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**Old Scores and New Readings
Discussions on Music & Certain
Musicians**

John F. Runciman

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WILLIAM BYRDE ... HIS MASS

Many years ago, in the essay which is set second in this collection, I wrote (speaking of the early English composers) that "at length the first great wave of music culminated in the works of Tallis and Byrde ... Byrde is infinitely greater than Tallis, and seems worthy indeed to stand beside Palestrina." Generally one modifies one's opinions as one grows older; very often it is necessary to reverse them. This one on Byrde I adhere to: indeed I am nearly proud of having uttered it so long ago. I had then never heard the Mass in D minor. But in the latter part of 1899 Mr. R.R. Terry, the organist of Downside Abbey, and one of Byrde's latest editors, invited me to the opening of St. Benedict's Church, Ealing, where the Mass in D minor was given; and there I heard one of the most splendid pieces of music in the world adequately rendered under very difficult conditions. I use the phrase advisedly—"one of the most splendid pieces of music in the world." When the New Zealander twenty centuries hence reckons up the European masters of music, he will place Byrde not very far down on the list of the greatest; and he will esteem Byrde's Mass one of the very finest ever written. Byrde himself has rested peacefully in his grave for over three hundred years. One or two casual critics have appreciated him. Fetis, I believe, called him "the English Palestrina"; but I do not recall whether he meant that Byrde was as great as Palestrina or merely great amongst the English—whether a "lord amongst wits," or simply "a wit amongst lords." For the most part he has been left comfortably alone, and held to be—like his mighty successor Purcell—one of the forerunners of the "great English school of church composers." To have prepared the way for Jackson in F—that has been thought his best claim to remembrance. The notion is as absurd as would be the notion (if anyone were foolish enough to advance it) that Palestrina is mainly to be remembered as having prepared the way for Perosi. Byrde prepared the way for Purcell, it is true; but even that exceeding glory pales before the greater glory of having written the *Cantiones Sacrae* and the D minor Mass. In its way the D minor Mass is as noble and complete an achievement as the St. Matthew Passion or the "Messiah," the Choral symphony of Beethoven or the G minor symphony of Mozart, "Tristan" or the "Nibelung's Ring." It is splen-

didly planned; it is perfectly beautiful; and from the first page to the last it is charged with a grave, sweet, lovely emotion.

The reason why Byrde has not until lately won the homage he deserves is simply this: that the musical doctors who have hitherto judged him have judged him in the light of the eighteenth-century contrapuntal music, and have applied to him in all seriousness Artemus Ward's joke about Chaucer—"he couldn't spell." The plain harmonic progressions of the later men could be understood by the doctors: they could not understand the freer style of harmony which prevailed before the strict school came into existence. Artemus Ward, taking up Chaucer, professed amazement to find spelling that would not be tolerated in an elementary school; the learned doctors, taking up Byrde, found he had disregarded all the rules—rules, be it remembered, formulated after Byrde's time, just as our modern rules of spelling were made after Chaucer's time; and as Artemus Ward jocularly condemned Chaucer, and showed his wit in the joke, so the doctors seriously condemned Byrde, and showed their stupidity in their unconscious joke. They could understand one side of Tallis. His motet in forty parts, for instance: they knew the difficulties of writing such a thing, and they could see the ingenuity he showed in his various ways of getting round the difficulties. They could not see the really fine points of the forty-part motet: the broad scheme of the whole thing, and the almost Handelian way of massing the various choirs so as to heap climax on climax until a perfectly satisfying finish was reached. Still, there was something for them to see in Tallis; whereas in Byrde there was nothing for them to see that they had eyes to see, or to hear that they had ears to hear. They could see that he either wrote consecutive fifths and octaves, or dodged them in a way opposed to all the rules, that he wrote false relations with the most outrageous recklessness, that his melodies were irregular and not measured out by the bar; but they could not feel, could not be expected to feel, the marvellous beauty of the results he got by his dodges, the marvellous expressiveness of his music. These old doctors may be forgiven, and, being long dead, they care very little whether they are forgiven or not. But the modern men who parrot-like echo their verdicts cannot and should not be forgiven. We know now that the stiff contrapuntal school marked a stage in development of music which

