

BYRD

Pavans&Galliards; Variation&Grounds

This recital, recorded in January 2020 and published as we approach the 400th anniversary of William Byrd's death, explores the two most abundant areas of his keyboard output: the dances and variations. Byrd's legacy is that of a prolific musician with a long life and long career, who not only had interesting models to work from, but the ability to assimilate, synthesise and go beyond them in a manner that truly resonates with the modern imagination. By the time of Byrd's earliest keyboard music the instruments, manual techniques, characteristics of different genres and modes of expression are all just about well-established enough for such a towering intelligence as his to freely survey, find new ways and create music that has an aesthetic life of its own: that instant when talking about 'progress' in an art form becomes redundant.

This recording, although not a complete survey, contains two important collections of pavans and galliards in their entirety – those in *My Lady Nevell's Book* and the *Parthenia* – along with the magnificent 'late' *Quadran Pavan and Galliard*. These are interspersed with, arguably, his fifteen finest sets of variations (either on popular Elizabethan tunes or a ground bass).

In navigating Byrd's keyboard music, the clearest orientation point is the 11 September 1591 completion of John Baldwin's copy, supervised by the composer, of *My Lady Nevell's Book*. This compilation of 42 of Byrd's best keyboard works to date form a counterpart to his four collections of printed vocal music issued between 1588 and 1591. With the comprehensive quality of this retrospective Byrd, around 50 at the time, cements the prominent position that keyboard music would hold in England for the next two to three generations.

The publication of *Parthenia* in 1612 is another milestone, providing perspective especially for those interested in 'stylistic development'. Prepared with Byrd's involvement, it constitutes the first printed collection of keyboard music in England and features eight compositions by him, alongside music by the two other pre-eminent virginalists, Orlando Gibbons and John Bull. Included is the *William Petre Pavan and Galliard* pair, also found as *Pavan and Galliard the Tenth* in *Lady Nevell* (where it sits apart from the other numbered pavans and galliards), and a number of pieces that are generally considered to be of later date than *Lady Nevell*. Appraising art in any medium as early, middle or late based on stylistic grounds is always an interesting game: 'finding' qualities in an aesthetic object because we are looking for them is part of the speculative engagement that beautiful things seem to require from us, even as we acknowledge that it often amounts to a treacherous activity, inevitably involving some confabulation and invention on the part of the admiring observer. There may be varying degrees of difficulty to demonstrating analytically why certain compositions must count as 'late' productions, but it feels right to impute that quality to the introspective sparseness of the *Earl of Salisbury Pavan* or to the knotty 'difficulty' of the *Mistress Mary Brownlow Galliard*, both from *Parthenia*; or elsewhere, to the beguiling sophistication of *O Mistress mine*, the adroit simplicity of *Callino casturame* or the highly-wrought intricacy of *John, come kiss me now*. With the *Quadran Pavan and Galliard*, a truly *sui generis* creation, we enter that territory where complexity is the gateway to a lavishness of ideas and rare beauties that reveal themselves ever more on closer acquaintance.

Another route towards familiarity, and to experiencing the fecundity of Byrd's invention, is attentiveness to the generic organisational laws that define the works. The principle of variation is crucial not only to the variation pieces themselves but also to the dances, since the pavans (generally in the 'grave' style) and galliards (their more stirring, buoyant counterparts in triple time) almost always contain three strains of regular length, where each strain is repeated in varied form. But more telling is the fundamentally distinct impression that a tripartite disposition leaves from the binary structure of, say, later French dances. It is rewarding to witness closely how beautifully Byrd guides these 'narrations' in three parts: how we set out, move away from expository ideas, and how a sense of ending or returning home is established; also how he exhausts the many varieties of pausing along the way, of achieving a feeling of subsidiary closure, of urgency in continuing, or of gentle elision; of the musical equivalents of conjunctions like 'and', or 'but', or 'moreover', or 'even so', or even 'meanwhile'.

The range of colour and emotional temperature encompassed by these dances (often inflected by Byrd's personal use of the modes) are especially evident in the numbered pavans and galliards from *My Lady Nevell's Book* when seen as a carefully laid-out sequence – the first six dance pairs each a beautifully finished object in a larger arrangement, fanning out into the reflective profundity of *Pavan the Seventh and Eighth* (each without an accompanying galliard), and culminating in the sheer scale and excitement of the *Passamezzo* pair.

