THE FITZWILLIAM VIRGINAL BOOK.

By J. A. FULLER MAITLAND.[1]

The passion of archæology has, during recent years, had more important results than ever before. As students of antiquity increase, scientific research is ever better directed, and sound methods of investigation are more and more widely recognized and adopted. This is probably true with regard to all branches of archæology, but none has reached a high stage of development more rapidly than the science of musical antiquities. Not many years ago, the handful of fanatics, as they were considered, who held that ancient music was a worthy object of research, were content to accept specimens of old compositions from any quarter without submitting them to the most ordinary tests. If it were attempted to perform any music of the past, it was thought enough to reproduce it under frankly modern conditions; and any want of effect that was felt was attributed to the inherent dulness of the music, rather than to the incongruity of its presentment. Again, the ancient laws of composition were carelessly studied and imperfectly understood, and any doubtful passage was restored, not in accordance with the rules that were in force at the period of origin, but in obedience to the taste of an audience accustomed only to modern music.

Of late things have been far more satisfactory, and several causes have contributed to a state of the art in which we musicians may, I think, take a great pride. Musical antiquaries have learnt that if their work is not to be discredited, they must follow the laws which govern the restitution of a corrupt passage in a classical text, and that the authority of the ancient treatises cannot be lightly set aside. Not only in England, but in France, Germany, and Italy, really scientific principles have been applied to music of a past time, and certain editions of the classics of these countries can be pointed out which

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have been as carefully and accurately prepared as the monumental editions of literary masterpieces. In the investigation of national and traditional music, too, much has been done to improve the haphazard methods of a few decades ago; and although many misleading publications are unfortunately being brought out more or less continuously, yet the change of standard may be illustrated by comparing the original edition of Chappell's *Popular Music of the Olden Time*—the author of which, though perhaps the best musical antiquary of his day, was in the habit of accepting tunes without any satisfactory evidence of their genuineness and purity—with the new issue of the book, into which Mr. Wooldridge, the present editor, has admitted nothing that is not capable of irrefragable documentary proof. Not only has the literature of music undergone what may be called a revolution, but a very important element in the change is due to the scientific reconstruction and restoration of the old musical instruments, whereby we are enabled to hear the compositions of the last three hundred years at least almost exactly as they were heard by the contemporaries of the composers. Various attempts have been made at restoration in various places; but the most important work in this direction has undoubtedly been done by Mr. Arnold Dolmetsch, who has succeeded wonderfully in reconstituting every kind of musical instrument in general use in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

It is of a book, rather than of an instrument, however, that I have been asked to tell you to-day, although it is owing to Mr. Dolmetsch's kindness in lending me his virginal that you will presently be able to estimate to some extent the beauty of the music the book contains.

In the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge there is a musical MS. containing a very large number of compositions for the virginal, the keyed instrument which was the immediate precursor of the spinet and harpsichord, and which held, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the place now occupied by the pianoforte. The origin of the name "virginal" is far from clear; but the theory now generally accepted is that the instrument was intended for the use of young ladies, or played by them. This is the meaning given by Blount, in *Glossographia*. One

whose opinions have every right to be considered has put forth a supposition that it was called "virginal" because keyed stringed instruments were used to accompany the hymn "Angelus ad virginem"; another surmise, that the English name of the instrument was given in honour of the virgin Queen Elizabeth, seems without foundation, and equally baseless is the traditional title of the book now under discussion.

