

## 34. Weelkes

### Sing we at pleasure

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

### Background information and performance circumstances

#### **Biography:**

- Thomas Weelkes was probably born in Sussex in 1576.
- He died in 1623 (London).
- He was a leading English composer of madrigals (and also an important composer of English church music).
- He was organist of Winchester College (1598), and later singer and organist at Chichester Cathedral (c.1602).

#### **'Sing we at pleasure':**

- The verse text is anonymous.
- Published London, 1598 – when Weelkes was still in his early twenties – in *Balletts and Madrigals to Five Voyces*. This volume was dedicated to the courtier Edward Darcy, which suggests that the contents may have been sung at the court of Queen Elizabeth I.
- The original singers sang from separate part-books (rather as orchestral players do today), as opposed to a score. Typically for the late 16th century there were no bar lines.

As well as listening to the anthology recording, try the performance of *Sing we at pleasure* by Pro Cantione Antiqua under Philip Ledger (item 17 of *English Madrigals...Sing We at Pleasure*). This is available from iTunes.

The music of *Sing we at pleasure* is Renaissance in style. There are no hints of the Baroque *seconda pratica* that was beginning to be in vogue in Italy (see for example Monteverdi's *Ohimè, se tanto amate* [NAM 35], published just five years after Weelkes's piece).

*Sing we at pleasure* can be termed a *madrigal*, but a more accurate term is *ballett*.

- A madrigal is usually a secular song about love, particularly in a rural setting. Madrigals are mostly for unaccompanied voices, and can be substantial and serious in tone (e.g. Weelkes's own *My tears do not avail me* (1597)).
- A ballett is essentially a lighter madrigal, with two main sections, each ending with a passage based on the syllables 'fa-la'. ('Ballett' with two t's is Weelkes's own spelling, and avoids any possible confusion with 'ballet'.)
  - The ballett was of late 16th-century Italian origin, where it was mostly homophonic and could accompany dancing.
  - Thomas Morley played a major part in introducing the ballett into England, where it was often developed into something longer and more sophisticated than the earliest Italian type. Note the plentiful use of counterpoint in *Sing we at pleasure*.

## Performing forces and their handling

*Sing we at pleasure* is in five parts, and Weelkes probably expected performance by five soloists rather than a choir with several singers on each part. As a secular piece it was almost certainly sung by a mixed ensemble of women and men (not by men and boys as in the manner of church music).

In the anthology the five voices are labelled:

- Soprano 1 (Cantus)
  - 'Cantus' – as in the 1598 publication – is Latin for 'song'. Often the cantus is the highest part, but here cantus and quintus take it in turns to be on top.
  - Range: from F sharp to G a 9th above (see the note heads after the treble clef in bar 1).
- Soprano 2 (Quintus)
  - 'Quintus' is Latin for 'fifth part'. Five-part writing was common in Weelkes's day, but four *types* of voice were often involved, broadly corresponding to present-day soprano/treble, alto/contralto, tenor and bass. So...
  - ...here soprano 2 has exactly the same overall range as soprano 1 and (as noted above) often crosses above it.

When the third line of the poem is repeated (at bar 53: 'Sweet Love shall keep the ground...'), the two soprano parts are swapped round for sake of variety, with soprano 1 singing what soprano 2 sang at bar 22, and *vice versa*.

- Alto
  - Probably for a woman's voice rather than a male alto or countertenor.
  - Range: middle C to C an octave above (the lower note head in bar 1 should be C).
- Tenor
  - Range: from D below middle C to G an 11th above.
- Bass
  - Range: from low G to D a 12th above.
  - Top D is reserved for places where Bass imitates Tenor at the unison.

## Texture

Number of parts:

- Five, which sing together all the time (except for occasional rests in individual parts).

Relationship of parts:

- Occasionally all voices have the same rhythm – i.e. *chordal* (or *homorhythmic*) texture in the manner of the simplest ballets:
  - at 'Sweet love shall keep' and 'All shepherds in a ring'.
- Generally parts have different rhythms:
  - employing a freer homophonic style than in chordal or homorhythmic writing, as at the end of the first 'fa-la'.
  - but more frequently in counterpoint.
- Counterpoint commonly involves *imitation*, usually in sopranos 1 and 2 and/or tenor and bass.

