



The Booke of Common Praier Noted

John Merbecke

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Here, one year after the first English Book of Common Prayer was published in 1549, is the marvelous arrival of music in the Anglican Reformation service. The Booke of Common Praier Noted—a curious phrase for the title, suggests church liturgy with an added crop of academic footnotes. Nothing of the kind, of course: "noted" means "set to music." Apart from its pioneering position and rarity, The Booke of Common Praier Noted is a work of the greatest charm. The slender quarto volume was printed by Richard Grafton in London; the composer's name, John Merbecke, appears at the end in large gothic letters. It was designed for use in parish cathedrals, and Grafton's music printing style was perfectly appropriate, if not a art form itself.

The purpose of the Book of Common Prayer was simplicity, ease of use, and comprehension, and soon after 1549 music followed and was probably in preparation concurrently, as the new, friendly, understandable liturgy must have seemed a dull affair with no singing. In the style of old plainsong, The Booke of Common Praier Noted was written so that each chanted syllable had its own note and was thus easily understood. The musical setting was entrusted to the Master of the Choristers of the Royal Chapel at Windsor, John Merbecke, who, apart from The Booke of Common Praier Noted, wrote a five-part mass and several Latin motets. He lived until about 1585, "singing merrily and playing on the organs."

Commentary by Colin Franklin, essay on music printing.

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