Music, Song and Dance in Elizabethan England

A Very Short Overview

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Introduction:

The following is a brief overview of English music and dance during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). The major instrument types, dance and song styles, and musical practices are described, with an emphasis on their relation to contemporary social history and class structure. It is intended to be an accessible introduction to this rich musical period for those with little prior knowledge of music history. The sources page may be used as a reference point for further research.
I: Instrumental Music

Elizabethans played a wide variety of musical instruments, some holdovers from the medieval period and some new to the sixteenth century. Some of the most common types from each family of instruments are discussed here.

String Instruments

Violin Family: The violin family, including the ancestors of the modern viola and cello, was a relative new comer to Elizabethan England, emerging out of Italy in the 1550s. The Renaissance violin was similar to its modern counterpart, but lacked a chin or shoulder rest and was held sloping downward rather than parallel to the floor. During the Elizabethan period violins never exceeded the viol family in popularity.

Viol Family: The preeminent bowed string instrument of the Elizabethans was the viol, a slightly older instrument with more rounded, sloping shoulders than the violin and a darker tone. All members of the viol family, from soprano to bass, were grasped between the knees of the player, in the same manner as the modern cello.

Lute: Perhaps no instrument is more emblematic of Elizabethan England than the lute, a medieval instrument of Arabic origin that Elizabethans played as a solo instrument, to accompany singing, or as part of a larger ensemble. The lute’s ubiquity in Elizabethan music was comparable to that of its modern descendent, the guitar.

Hurdy Gurdy: The hurdy gurdy, or “wheel fiddle,” was a complex string instrument that was developed some 600 years before the Elizabethan period, but was still popular in the sixteenth century. The crank at the end of the hurdy gurdy produced a steady drone by rubbing a wheel against the strings, while melodies could be played on a keyboard of wooden pegs with the other hand. Now all but extinct in the western world, the hurdy gurdy retained its popularity in Eastern Europe to the present day.

Harpischord Family: Keyboard instruments in Elizabethan England consisted of organs and harpsichords. The latter of these bore a superficial resemblance to the modern piano, but had a thinner sound and no variation in volume. Members of the harpsichord family pictured here include the small virginal, the spinet (top left), and the large, upright, clavicytherium.
**Woodwind Instruments**

**Recorder Family:** Popular among nobility and peasantry alike, the recorder family was a common presence in Elizabethan music. Shakespeare utilized this instrument’s sweet, soft tones to invoke the spiritual and otherworldly in music accompanying his plays. The recorder coexisted in Elizabethan England with the wooden transverse flute, whose metal descendent is familiar to us as the modern flute.

**Shawm Family:** The shawm, ancestor of the modern oboe, possessed a shrill, squealing tone much more abrasive than that of its descendent. So loud was this early double reed woodwind that it was usually only played in outdoor settings such as dances and parades. Unlike its cousin the bagpipe, the shawm was an instrument of the city, not the countryside.

**Rackett Family:** In spite of its small size, the rackett was a bass instrument in the double reed family, a dwarfish forerunner of the modern bassoon.

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**Brass Instruments**

**Trumpet:** The trumpet continued its Medieval role as the instrument of nobility and the battlefield, although the lack of valves meant that it could play little more than fanfares in civilian music. Nevertheless, trumpeters were highly valued musicians in Elizabethan society.

**Sackbut Family:** The trumpet’s lack of musical flexibility was solved in the Renaissance trombone or sackbut, the first fully chromatic brass instrument. The sackbut featured narrower tubing and a much smaller bell than the modern trombone, which gave it a slightly softer and more delicate sound. This enabled the sackbut to blend more easily with the human voice.

**Cornett Family:** This curious Renaissance instrument consisted of a small metal mouthpiece and wooden body with finger holes similar to the recorder. It had a sweet and piercing tone, but was very difficult to master and has no modern descendents. Henry VIII was an avid cornettist, but Elizabeth considered it an instrument unbecoming of a monarch.
**Instrumental Ensembles**

**Consorts:** Elizabethans formed various types of instrumental ensembles, called “consorts.” Most instruments were made in a variety of sizes, so consorts consisting of only one instrument family were common. This was especially true of viols and recorders. If more than one instrument type was used, the ensemble was referred to as a “mixed” or “broken” consort. Viols, lutes, flutes, and violins in various combinations often played together in mixed consorts.

**Waits:** Loud instruments were also combined in wind bands known in England as “waits.” Waits were semi-professional city bands that played at ceremonies, dances, and other public occasions. Shawms, Sackbuts and cornetts were the usual instruments of the waits. The latter two instruments were also sometimes used in church music to double vocal lines.

**Music and Class**

Elizabethan society was deeply divided along class lines, and music reflected this basic social condition.
Professional musicians: Professional instrumentists were usually employed by the nobility or the wealthiest of the middle class. These might range from a single music master whose main function was to instruct the children of the household, to large ensembles that could provide entertainment at feasts and masques (elaborate festivities combining music, dance and theater).

The royal “Queen’s Musick” consisted of 30 to 60 musicians, many of them foreign virtuosi recruited from the continent at great expense. Large ensembles such as these usually played in separate, small consorts. The mass “orchestra” was an invention of the later, Baroque period.

