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“Solemnity and Gravity” in Anglican Church Music, c.1700

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Abstract

When Arthur Bedford wrote in 1711 that “we should all be serious in the Worship of *God*, and affect that *Musick*, which is grave and solemn,” he was articulating the consequences for church music that arose from the culture of moderation that developed in England as a direct response to the political, social, and religious crises of the seventeenth century. English writers of religious and secular literature at the turn of the eighteenth century cautioned composers of church music such as William Croft, Jeremiah Clarke, and Thomas Tudway to avoid imitating French and Italian-style secular music, decried as the “theatrical style,” and encouraged them to develop and maintain, in the words of Croft, the “Solemnity and Gravity of what may properly be called the *Church-Style*.” I will explore two ways that composers created an innovative and singular sacred repertory that interacted with a complicated and unique historical framework. The first is choice of text, seen especially in the practice of setting mournful verse passages from psalms of praise and thanksgiving. The second is the specific cultivation of anthem movements for ensemble. To temper the theatrical elements of virtuosity and enthusiasm that can be heard in seventeenth-century anthem movements for vocal solo, eighteenth-century ensemble movements expressly emphasized grave and solemn stylistic traits such as syllabic setting, slow tempos, and the repetition of affective words and phrases.