trope text.⁸ Verification of any hypothesis is hampered by the apparent breakage of a large proportion of the music originally on the slate.

The third staff contains the cadence of the penultimate rather than the final Kyrie. It is followed by the opening of the Kyrie in simple stroke notation;⁹ this may indicate some didactic purpose, perhaps to show by comparison how the mensural notation worked. The fourth staff has the appearance of having been added, as an afterthought, in limited space; it has sustained much damage and the remaining fragment of music is unclear at each end. Unlike the previous three staves, which bear the tenor C clef, no clef survives on the fourth. There is a further change in notation, with a predominance of note shapes resembling void semiminims. The music, for all its imprecision, is strikingly similar to the troped *Ite, cunctipotens, missa est*, though less so to the corresponding Kyrie, and these appear among the tropes in the Sarum use.¹⁰

It is not unreasonable to suppose that the writing originates from the period when the Sarum use was current in the Wells area. It is unlikely to date from before 1400. However, the appearance of a Sarum *Ite, missa est* trope (if this is its true identity) is not in itself proof that the writing was done in the area where the slates were found. Indeed, Kyrie *Pater cuncta* does not appear among the Sarum troped Kyries but among the Kyries for the Hereford

⁷M. Melnicki: *Das einstimmige Kyrie des Lateinischen Mittelalters* (diss., Erlangen U., 1954), 97ff; no English sources are cited for this Kyrie.

⁸I am indebted to Messrs Stephen Ryle and Bruno Turner and Dr Mary Berry for background material on plainsong in this section.

⁹similar to that described by Margaret Bent in 'New and Little-known Fragments of English Medieval Polyphony', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xxi (1968), 137

¹⁰for example in *Missale ad usum insignis ecclesiae Sarisburiensis* (Antwerp, 1528) and *Graduale ad usum ecclesiae Sarisburiensis* (Paris, 1532), both in the British Library

use, where it shows the *sede sedens* text variant. As far as can be traced, the only member of the Wells clergy who had connections with Hereford during the period in question was Nicholas Carent. He was Dean of Wells from 1446 to 1467 and held a prebend in the Hereford diocese simultaneously with his deanship until 1453.¹¹ His residence in Wells would have been the manor house where the slates were found. The Kyrie *Pater cuncta* may have been used around Wells alongside the Sarum repertory. This may even explain the appearance of this Kyrie on the slate—precisely because it is not written down in the normal repertory of the area.

The juxtaposition on the slate of Kyrie *Pater cuncta* with *Ite, cunctipotens, missa est*, if correct, raises an interesting possibility. The Hereford use had five classes of feast, and for some of the relatively minor ones *Pater cuncta* and *Cunctipotens* are given as alternative tropes.¹² These minor feasts at Hereford included St Andrew, more important at Wells as the dedicatee of the cathedral; and the deposition of St Thomas of Hereford, Confessor, in the cathedral church only (August 25). St Thomas was also celebrated on two principal feast-days in the Hereford diocese: his particular day (October 2) and his translation (October 25). He was apparently accorded a minor feast-day (October 2) at Wells, and it is possible that musical items were borrowed from the Hereford repertory, among them his deposition. Mention of this and several other feasts peculiar to Wells occurs in a 15th-century breviary which probably formed a local Wells appendix to the Sarum breviary then in use.¹³ Although this apparent Hereford influence could cast doubt on the Wells origin of the slates, it is also possible that the slate music could have been used for particular Wells feasts such as this.

The notation and clefs on the smaller slate are substantially different from those on the larger. A deletion of four separate notes and the substitution of a ligature at higher pitch occurs on the first staff. The staves appear to be unrelated in content since the clefs are different, and only the first staff bears the B $\flat$ key signature. They do not form part of a score. Both bear superficial resemblance to several chants but in neither case to one in particular. It is possible that the fragments show the middle rather than the opening of a chant.

A further possibility is that these fragments may form some kind of counterpoint to plain-

song, perhaps in the manner of faburdens or squares. This could explain the presence of mensural rather than plainsong notation on both slates, the plainsong having been turned into *cantus fractus*.¹⁴ Faburden was sometimes used in processional music, and it is just possible that small, portable slates fulfilled such a purpose. The faburdens were sometimes written down as a basis for further improvisation. The technique of using squares was in use at Wells until comparatively late, for in 1538 the choirmaster was required to provide himself with 'square books and pricke song books' for the choir, for the Lady Chapel, and for processions and principal feasts.¹⁵ Comparison of the slate tunes with Kyrie squares¹⁶ fails to identify the slate music. Perhaps coincidentally, the first fragment on the smaller slate (including the deleted material) works contrapuntally with part of the Christe of the 14th Kyrie square, while Kyrie *Pater cuncta* is itself very similar to the 11th Kyrie square.

