

Sing along with the English Reformation with this melodious missal that revolutionized Anglican worship

John Merbecke, *The Booke of Common Praier Noted*. London: Richard Grafton, 1550. 7 5/8 inches x 5 1/2 inches (194 x 140 mm), 198 pages.

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. In addition to its pioneering position and rarity, *The Booke of Common Praier Noted* (“noted” in the title means “set to music”) 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. The purpose of the Book of Common Prayer was simplicity, ease of use, and comprehension; music followed soon after, as the new vernacular 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. John Merbecke, the Master of the Choristers of the Royal Chapel at Windsor, was entrusted with the musical setting.

Merbecke’s life was itself an adventure story. In 1544 he was condemned to death at the stake along with three others for “heretical adherence to Calvinism,” but was saved by the intervention of the Bishop of Winchester because of his considerable music talents (the other three were executed). He studied theology and music into his later years, and apart from *The Booke of Common Praier Noted* wrote a five-part mass and several Latin motets. Merbecke lived until about 1585, “singing merrily and playing on the organs.”

This copy of *The Booke of Common Praier Noted*, from Bridwell Library at Southern Methodist University, is of particular interest in having bound into the back the first printing of the Thirty-nine Articles (still in use today), as well as the first significant attempt at codifying and legislating Anglican Church law; both are a continuation of the long and colorful saga of the Church of England. The printing of the music in *The Booke of Common*

Praier Noted is especially noteworthy, considering the difficulty of two-color printing at the time and the absolute necessity of having each note perfectly aligned within the staves.

The book is bound in gilt-stamped red goatskin over pasteboard. The spine has raised bands and is divided into six panels with titling in the second panel. The earliest recorded owner of this copy of *The Booke of Common Praier Noted* is Daniel Heylot, who wrote his name on the title page in 1617. Nothing appears to be known of him. The book's next owner William Dowsing (1596–1679?) was a notorious iconoclast, whose signature with the date of 1645 appears on the top of the title page. The book was later owned by Mark Cephias Tutet (1732–85), a Huguenot merchant and a collector, and by George Armin Goyder (1908–97), chief executive of the giant newsprint company British International Paper and author of several books on the application of Christian principles to the reform of company law and modern business.

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