it was necessary that music should go through. The modern men who care nothing for rules—for instance Wagner and Tschaikowsky—could not have come immediately after Byrde; even Beethoven could not have come immediately after Byrde and Sweelinck and Palestrina, all of whom thought nothing of the rules that had not been definitely stated in their time. Before Beethoven—and after Beethoven, Wagner and all the moderns—could come, music had to go through the stiff scientific stage; a hundred thousand things that had been done instinctively by the early men had to be reduced to rule; a science as well as an art of music had to be built up. It was built up, and in the process of building up noble works of art were achieved. After it was built up and men had got, so to say, a grip of music and no longer merely groped, Beethoven and Wagner went back to the freedom and indifference to rule of the first composers; and the mere fact of their having done so should show us that the rules were nothing in themselves, nothing, that is, save temporary guide-posts or landmarks which the contrapuntal men set up for their own private use while they were exploring the unknown fields of music. We should know, though many of us do not, that it is simply stupid to pass adverse judgment on the early composers who did not use, and because they did not use, these guide-posts, which had not then been set up, though one by one they were being set up. For a very short time the rules of counterpoint were looked upon as eternal and immutable. During that period the early men were human-naturally looked upon as barbarians. But that period is long past. We know the laws of counterpoint to be not eternal, not immutable; but on the contrary to have been short-lived convention that is now altogether disregarded. So it is time to look at the early music through our own, and not through the eighteenth-century doctors' eyes; and when we do that we find the early music to be as beautiful as any ever written, as expressive, and quite as well constructed. There are, as I have said, people who to-day prefer Mr. Jackson in F and his friends to Byrde. What, I wonder, would be said if a literary man preferred, say, some eighteenth-century poetaster to Chaucer because the poetaster in his verse observed rules which Chaucer never dreamed of, because, to drag in Artemus Ward once again, the poetaster's spelling conformed more nearly to ours than Chaucer's!

The Mass is indeed noble and stately, but it is miraculously expressive as well. Its expressiveness is the thing that strikes one more forcibly every time one hears it. At first one feels chiefly its old-world freshness—not the picturesque spring freshness of Purcell and Handel, but a freshness that is sweet and grave and cool, coming out of the Elizabethan days when life, at its fastest, went deliberately, and was lived in many-gabled houses with trees and gardens, or in great palaces with pleasant courtyards, and the Thames ran unpolluted to the sea, and the sun shone daily even in London, and all things were fair and clean. It is old-world music, yet it stands nearer to us than most of the music written in and immediately after Handel's period, the period of dry formalism and mere arithmetic. There is not a sign of the formal melodic outlines which we recognise at once in any piece out of the contrapuntal time, not an indication that the Academic, "classical," unpoetic, essay-writing eighteenth century was coming. The formal outlines had not been invented, for rules and themes that would work without breaking the rules were little thought of. Byrde evades the rules in the frankest manner: in this Mass alone there are scores of evasions that would have been inevitably condemned a century afterwards, and might even be condemned by the contrapuntists of to-day. The eighteenth-century doctors who edited Byrde early in this century did not in the least understand why he wrote as he did, and doubtless would have put him right if they had thought of having the work sung instead of simply having it printed as an antiquarian curiosity. The music does not suggest the eighteenth century with its jangling harpsichords, its narrow, dirty streets, its artificiality, its brilliant candle-lighted rooms where the wits and great ladies assembled and talked more or less naughtily. There is indeed a strange, pathetic charm in the eighteenth century to which no one can be indifferent: it is a dead century, with the dust upon it, and yet a faint lingering aroma as of dead rose petals. But the old-world atmosphere of Byrde's music is, at least to me, something finer than that: it is the atmosphere of a world which still lives: it is remote from us and yet very near: for the odour of dead rose petals and dust you have a calm cool air, and a sense of fragrant climbing flowers and of the shade of full foliaged trees. All is sane, clean, fresh: one feels that the sun must always have shone in those days. This quality, however, it shares with a great deal of the music of the

"spacious days" of Elizabeth. But of its expressiveness there is not too much to be found in the music of other musicians than Byrde in Byrde's day. He towered high above all the composers who had been before him; he stands higher than any other English musician who has lived since, with the exception of Purcell. It is foolish to think of comparing his genius with the genius of Palestrina; but the two men will also be reckoned close together by those who know this Mass and the Cantiones Sacræ. They were both consummate masters of the technique of their art; they both had a fund of deep and original emotion; they both knew how to express it through their music. I have not space to mention all the examples I could wish. But every reader of this article may be strongly recommended at once to play, even on the piano, the sublime passage beginning at the words "Qui propter nos homines," noting more especially the magnificent effect of the swelling mass of sound dissolving in a cadence at the "Crucifixus." Another passage, equal to any ever written, begins at "Et unam Sanctam Catholicam." There is a curious energy in the repetition of "Et Apostolicam Ecclesiam," and then a wistful sweetness and tenderness at "Confiteor unum baptisma." Again, the whole of the "Agnus" is divine, the repeated "miserere nobis," and the passage beginning at the "Dona nobis pacem," possessing that sweetness, tenderness and wonderful calm. But there is not a number that does not contain passages which one must rank amongst the greatest things in the world; and it must be borne in mind that these passages are not detached, nor in fact detachable, but integral, essential parts of a fine architectural scheme.