Comparison with other examples of music carved on slate or stone shows the Wells slates to be unique in many respects. Of several musical graffiti described by Violet Pritchard¹⁷ the Wells slates stand apart as showing sacred music, not in code or cipher, on five-line staves. Further, they were found in a house rather than a church, apparently having been part of a roof rather than, for example, a more accessible pillar. They are functional not decorative.

A far more striking comparison is possible between the Wells slates and the only other example of inscribed musical slates from a similar period in the British isles: those from Smarmore, Co. Louth (now in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin). There are 49 of these slates, and as well as music they contain medical or veterinary prescriptions in English, and ecclesiastical and other inscriptions in Latin. They may be dated from the first half of the 15th century, and the musical material on four of them apparently fits with this dating. Some of the Latin subject matter suggests that they were used in a school, for pupils' writing exercises or by the schoolmaster. The music, much of which is similar in appearance to some of the Wells music, is mensural and thus deemed part of polyphony; no plainsong has been identified, and the music has more of a dance-tune character. This led Bliss¹⁸ to believe that the musical fragments were not for school

¹¹J. le Neve and T. Duffus Hardy: *Fasti ecclesiae anglicanae* (Oxford, 1854), ii, 24; viii, 5

¹²W. G. Henderson, ed.: *Missale ad usum percelebris ecclesiae Herefordensis* (Leeds, 1874), p. xxxviii

¹³B. Schofield: 'Muchelney Memoranda, Edited from a Breviary of the Abbey', *Somerset Record Society*, xlii (1927), 181

¹⁴B. Trowell: 'Fa-burden and fauxbourdon', *Musica disciplina*, no. 13 (1959), 54

¹⁵H. Baillie: 'Squares', *Acta musicologica*, xxxii (1960), 180

¹⁶*ibid*

¹⁷V. Pritchard: *English Medieval Graffiti* (Cambridge, 1967), 170–71

¹⁸A. J. Bliss: 'The Inscribed Slates at Smarmore', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, lxiv, C/2 (1965), 33

use, since mensural dance-like music would not form part of an elementary education, and monastic novices would start by learning plainsong. Despite their having the initial appearance of scores, the staves on the Irish slates do not fit together as coherent polyphony. But, like the staves on the Wells slates, they could well form parts of single polyphonic pieces. Frank Harrison suggests that both sets were used to teach polyphonic music to church choristers, pointing out the advantage that they could be used for successive groups of learners. The musical slates must all date from before 1549 when (apart from the brief respite of 1553–8) the Latin liturgy ceased to be used.¹⁹

The idea of slates for composition has been explored by Edward Lowinsky, in an article on Lampadius's treatise of 1537.²⁰ He posits a method of composition in use until about 1500 in which each voice part of a polyphonic piece was composed on a separate tablet. Although not permitting erasure and re-use, as suggested by Lowinsky, slate would be an ideal material for such a purpose: it is smooth, fairly thin, not too difficult to inscribe and—unlike paper and parchment in the 15th and

16th centuries—abundant and inexpensive. If Lowinsky's ideas on the technique of composition are right, then the Kyrie *Pater cuncta* slate melody at least could have been used as a basis on which to practise composition.

The slate found in a disused mine at Fosse, Belgium, and described by Suzanne Clercx²¹ forms an interesting comparison with the Wells slates, with which it could be contemporaneous. But there are important differences. The Belgian slate contains no music, and its staves appear to be braced together at both ends, making its intended use as a score more likely.

Another possible function for the Wells slates is brought to mind by Lowinsky's translation of a Latin text of 1438, published in Paris in 1534,²² and advocating the continuous display of tablets of music in the choir to show what should be sung by each officiant at every feast. This could concur with the theory that the music was for feasts peculiar to Wells.

Although the discovery of the Wells slates on the site of the deans' former manor prompts conjectures as to their date, use and ownership, the evidence is far from conclusive. Whatever their purpose, they are fascinating; and there is surely more to be discovered about them.

¹⁹F. L. Harrison: 'Polyphony in Medieval Ireland', *Festschrift Bruno Stäblein zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. M. Ruhnke (Kassel, 1967), 77

²⁰E. E. Lowinsky: 'On the Use of Scores by Sixteenth-century Musicians', *JAMS*, i (1948), 17

²¹S. Clercx: 'D'une ardoise aux partitions du XVI^e siècle', *Mélanges d'histoire et d'esthétique musicales*, i (1955), 157–70

²²E. E. Lowinsky: 'Early Scores in Manuscript', *JAMS*, xiii (1960), 128, n.8 [includes discussion of the Belgian slate]