With the variation sets Byrd fully takes full advantage of the potential that their very nature entails: since a 'theme' (whether that be a melody or a fixed bass line or harmonic frame) is in effect repeated multiple times, albeit in varied form, a skilful composer can engineer a marvellous synergy between the act of 'varying' and the implicit act of continual reiteration – and a performer must respond to this. The rhetorical implications for the larger design and intentions are many-fold: the 'repetitiveness' can be made to either feel hypnotic, ruminative; or ceremonial, courtly; or cumulative, directed to a dramatic goal; or playful, exploratory, uncertain of its course; or even a mere excuse for embellishment and display. It follows naturally that, within a larger set, sub-sets that hang together in one or other of these ways can also be demarcated.

What a theme lends itself to may depend on its length (in the case of *The Bells* a bass of only two notes; at the opposite end from, say, *Sellinger's Round*, where the theme feels quite self-contained) or which of its melodic, motivic and harmonic features yield most possibility. By exploiting resemblances and connections, even run-of-the-mill divisions and decorative figures can be made to feel more consequential and specific than their surface appearance suggests, very little coming across as mere 'filler' material. The acuity with which Byrd identifies salient features and establishes intimate relationships between a theme and its treatment are what set him apart. Striking, for instance, is how he relishes the crudeness of the alternation between F and G major in *The Woods so Wild*, through clear textural and registral contrasts that maintain the essential earthiness of the theme, at the same time embroidering a bountiful 'outdoors' image. Sometimes great climaxes are built from the smallest fragments – never more movingly than in *Walsingham*, where the rising three notes of the theme eventuates in longer, intense melodic rising lines in the later variations; and at

the end in falling-line descants against the theme, all rounded off with flourishes of virtuoso scales: a stock-in-trade transformed. The idea of climbing scale steps resonates powerfully when one remembers that the *Walsingham* tune refers to the famous pilgrimage site: much that is human and mundane happens on the road, but an ascent to a spiritual goal feels undeniable.

There is potentially great excitement for a pianist in engaging with a repertoire of such self-evident complexity, depth and stature that yet still feels free of the ethical posturing that besets the 'interpretation' of more well-worn corners of the piano literature. 'Virtue signalling' easily collapses into sets of shoulds and shouldn'ts that too frequently render the performing of the classics a mere artisanal exercise in the reproduction of a prevailing consensus. But, ironically, the very absence of a ready-made suite of do's and don'ts for playing Byrd on the piano may itself discourage pianists. Perhaps the time and patience of true immersion are too great a requirement. Or perhaps some reluctance still persists to regard a fine performance as an aesthetic outcome in itself, with its own governing principles: it may feel easier to cling to the idea of doing something demonstrably 'correct', especially when, in the imagination of the pianist, early music specialists may be waiting in the wings to point out stylistic 'errors', or to express fundamental intellectual objections to very endeavour of playing early music on the piano.

Preferring or enjoying Byrd on the harpsichord is of course entirely legitimate; but arguments *contra* playing early keyboard repertoire on the piano often assume the nature of moral outrage. The grounds for this outrage may have to do with the music not being 'intended' for the instruments, or with inherent elements in the music not judged as being served sufficiently well on the piano (which is not tuned like period instruments, and does not 'speak' like them).

For those inclined to ponder such things, a series of questions arise, questions that are not new, but to which different sensibilities of different generations will want to pose their own answers....

Is it the duty of the performing musician to produce an artefact which tries to imitate a supposedly true original?

Are the ideas to be found in a musical work confined to what can be expressed on original instruments?

If we could know and understand a composer's intentions fully, would the performer be obliged to carry these out?

When playing old music on modern instruments, is what is 'lost' too much?

Is what is 'gained' inappropriate or irrelevant?

Does what is gained have to supplant or supplement that which is lost?

Which types of musical works contain elements that refer to a past that is appropriated for novel purposes?

Can we describe as innate to the ambitions of aesthetic creation that its meanings be capable of bearing misreading by subsequent generations?

Is it the role of the listener or the performer to bridge the historical chasm between the 'now' and the 'then'?