That title, it has been amply proved, is altogether false and misleading, and indeed that it should have ever arisen is only an illustration of the carelessness with which musical manuscripts were examined in past times. For against one of the pieces, the "Ut, Re, Mi," of Sweelinck, on p. 216, there occurs the date 1612, when Queen Elizabeth had been dead nine years. And another piece, Dr. Bull's "Juell," exists in a manuscript in the British Museum, where it is dated December 12, 1621. Probably the name, for which Hawkins is responsible, arose from the fact that all the composers represented rank among those of the Elizabethan era. In outline the history of the book, as brought to light by Mr. William Chappell and latterly by Mr. W. Barclay Squire, may be recapitulated as follows:—

A Cornish gentleman, named Francis Tregian, the head of a rich and powerful Catholic family, was seized on account of his religion, in 1577, and after many short imprisonments was thrown into the Fleet prison, where he remained for at least twenty-four years. In this prison eleven of his children were born, among them his eldest son, Francis Tregian, who entered the College at Douay in 1586. On leaving Douay, in 1592, he was for two years chamberlain to Cardinal Allen in Rome. He afterwards returned to England and succeeded in buying back his father's lands; but in 1608–9 he was committed to the Fleet himself on a charge of recusancy. He died there in 1619, owing a large bill to the warden for board and lodging. It is this Francis Tregian who has been supposed to be the scribe of the greater part at least of the famous manuscript. The splendid binding is undoubtedly a piece of Netherlands work, and many other things connect the book with the Netherlands. One of the composers most largely represented in the collection is Peter Philipps, who was an English Catholic ecclesiastic settled in the Netherlands,

and probably a connexion of Morgan Philipps, one of the first Professors of the Douay College. You will remember, too, how close was John Bull's connexion with the same country. The date I quoted before for a piece by Bull (1621) would of course invalidate the younger Tregian's claim to be considered as writing the whole of the volume; but it has been supposed that two styles of writing are to be discerned in the MS., though they are so much alike that it is difficult to be sure whether they are two or one. That the family of Tregian had a good deal to do with the book is quite certain; the "Mrs. Katharin Tregian," whose name appears opposite a pavan by William Tisdall, on p. 315, was probably the grandmother of the younger Tregian. But more eloquent than this is the frequent occurrence of odd little contractions of the surname, no other proper name being thus treated throughout the book. "Treg. Ground" is the name of a piece by Byrd; "Pavana Dolorosa Treg." is a piece by Peter Philipps, dated 1593 (the year after the younger Tregian left Douay for Rome); the initials "Ph. Tr." are set against a pavan by Byrd; against the first line of a jig by the same master are the initials "F. Tr."; and, finally, a short piece called "Heaven and Earth" has, for its composer's name, the three letters "Fre.," no doubt a contraction for "F. Tregian." The theory concerning the compilation is, then, that the book, bound as it is now, was bought by Francis Tregian in the Netherlands, and that, during his imprisonment in the Fleet, he wrote out from musical manuscripts in his possession the transcript which has been, in some cases, the only means of their preservation.

Its later history is soon told; how it got into the hands of Dr. Pepusch is not known, but Hawkins tells us that Mrs. Pepusch, who was Margherita de l'Epine, the famous singer, used to try to play the pieces; and though she was an accomplished harpsichord player, she never could get through the first piece in the book, the famous set of variations on "Walsingham." If one thinks of the executive powers on the pianoforte of the most accomplished *prime donne* of the present day, we shall not find it difficult to believe what Hawkins tells us about Mrs. Pepusch. In 1762 it was bought at Pepusch's sale by

R. Bremner, who gave it to Lord Fitzwilliam before 1783. The price paid for it by Bremner was £10.

The difficulty of making public the contents of the manuscript seemed at one time quite insuperable, seeing that it was not possible to find anyone with the requisite knowledge, who would also have the leisure to work at it in the museum at Cambridge; and by the terms of Lord Fitzwilliam's will, nothing may be taken out of the museum for any purpose. At last, two years ago, an ardent lover of old music, who happens to be an accomplished photographer, Mr. C. F. Bell, undertook to photograph the entire volume on a reduced scale, so that the work of translation into ordinary notation could be carried on where it was most convenient. The extreme neatness and clearness of the writing made it seem as if it would be easy enough to reduce the music to a form in which it would have some meaning for modern musicians; but the task has been by no means a light one.