- The two sopranos usually imitate at the unison – i.e. both parts are at the same pitch – as at the start of the piece...
- ...but Tenor and Bass are sometimes an octave apart (again as at the start).
- The alto 'fills in' except at 'Whilst we his praises sound' and at the end of the first fa-la.
- Imitation can be sufficiently prolonged and exact to allow the term *canon* – or *canonic imitation* – to be used. See for example 'Shall, dancing, ever sing' (from b. 34) and 'Whilst we his praises sound' (from b. 56).
- The time interval between entries is sometimes one whole bar (as at the beginning), but some other entries are separated by a single crotchet beat, with more lively effect, at 'Whilst we his praises sound' (from bar 25).
- Parts frequently work in pairs:
  - Sometimes one pair repeats what another has just sung, as Example 1 (below) shows.
  - In such cases the pairs consist of
    - one soprano plus tenor, and
    - the other soprano plus bass.
  - This is not the same as *antiphony*, as the 'answering' pairs are embedded in a full five-voice texture rather than singing alone, the other parts having rests.
  - The immediate repetitions in the passage at 'Shall, dancing, ever sing' involve *ostinato* (with the same phrase, alternating between the two sopranos, heard four times straight off – bars 34<sup>3</sup>–43<sup>2</sup>).

Example 1

Musical score for Example 1, showing five voices: Soprano 1 (Cantus), Soprano 2 (Quintus), Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The score is in 3/4 time and features a canon where the Soprano 1 and Tenor parts repeat the phrase 'Sing we at pleasure, at pleasure, Con-' while the other voices have rests or different parts.

SOPRANO 1 (CANTUS)  
Sing we at plea-sure, at plea - sure,

SOPRANO 2 (QUINTUS)  
Sing we at plea-sure, Con -

ALTO  
Sing we at plea-sure, at plea-sure, Con -

TENOR  
Sing we at plea-sure, at plea-sure, Con -

BASS  
Sing we at plea-sure,

## Structure

### Section 1: Bars 1–22 (first-time bar)

*Sing we at pleasure,  
Content is our treasure.  
Fa la.*

- Bars 1–8<sup>2</sup> a single rhyming couplet – with imitation, but enough straight crotchets for there to be some feeling of homophony.  
Bars 8<sup>3</sup>–22 the fa-la – mostly contrapuntal.

### Section 1: again: Bars 1–22 repeated exactly.

### Section 2: Bars 22 (second-time bar) –53

*Sweet Love shall keep the ground,  
Whilst we his praises sound.  
All shepherds in a ring  
Shall, dancing, ever sing.  
Fa la.*

- Bars 22<sup>3</sup>–43<sup>2</sup> the two new rhyming couplets quoted above. The setting of the first line is homophonic; the setting of the second line is contrapuntal.  
Bars 43–53 the fa la (contrapuntal). Shorter than the fa la of Section 1, presumably so that Section 2, with its two rhyming couplets, can be considerably longer than Section 1, but not *too* long?

### Section 2 again: Bars 53<sup>3</sup>–74<sup>2</sup> = bars 22<sup>3</sup>–53<sup>2</sup>, but with soprano parts reversed.

The overall structure might be described as *binary*, with its two sections, each repeated, but it lacks the tonal contrast of most binary structures in the Baroque period and later, because Section 1 does not close outside the G major in which the whole piece begins and ends.

## Tonality

*Sing we at pleasure* predates the type of 'functional' tonality which governed so much music from the late Baroque onwards. The latter was based on:

- Two types of diatonic scale – major and minor.
- Pre-eminence of primary triads, especially tonic (I) and dominant (V).
- Systematic use of modulation as an important structural device.

For Weelkes several types of diatonic scale, called *modes*, were available.

In *Sing we at pleasure* it is customary to speak of the mixolydian mode on G (without key signature) with the basic set of notes G A B C D E F (natural) G. Nevertheless, as in

much other music composed c.1600, the transition from modes to major and minor scales and keys was already under way. In particular:

- F sharp, the principal sign of G major as opposed to G mixolydian, is prominent in the opening bars (as in Example 1) and from time to time elsewhere, notably in the final cadence.
- The tonic and dominant notes of G major (G and D) are sometimes emphasised in melodic patterns (as in bars 1-2 of the tenor and bars 2-3 of the bass).
- Chords I and V (G major and D major) are prominent at some cadence points (e.g. at the end) and sometimes elsewhere.

Weelkes was also aware in a fairly limited way of the value of tonal contrast. (There is, however, nothing similar to the immensely purposeful tonal architecture of e.g. much music by J.S. Bach.)

- He cadences away from G at 'keep the ground' with the perfect cadence in D major (note the C sharps).
- At the start of the first fa-la (bars 83-17) a phrase in D major (following the 'VIIb-I' cadence in G at 'treasure') is repeated transposed to G and then to C. All this is balanced and resolved by the firm cadence in G with which the first fa-la concludes.
- The final perfect cadence of the second fa-la (in G major, with F sharp in the alto) sounds remarkably fresh after the preceding eight-bar C major alternation of G major and C major chords.

## Harmony

Weelkes uses:

- Root-position triads ( $^5_3$  chords):
  - e.g. at 'Sing we at pleasure': in terms of roman numerals in G major the chords are: I I V | I I V | I I.
  - on the last beats of bars 10, 13 and 16, the chords are diminished (C sharp-E-G, F sharp-A-C and B-D-F).
- First-inversion triads ( $^6_3$  chords):
  - e.g. at 'Content is our treasure' each of bars 5-7 begins with B in the lowest-sounding part, the chord in full being B-D-G (G major, first inversion).

