

“The spirit of that art is incommunicable by writing”, Roger North on music (ca. 1700)

A few thoughts on the recording

As there is no good edition of John Bull's keyboard works, the primary challenge of making a recording is to procure a reliable score. But, after all, a recording is not the illustration of a final version of a score, it is an acoustic, aesthetic and artistic proposition of Bull's music. One should nevertheless try to find the right score in order to avoid being scattered between the different sources, for that would result in the following: a mixture of ornaments according to sources A and C with the accidentals mostly of source B and the final bars of source D, etc. That does not seem very coherent to me. That could result in a score which certainly never existed in the 17th century, but which suggests that it did.

But what emerges from the different sources? A rather contrasting image. In the one, there are many ornaments, in the other, almost none. We might ask whether the Parisian source (registered under the number F-Pn, Rés. 1185) was truly written – in part – by John Bull himself. For what reason, in this particular source, was a piece transmitted in two different versions? In one of the sources, the writer interferes more with the score, and in others there are “errors”. But it is important to identify the author of these modifications: was it a virtuoso, a composer or just an enthusiastic admirer and collector?

With regard to the “errors”, are they truly errors? An accidental forgotten or added – for example by Thomas Tomkins (1595-1655) – is it really an error? Can't several small, successive motifs each have a different meaning? Couldn't a harsh harmony have been desired? Do we really have to avoid a harsh harmony? And even if Tomkins made modifications, his version remains closer to the era and practice of Bull than a modern version. Moreover, despite the practice of *Musica Ficta*, comprehending the accidentals, which differ from source to source, remains difficult. By *Musica Ficta* we mean the practice by which musicians complete the accidentals. These days, it is unclear where we should apply it, and opinions differ greatly.

This problem is not unique to English music. The composer and theoretician Michael Praetorius (1571-1621) did not say “that's how it is written and that's how it must be read...”. He wrote: “Sic veteribus – sic mihi placet” (*Syntagma musicum* III, 1619), which one can translate as: *that is how it was written by the ancients (which I no longer understand) – and I like it that way*. It is certainly a very personal point of view, but one that offers numerous perspectives.

How should we proceed when a piece exists in only a single source and when that source is not with certainty by Bull's own hand, such as the piece recorded here, *Nomine X*? Should we not handle such a score with great caution? How can we know whether a hypothetical lost original manuscript would have included accidentals, even if they seem surprising or illogical? In many editions, the music is smoothed out. Must we really settle for the logic and taste of the score's contemporary editor? And the question arises as to why, in the modern edition, note values are halved, suggesting a doubling of the tempo as compared with the original sources! Is it not time for a critical edition of the sources, for example Tomkins – Oxford 1113 – or the Cosyn manuscript as was done of the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book?

We find most ornaments in the Cosyn manuscript. These days their preponderance is often considered to be in poor taste and not in the spirit of the composer. But what taste does this refer to? Would it not be better for us to ignore these ornaments? We do not actually know which ornaments were Bull's. But this would only save us rehearsal time. The ornamentation forms an integral part of the structure. It is not a superficial or luxurious complement. Virtuosos such as Bull and Gibbons would certainly have added many while performing the pieces, even if they did not notate these ornamentations. Why, after all, would virtuosos have had to notate their ornamentations?

Cosyn notates extremely rich ornamentation, and Tomkins modifies, for example – comparing the extant sources – the accidentals and sometimes even a small motif. I think, to conclude these reflections, that a personal reading and interpretation are essential. One should not be too rigid, but should rather make one's own contribution: the performer does not disappear between the instrument and the composer, quite the opposite! There is no absolute truth, and to search for it is pointless. Are we faithful to the piece if we restore the score in a harmonious manner without dissonances and without adding ornaments? Isn't the interpreter's objective to provoke enthusiasm, shock, amazement and attention? After all, we are not restoring background or feel-good music!

One of the most striking characteristics of the music of the English virginalists of the 16th and 17th centuries is the use of a large number of ornamentation signs, especially / and //.

But what is the meaning of these so frequently used symbols? The most honest answer is that we have no idea.

We have always tried to decipher these symbols and propose an interpretation of them. They could be partly exact or instead overly simplified. The question arises, for example, concerning ornamentation known on the European continent by the name of *Mordant* – which we often use today in the interpretation of this type of repertoire: Was it known in the England of the 17th century? No English source contemporary with Bull mentions this type of ornamentation, and the symbols / and // are not explained. The first source to define them dates to around 1630/35 and comes from Edward Bevin. It is interesting to note that Bevin does not describe these symbols as coming from a traditional list of trills, but rather as being something truly singular, an improvised connection between two notes. Thus, there is no clear-cut answer to the question of knowing how these improvisation signs were interpreted. Could it be that each performer gave a different meaning to these signs, according to the affect, rhythm, space or instrument, but also technical abilities? Could it be that at the time, people quite simply did not want a standardised performance practice as one would like to be the case today?

Drawing inspiration from Roger North, we can say: "The spirit of that art is incommunicable by writing."

Translation: John Macfarlane

Sources and editions used:

F-Pn, Rés. 1185 Bull-Cosyn manuscript

GB-Och Mus 1113, William Ellis manuscript (Oxford Christ Church)

Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Mus. MS 168, Fitzwilliam Virginal Book

F-Pc Rés 1122, Thomas Tomkins autograph

GB-Lbl Add. MS 23623, Messaus-Bull manuscript

GB-Lbl R. M MS 23.1.4, Benjamin Cosyn virginal book

Musica Britannica vol. 14 & 19

The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book. Ed. by Jon Baxendale and Francis Knights, 2020
Lyrebird Music