OUR LAST GREAT MUSICIAN (HENRY PURCELL, 1658-95)

I.

Purcell is too commonly written of as "the founder of the English school" of music. Now, far be it from me to depreciate the works of the composers who are supposed to form the "English school." I would not sneer at the strains which have lulled to quiet slumbers so many generations of churchgoers. But everyone who knows and loves Purcell must enter a most emphatic protest against that great composer being held responsible, if ever so remotely, for the doings of the "English school." Jackson (in F), Boyce and the rest owed nothing to Purcell; the credit of having founded *them* must go elsewhere, and may beg a long time, I am much afraid, in the land of the shades before any composer will be found willing to take it. Purcell was not the founder but the splendid close of a school, and that school one of the very greatest the world has seen. And to-day, when he is persistently libelled, not more in blame than in the praise which is given him, it seems worth while making a first faint attempt to break through the net of tradition that has been woven and is daily being woven closer around him, to see him as he stands in such small records as may be relied upon and not as we would fain have him be, to understand his relation to his predecessors and learn his position in musical history, to hear his music without prejudice and distinguish its individual qualities. This is a hard task, and one which I can only seek to achieve here in the roughest and barest manner; yet any manner at all is surely much better than letting the old fictions go unproved, while our greatest musician drifts into the twilight past, misunderstood, unloved, unremembered, save when an Abbey wants a new case for its organ, an organ on which Purcell never played, or a self-styled Purcell authority wishes to set up a sort of claim of part or whole proprietorship in him.

II.

Hardly more is known of Purcell than of Shakespeare. There is no adequate biography. Hawkins and Burney (who is oftenest Hawkins at second-hand) are alike rash, random, and untrustworthy, depending much upon the anecdotage of old men, who were no more to be believed than the ancient bandsmen of the present day who tell you how Mendelssohn or Wagner flattered them or accepted hints from them. Cummings' life is scarcely even a sketch; at most it is a thumbnail sketch. Only ninety-five pages deal with Purcell, and of these at least ninety-four are defaced by maudlin sentimentality, or unhappy attempts at criticism (see the remarks on the Cecilia Ode) or laughable sequences of disconnected incongruities — as, for instance, when Mr. Cummings remarks that "Queen Mary died of small-pox, and the memory of her goodness was felt so universally," etc. Born in 1658, Purcell lived in Pepys' London, and died in 1095, having written complimentary odes to three kings — Charles the Second, James the Second, and William the Third. Besides these complimentary odes, he wrote piles of instrumental music, a fair heap of anthems, and songs and interludes and overtures for some forty odd plays. This is nearly the sum of our knowledge. His outward life seems to have been uneventful enough. He probably lived the common life of the day — the day being, as I have said, Pepys' day. Mr. Cummings has tried to show him as a seventeenth century Mendelssohn — conventionally idealised — and he quotes the testimony of some "distinguished divine," chaplain to a nobleman, as though we did not know too well why noblemen kept chaplains in those days to regard their testimony as worth more than other men's. The truth is, that if Purcell had lived differently from his neighbours he would have been called a Puritan. On the other hand, we must remember that he composed so much in his short life that his dissipations must have made a poor show beside those of many of his great contemporaries — those of Dryden, for instance, who used to hide from his duns in Purcell's private room in the clock-tower of St. James's Palace. I picture him as a sturdy, beef-eating Englishman, a puissant, masterful, as well as lovable personality, a born king of men, ambitious of greatness, determined, as Tudway says, to exceed every one of his time, less majestic than Handel,