It will naturally be asked, What is the nature and style of the music contained in this collection? Its chief value consists in this:—that while the vocal works of the great Elizabethan composers are, if not as well known as they deserve to be, yet accessible to all who care for them, their published instrumental music is of small extent, and hardly important enough to be called representative. Works by Byrd, Bull, and Orlando Gibbons were published, in 1611, under the title of "Parthenia" (with obvious reference to the name "Virginal," a reference which is made still more emphatic by the picture, on the title-page, of a simpering young lady playing the instrument). The compositions were very few, nor do these three names complete the catalogue of composers of the virginals of that golden age. Of several existing MSS. of virginal music, the Cambridge book is by far the longest and most important, but it is to be hoped that in the future the contents of the other collections may be made public.

In considering the contents of this collection, it is necessary to remember that the great musical form in which all "classical" works are cast was not so much as guessed at in the reign of Elizabeth. Without entering into technical details, I may remind you that this form allows of the modification, or, as it is called, development,

of the musical subjects or phrases chosen, and that its conventions allow the display, not merely of technical ingenuity, but of real invention, imagination, and poetry. Such qualities we need not hope to find in the Elizabethan pieces, except in a very rudimentary condition; and they are for the most part much shorter than the sonata-movements to which modern musicians are accustomed. I may divide the contents into four classes, which are about equally represented in the book:—

i. Variations, or rather florid ornamentations on the plain chant of the church, or *canti fermi*. These are the oldest things in the volume, one of them, a "Felix Namque" of Tallis, being dated 1562.

ii. Variations on secular tunes, in a style which seems to foreshadow the sets of variations that reigned supreme in the fashionable world down to the middle of the present century. The tunes appear now in one part, now in another, but are seldom altered at all materially, though sometimes they are richly ornamented. In these pieces it is interesting to see the gradual development of various forms of musical embroidery that are now so hackneyed as to be absurd, and for the student of the pianoforte the passages have a special value. One peculiarity of these variations is the great executive dexterity required in the left hand, which must have been cultivated by the Elizabethan young ladies to an extent that is hardly dreamt of, even by the virtuosi of the present day. It was no doubt this peculiarity which occasioned Burney's remark, concerning these very pieces: "Some are so difficult that it would be hard to find a master in Europe who could play them without a month's practice."

iii. Fantasias based upon some short and easily-remembered subject, treated in strict contrapuntal style, and with very beautiful effect. To the unpractised ear these compositions are hardly distinguishable from fugues, excepting that they very often fall off towards the end

into mere florid ornament. When this is the case a return is generally made to the polyphonic style in the last section, which, in many instances, is of the utmost grandeur and breadth.

iv. Dance-movements, ranging from the long and elaborate pavans and courantes to the slighter and shorter almans, &c.

In point of time, the compositions, so far as they are dated, cover a period of sixty years from the composition by Tallis, already mentioned as being dated 1562, to Dr. Bull's "Juell," dated 1621.

This instrument, belonging to Mr. Dolmetsch, is a very fine specimen of a sixteenth century instrument of Italian make; it is undated, but a written sentence appears on the crosspiece confining the jacks, "Non percussus sileo" ("Unstruck I am mute"), in a hand that cannot be later than 1600. The action is, roughly speaking, the same as that of the harpsichord, *i.e.*, the jacks, furnished in this case with leather, not quill plectra, rise on the pressure of the keys, striking the strings as they pass them, and being provided with dampers to prevent the sound of the plectrum as it returns to its place. It has one very awkward peculiarity in practical music, and that is what is called a "short octave," the seven lowest notes being arranged so as to give these sounds in succession, beginning from the bottom note, which is apparently E—

Apparent notes,	E,	F,	F sharp,	G,	G sharp,	A, B flat.
Real sounds:—	C,	F,	D,	G,	E,	A, B flat.