Minstrels were still to be found in Elizabethan England, although their status was only a faint echo of the elite poet-composer-performers of the Medieval period. The usual employers of these itinerant musicians were taverns, theaters, and rural villages that might pay a fiddler to play music for dances.

Amatuer musicians: A new development in the Elizabethan period was the growth of amatuer instrumental consorts. Music had long been a pastime of the nobility, but the development of the music printing industry made it possible for the rising middle class to pursue music making in their leisure time. The posession of musical instruments was considered a mark of social aspiration, and most middle class homes could afford at least a few viols, lutes, or recorders.

The poor, both rural and urban, valued musical instruments but struggled to acquire them. Some instruments such as the bagpipe, the trump (Jew’s or Jaw Harp) and the hurdy gurdy were strongly associated with the countryside.

II: Vocal Music

Vocal music permeated every level of Elizabethan society. Singing was a pastime enjoyed by all, and a way of life for a few.

Sacred Song

Unlike instrumental performance, the church was the main creative force for vocal music in Elizabethan England, and one of the few employers of professional singers. No secular choirs equivalent to the town waits existed, and noble households rarely maintained musicians who were strictly vocalists.

Although England was Protestant, Elizabeth encouraged English composers to continue producing complex polyphonic (more than one vocal part) choral works for the Anglican church to differentiate it from the more puritanical Calvinists. Many of Elizabethan England’s greatest composers including Thomas Tallis, William Byrd, and Orlando Gibbons wrote primarily or exclusively for the church. Tallis’ Spem in alium (c1570) features no less than 40 independent vocal parts!

Elizabethan choral music by Thomas Tallis. Most disconcerting to modern singers is the lack of barlines.
Secular Song

The Madrigal: Like instrumental ensembles, the availability of printed music and the spending power of the middle class led many Elizabethans to take up singing part songs informally among friends and family. By far the most popular song type for these amatuer vocal ensembles was the madrigal, a genre of songs for multiple voices that featured active vocal lines and complex harmonies.

Madrigals were so important to upper and middle class Elizabethans that the inability to carry a part was a serious social faux pas. Composer Thomas Morley was humiliated by his lack of musical training in his youth. As he recounted the incident in the introduction to his *Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (1597):

“Supper being ended, and Musick bookes (according to the custome) being brought to the tables, the mistresse of the house presented me with a part, earnestly requesting me to sing. But when, after many excuses I protested unfainedly that I could not: every one began to wonder. Yea, some whispered to others, demaunding how I was brought up.”

Other Secular Song: Popular as the madrigal was, it by no means the only form of secular song sung by Elizabethans. Peasants, most of whom were musically illiterate, learned and sang folk songs by ear.

Folk songs could take the form of long ballads, or could be round or “catches,” where a single musical line is repeated by many voices starting at different times. The words of the catch were often simple and dealt with daily life and the natural world. The following was published by Thomas Ravenscroft in 1609:

Hey hoe, to the greene wood now let us goe, sing heaue and hoe, and there shall we find both bucke and doe, sing heaue and ho, the Hart and Hinde and the little prety Roae sing heaue and ho.

Catches were also popular tavern songs, although the lyrics tended to be much bawdier in this context.
III: Dance

Dancing was a very popular entertainment in Elizabethan England, and reflected the same class divisions as musical performance.

Court Dances

Dances were a common entertainment at Elizabeth’s court. Courtiers who danced well sometimes awarded special recognition by the queen, and those who performed poorly were chastised. The dances performed at court were mostly imported from the continent. Some, such as the stately Pavan could be danced by all members of the court, while the more energetic Volta and Galliard were the domain of athletic courtiers who vied for distinction in stamina and gracefulness.

Elizabeth herself was an excellent dancer, having been tutored in the art form from a young age. However, she did not regularly take part in the dances of her court. Instead, the Queen danced before smaller audiences of courtiers, handpicked to receive the honor of observing this display of royal skill.

Country Dances

Playford dances: A surprising amount of information is known about folk or “country” dancing in Elizabethan England thanks to the writings of John Playford, a seventeenth century author who compiled a large number of traditional dances in The English Dancing Master of 1651. It is difficult to know how many of these dances were practiced 50 or 100 years earlier, but references in Elizabethan accounts make it clear that at least some of them were. The dances recorded by Playford are simple and inclusive, designed to be danced by large numbers of men and women following the same steps. This is far removed from court dances where couples competed with one another in displays of virtuosic footwork.
Ritual dances: Another style of traditional English dance is represented by the so-called “ritual” dances. Of these, the maypole and morris dances are best known. The maypole was a fixture throughout northern Europe, but morris was a uniquely English dance form. The morris was danced exclusively by men dressed in elaborate costumes featuring bells, handkerchiefs, and wooden swords.

An especially unique ritual dance performed by Elizabethans was the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance, a dance performed only once per year in the Staffordshire village of Abbots Bromley. The dance involved a procession of men baring reindeer antlers and “character” dancers representing a hobby horse, a man dressed as a women, and a fool.

Dance ethnologists have often speculated that the ritual dances may have evolved from ancient, pre-Christian traditions that escaped the censure of the church. Intriguing as these theories are, no hard evidence exists that the ritual dances of the Elizabethans were more than the faintest echoes of a pagan past.

Sources:

The black and white illustrations of instruments are woodcuts from Syntagma Musicum by Michael Praetorius (1618). All images are public domain.