Playing Byrd on the piano, and how one plays it on the piano, inevitably provides answers-in-action to some of these *raison d'être* questions: the fault-lines are established through the practicalities of craft.

For example, much is left to the judgement of the player by the extremely limited vocabulary of signs in the sources of English virginal music to indicate ornaments (almost exclusively either a single or double stroke through the note stem) in stark contrast to so much of early French keyboard music. The interpretation of these strokes may range from an appoggiatura, a crushed or mere 'brushed' auxiliary note, through mordents, all the way to longer 'shakes'. Their speed, placement (the last note on or before the beat), whether the subsidiary note should be above or below the indicated note, and what the difference between the double and single strokes may be, are all still fiercely debated. Yet the proliferation of these ornaments cannot be ignored: in Byrd's music they form an intrinsic part of the sonic texture, the character, nomenclature and musical grammar. Consequently the performer's choices have a significant impact on these elements, and each instance provides an opportunity for making active decisions in which thought, sensibility and technique all play a role – as much as do decisions regarding the tempo, nature of the tactus, gestural language, and the dynamic levels of each piece.

The pianist may savour the challenge (and the freedom) of realising these things in a manner idiomatic to the piano, even though doing so may alter or shift meanings, or add unexpected dimensions to the sensuous experience of the music that do not map neatly onto what organs, virginals and other period keyboards can do. Specifically, dynamic voicing on the piano and the possibility of calibrating overall dynamics with great exactness enable rhythmic and textural buoyancy and an array of tempi that are not practicable on the harpsichord or organ. In the shaping of melodic lines the balance between expressive and merely 'grammatical' use of agogics is also radically altered on the piano, and a refined hierarchy of accentuation can be established within flowing or rapid lines without taking recourse to 'choppy' subdivisions that are not essential to the character at hand.

While the piano is reasonably good at 'imitating' vocal utterance, it can also occasionally be made to sound organ-like, or produce effective ersatz versions of virginal, lute or viol consort articulations, assume a clarion quality, or produce rugged, rustic or percussive effects. There are clear instances in much of Byrd's keyboard music where one or more of these sound worlds can be evoked effectively; on the other hand, fetishising such references can be as limiting as ignoring them.

Byrd's keyboard music is remarkable as one of the earliest oeuvres that make the case for the keyboard as a self-contained medium of expression – self-expression, but elevated through artifice and painstaking judgement to a realm beyond the self; that is, 'artistic' expression. The pathos, energy and finesse manifested in his dances and the advanced conceptual thinking behind his variation sets, each with its own logic, are unprecedented in keyboard writing. Byrd achieves this mostly by harnessing and plying for his own, highly developed ends the generic compositional means and still-limited assortment of technical devices

handed down to him, but also – crucially so – bringing to bear the full extent of his contrapuntal resourcefulness and skill (perfected through his vocal output). He does not set out to 'invent' new keyboard textures and sonorities, or new virtuoso 'tricks' in themselves. Instead the sense of a fully mature, advanced and 'modern' keyboard technique arises as a by-product of the density of lateral thought and the tireless, closely polyphonic exploitation of musical 'cells', motifs and 'points'. Moreover, his contrapuntal mastery enables an exuberant exchange between voices at the same time as driving long lines to powerful culmination points, or simply taking an eagle view of far-reaching harmonic arcs – thereby testing the performer both physically and mentally.

The communicative scope and breadth of sentiment in these works would have been fully apparent to connoisseurs of Byrd's day – listeners and players that would have been able to hear beyond the surface limitations imposed by keyboard sonorities and the intimate settings in which they were played. Indeed, they might not have perceived those limitations as such. One may however read Byrd's keyboard works as 'ahead of their time' in that the music manifests elements of emotion and drama within the confines of its medium that later keyboard instruments and their expressive techniques would evolve to realise *viscerally* – especially publically, outside a liturgical context. We don't sense that Byrd was writing at the limits of what his instruments were capable of (like Beethoven perhaps); simply that there are modes of projecting some of the essential attributes of his keyboard music performatively that were not available to Elizabethan or Jacobean keyboard players. This is where, provocatively perhaps, the modern pianist has much scope to experiment.

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