There are various dissonant (non-chord) notes, chiefly suspensions and passing notes, but they do not greatly disturb the generally consonant quality of the harmony.

Suspensions:

- Provide extra rhythmic movement and mild harmonic tension, mainly on penultimate chords of some important cadences, e.g. the 7-6 with the G major chord VIIb at the end of the first rhyming couplet (bar 7<sup>3</sup>).
- Here have no expressive purpose (as can happen, for example, where dissonance is used in the depiction of dark text in a serious madrigal).

Unaccented passing notes:

- Are quavers that fill in intervals of a 3rd between two harmony notes and keep the music flowing.
- Are numerous in the descending scalar patterns used at 'Whilst we his praises sound'. Sometimes two parts have passing notes simultaneously in 3rds or 6ths, as at bar 25, beat 3.

Cadences are almost all perfect (V–I). The first rhyming couplet ends with VIIb–I, but this is really just a substitute for an ‘ordinary’ perfect cadence. The first line of the third couplet (‘All shepherds in a ring’) ends with chords of G and D major (imperfect in G major).

## Melody

Weelkes uses:

- Much conjunct (stepwise) movement
  - including scalic passages, especially at ‘Whilst we his praises sound’.
- Leaps of a 3rd
  - in particular the descending 3rds first heard at ‘Content is our treasure’.
- Leaps of a 4th or 5th
  - notably where the bass outlines perfect cadences and other chord successions with roots a 4th or 5th apart.
- A few larger leaps (almost all octaves)
  - e.g. the falling octave in soprano 1 at ‘Sing we at *pleasure*’ – which would be even more striking if it were not obscured by the entry of soprano 2.
  - rapid octaves in the bass of the second fa-la add to the liveliness and vigour of this closing passage.

Other points:

- As typical of so many styles of music, Weelkes carefully balances ascending and descending movement: for example, a leap in one direction is often countered by stepwise movement in the other.
- As previously explained, the alto part has much less melodic interest than the other four parts.
- The three-note figure first heard at ‘Content is our treasure’ reappears prominently in the first fa-la and in the second, and contributes to a degree of melodic unity and concentration fairly unusual in music of this period. Note also that the opening soprano 1 phrase ‘Sing we at pleasure, at pleasure’ consists of two balancing stepwise ascents a 5th apart (see Example 1). This phrase is the basis of soprano 1’s closing phrase in the first fa-la – and perhaps suggested the more vigorous ascents in the soprano parts at ‘Shall, dancing, ever sing’.
- Word setting is syllabic throughout, both where the rhyming couplets are set and in the fa-las. The syllable ‘fa’ comes only on the first note of a new phrase: other notes have ‘la’.

## Rhythm and metre

- In the 1598 edition the time signature is **C3** (the **C** having a dot in the middle). Barlines are editorial, and the music is, in modern parlance, in simple triple time or  $\frac{3}{4}$ .
- *Sing we at pleasure* relies greatly on the dotted crotchet, quaver, crotchet rhythm heard in soprano 1 at the start. This rhythm is present in one or more parts in the majority of bars, but contrast and variety are achieved by, for example, the alternation of crotchets and minims at the start of each couplet in Section 2.

- The frequent quavers at 'Whilst we his praises sound' may be intended to reflect joy and praise.
- Strings of quavers in the second fa-la (in tenor and bass) bring Section 2 to a lively conclusion.
- Syncopation (with relatively long notes starting on weak beats and thereby receiving special stress) features in more contrapuntal passages and where a cadence has a suspension or the type of unprepared dissonant 4th found at the end of Section 1 (bar 21, alto).
- There is *hemiola* at the end of each fa-la (that is, two bars of  $\frac{3}{4}$  are divided into three sets of two beats rather than the usual two sets of three) (Example 2).
- Generally Weelkes uses straightforward triple-time rhythms with an obvious beat and dance-like quality (after all, the ballett originated in the dance).

Example 2

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The musical score consists of five staves. The first four staves are vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and the fifth is a bass line. The lyrics are: 'la la la la la la la la la la. Sweet'. The rhythm pattern at the bottom is: 1 2 3 1 2 3 I 2 I 2 I 2 1 2 3. The 'I' marks indicate hemiola patterns.

### Further reading

The items on the following list, though of considerable interest, are not to be regarded as essential reading.

*The New Grove (2001)*, available by subscription online, has (for example) more on Weelkes' biography.

D. Brown, *Thomas Weelkes: a Biographical and Critical Study* (New York and Washington, Praeger, 1969).

L. Pike, *Pills to Purge Melancholy: The Evolution of the English Ballett* (Aldershot and Burlington, Vt., Ashgate, 2004).