perhaps, but full of vigour and unshakable faith in his genius. His was an age when genius inspired confidence both in others and in its possessor, not, as now, suspicion in both; and Purcell was believed in from the first by many, and later, by all—even by Dryden, who began by flattering Monsieur Grabut, and ended, as was his wont, by crossing to the winning side. And Purcell is no more to be pitied for his sad life than to be praised as a conventionally idealised Mendelssohn. His life was brief, but not tragic. He never lacked his bread as Mozart lacked his; he was not, like Beethoven, tormented by deafness and tremblings for the immediate future; he had no powerful foes to fight, for he did not bid for a great position in the world like Handel. Nor was he a romantic consumptive like Chopin, with a bad cough, a fastidious regard for beauty, and a flow of anaemic melody. He was divinely gifted with a greater richness of invention than was given to any other composers excepting two, Bach and Mozart; and death would not take his gifts as an excuse when he was thirty-seven. Hence our Mr. Cummings has droppings of lukewarm tears; hence, generally, compassion for his comparatively short life has ousted admiration for his mighty works from the minds of those who are readier at all times to indulge in the luxury of weeping than to feel the thrill of joy in a life greatly lived. Purcell might have achieved more magnificent work, but that is a bad reason for forgetting the magnificence of the work he did achieve. But I myself am forgetting that the greatness of his music is not admitted, and that the shortness of his life is merely urged as an excuse for not finding it admirable. And remembering this, I assert that Purcell's life was a great and glorious one, and that now his place is with the high gods whom we adore, the lords and givers of light.

III.

Before Purcell's position in musical history can be ascertained and fixed, it is absolutely necessary to make some survey of the rise of the school of which he was the close.

In our unmusical England of to-day it is as hard to believe in an England where music was perhaps the dominant passion of the people as it is to understand how this should have been forgotten in a more musical age than ours. Until the time of Handel's arrival in this country there was no book printed which did not show unmistakably that its writer loved music. It is a fact (as the learned can vouch) that Erasmus considered the English the most given up to music of all the peoples of Europe; and how far these were surpassed by the English is further shown by the fact that English musicians were as common in continental towns in those days as foreign musicians are in England nowadays. I refrain from quoting Peacham, North, Anthony Wood, Pepys, and the rest of the much over-quoted; but I wish to lay stress on the fact that here music was widespread and highly cultivated, just as it was in Germany in the eighteenth century. Moreover, an essential factor in the development of the German school was not wanting in England. Each German prince had his Capellmeister; and English nobles and gentlemen, wealthier than German princes, differing from them only in not being permitted to assume a pretentious title, had each his Musick-master. I believe I could get together a long list of musicians who were thus kept. It will be remembered that when Handel came to England he quickly entered the service of the Duke of Chandos. The royal court always had a number of musicians employed in the making or the performing of music. Oliver Cromwell retained them and paid them; Charles the Second added to them, and in many cases did not pay them at all, so that at least one is known to have died of starvation, and the others were everlastingly clamouring for arrears of salary. It was the business of these men (in the intervals of asking for their salaries) to produce music for use in the church and in the house or palace; that for church use being of course nearly entirely vocal—masses or anthems; that for house use, vocal and instrumental—madrigals and fancies (*i.e.* fantasias). As generation succeeded generation, a certain body of technique was built up and

a mode of expression found; and at length the first great wave of music culminated in the works of Tallis and Byrde. Their technique and mode of expression I shall say something about presently; and all the criticism I have to pass on them is that Byrde is infinitely greater than Tallis, and seems worthy indeed to stand beside Palestrina and Sweelinck. Certainly anyone who wishes to have a true notion of the music of this period should obtain (if he can) copies of the D minor five-part mass, and the *Cantiones Sacrae*, and carefully study such numbers as the "Agnus Dei" of the former and the profound "Tristitia et anxietas" in the latter.

The learned branch of the English school reached its climax. Meantime another branch, not unlearned, but caring less for scholastic perfection than for perfect expression of poetic sentiment, was fast growing. The history of the masque is a stale matter, so I will merely mention that Campion, and many another with, before, and after him, engaged during a great part of their lives in what can only be called the manufacture of these entertainments. A masque was simply a gorgeous show of secular ritual, of colour and of music—a kind of Drury Lane melodrama in fact, but as far removed from Drury Lane as this age is from that in the widespread faculty of appreciating beauty. The music consisted of tunes of a popular outline and sentiment, but they were dragged into the province of art by the incapacity of those who wrote or adapted them to touch anything without leaving it lovelier than when they lighted on it. Pages might be, and I daresay some day will be, written about Dr. Campion's melody, its beauty and power, the unique sense of rhythmic subtleties which it shows, and withal its curiously English quality. But one important thing we must observe: it is wholly secular melody. Even when written in the ecclesiastical modes, it has no, or the very slightest, ecclesiastical tinge. It is folk-melody with its face washed and hair combed; it bears the same relation to English folk-melody as a chorale from the "Matthew" Passion bears to its original. Another important point is this: whereas the church composers took a few Latin sentences and made no endeavour to treat them so as to make sense in the singing, but made the words wait upon the musical phrases, in Dr. Campion we see the first clear wish to weld music and poem into one flawless whole. To an extent he succeeded, but full success did not come till several generations