As an example of the first class I have mentioned, I have chosen, not one of the compositions by Tallis, which are so archaic in style as to be scarcely pleasing, but one of Byrd's, a "Miserere" in four parts, in which the workmanship of the ornamental parts has far more interest and beauty than anything of the same kind by Tallis can show. Byrd inherited from Tallis the tradition of this solid kind of music; he was only a little younger than Tallis, but he was a musician of far wider powers. He and Tallis obtained in 1575 a patent from Elizabeth for printing and selling music and music paper, English and foreign, for twenty-one years. They afterwards found the

monopoly less profitable than they had expected, for there is a petition in the Stationers' Registers, recording that "Bird and Tallys . . . haue musike bokes with note, which the complainantes confesse they wold not print nor be furnished to print though there were no priuilege." In this Virginal book are many compositions by Byrd, which prove him, if there were nothing else by which he were known, to deserve the name of a Master of Music, bestowed on him by more than one contemporary. Peacham, in his *Compleat Gentleman*, calls him "That Rare Phoenix, Maister William Bird." He died in 1623, so that his life covers the whole period of the compositions in this book.

Byrd's pupil, Thomas Morley, obtained a similar patent to that already mentioned, in 1598; but although apparently a much younger man than Byrd, he died as early as 1604. His great work, as some of you may be aware, was the famous Treatise, called, somewhat ironically, as it seems to us nowadays, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke.* He wrote in all the forms of music then practised, and his madrigals are among the very finest of any time. In the department of instrumental music, as it concerns us to-day, his chief contributions were those belonging to my second division, namely, variations upon popular tunes. His "Goe from my Window" is perhaps the most beautiful of these, and it seems to be the only way in which the tune itself has been preserved. I may perhaps be permitted to tell you of one very gratifying thing in connexion with this piece. For reasons which I could not explain without troubling you with many details of a very technical kind, the music of this period cannot be written out straight from the MS. With regard to accidental notes, &c., the practice of the older composers was in many ways different from ours, and many points have to be supplied conjecturally, in order to recover the actual effect of the music. The ninth piece in the collection is this piece by Morley; and my fellow-editor and I had fully discussed it, and supplied accidentals, when we came upon No. 42, a set of variations on "Goe from my Window," attributed to John Munday. It turned out to be the same composition, saving only that No. 42 had an extra bar and a very

beautiful variation at the end. A comparison of the two proved that our conjectures were almost without exception right, for the later piece had been written out with more care, and had the accidentals which we had put in.

As an example of my third class, I have taken a fantasia by Peter Philipps, who, as we have seen, was intimately connected with the transcriber of the book, and whose compositions abound in it. His very name had been strangely forgotten in England till a few years back, when Mr. Barclay Squire published some beautiful madrigals by him.

Before coming to the fourth class, I should like to play you the last-dated piece in the book, Dr. Bull's "Juell." It does not indeed contain many of the curious characteristics of Bull's work; these were bold harmonic and rhythmical experiments, which for the most part are more interesting to learned musicians than to people in general; and rapid passages very often for the left hand, and very often consisting of repeated notes that are exceedingly difficult to play successfully on instruments of this date. One of Bull's experiments in rhythm is a fantasia kept up from the beginning till nearly the end, in 11–4 time, which yet sounds quite natural.

Another most interesting number, which I should have played you were it not that the "short octave" arrangement already referred to makes it impossible to play some of the notes on this virginal, is a piece called "Ut, Re, Mi," the subject of which consists of the successive notes of the scale, subjected to every kind of ingenious treatment in the way of modulation; the piece is nothing less than an anticipation of the "Wohltemperirtes Clavier" of Sebastian Bach, in that it realizes what is called the circle of keys, quite a hundred years before the invention of equal temperament.

There is one very quaint specimen of an early endeavour to represent non-musical things in terms of music, in a fantasia by John Munday, describing in very naïve manner the changes in the weather. In case there should be any mistake as to the meaning of the different parts, they are carefully labelled "Thunder," "Lightning," "A Cleare Day," &c.

A short "alman" and a little piece called "Muscadin," both by anonymous composers, will fairly represent the fourth class, that of dance-tunes.