

## REVISITING THE KEYBOARD MUSIC OF ORLANDO GIBBONS

The keyboard output of Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) still represents a small but significant blind spot in the perception of the work of one of England's greatest composers. Even though he is freely counted among the finest of the great virginalists, it is his vocal music and viol consorts that mainly attract attention; the keyboard works remain, in practice, the domain of a few die-hard devotees. As an increasing number of works by William Byrd (Gibbons' sometimes presumed teacher) are now to be found in the recital repertoire of pianists interested in keyboard music before Bach, the time is perhaps ripe for a fresh assessment of the whole of this part of Gibbons' oeuvre.

Not least because he had but a short life, Gibbons' keyboard music leaves a far more concentrated impression than that of Byrd. But here is also greater consistency of style and quality. Gibbons seems to have attained a supreme compositional technique early on; often we have the sense that he is trying to outdo his predecessor in brilliance. But it is in the *style* of keyboard writing that Byrd is generally accepted as more idiomatic and naturally adapted. This is perplexing since contemporary reports portray the younger man as 'the best hand in England'. In explanation commentators tend to invoke his seriousness of temperament. Indeed, the appearance of the music on the page only seems to support the image of Gibbons as an 'austere' composer. It is this perceived lack of instrumental ostentation that is perhaps the most important deterrent to keyboard players taking a general interest in these forty-five pieces. Beyond frequent scale-like passages in the repeat sections of the dances the writing seems to make few concessions to the display impulse. Furthermore, the strokes and double strokes through note stems (indications of embellishment) that litter the pages of many of the sources (notably those pieces copied by Benjamin Cosyn) appear to demand very slow tempi to accommodate their execution. The truth however (as Martin Knizia points out in the introduction to his beautifully considered edition of the preludes and fantasias for Universal) is that many of these ornaments can safely be taken to be the work of the various copyists of Gibbons' music. Quite apart from the fact that there are no contemporary treatises discussing the execution of

these strokes, sources of the few works whose publication Gibbons may be assumed to have overseen are lightly ornamented, or hardly at all, presumably leaving such matters to taste and circumstance.

When, instead, one takes the shape of the phrase and characteristic rhythmical features as one's starting points for pacing a work (notably in the galliards), it soon becomes clear that the frequent semiquaver passages often demand to be played very rapidly and with extraordinary lightness of touch. Are these very sections, for all their less-than-interesting appearance at first sight, the very ones which (at least in part) earned the composer his reputation as 'the finest finger of the age'? Moreover, these figurations reveal themselves to be anything but generic – their rhythmic placement, their possibilities for characterisation, the particular effect of texture intended, where dissonances occur, are all extremely adroit, and more often than not unique in their given context. (Here one may perhaps remember that, for a long time, the right hand runs in Mozart's piano concertos were considered uninteresting too.) In such a setting it likewise becomes clear where ornaments are needed: for emphasis, to support the syntax, to enhance character or style – and only rarely to 'hold together' the musical fabric.

The present recording really is a recital in two halves, with several of the pieces arranged as suites (we know very little of the chronology of these works, so that such programming is merely fanciful). Whether this 'works' as a sustained listening experience must partly depend on whether the listener can come to terms with the pervasive melancholy that colours so much of this output, and also with the virtual absence of humour; of wit (of the kind that is intended for those 'in the know') there is plenty though, and also of a certain jolliness, even at times bordering on the uncouth.

Fundamentally, this music rests on its great inventiveness of rhythm and of counterpoint. After all, it takes considerable resourcefulness to transfer the sublime purity of contrapuntal writing and cross-rhythm that distinguish the great viol fantasias to the two hands of a keyboard player... A close exploration of these forty-five works reveal that a

considerable number of them achieve the highest level of technical and expressive mastery – and that even in the less-than-great and in the trivial Gibbons displays the continual sensitivity to sonority, to details of voice-leading, and to the pertinently artistic that only a musician with the very finest ear and aesthetic sensibility can consistently achieve.

The ten fantasias and four pavans form the core of this output, both intellectually and in fullness of feeling. Truly outstanding (indeed, unsurpassed in their period) are the fantasias MB9 and MB12 in their integration of contrapuntal conceits into a sustained expressive whole. The *Salisbury pavan* (MB18) is rightly celebrated for an almost mystical beauty, and alongside it can be cited the fantastically baroque MB16, its third part evolving to a searing intensity.

The galliards explore an extraordinary range of affect and effect within the bounds of the nomenclature and set three-part narrative of the dance, ranging from the elegiac (MB24) to the choleric (MB22); from the implacable (MB20) to the exuberant (MB25); from the mincing (MB23) to the muscular (MB19).

Three of the smaller scale grounds are gems: one may note how MB26 (*The Italian ground*) covers the lower range of sonorities, while MB27 is mostly confined to the higher register; the *Queen's command* (MB28) has the hands at either end of the keyboard. With *The woods so wild* (MB29) Gibbons creates a kind of tone poem – earthy and abundant – a considerably more complex setting than Byrd's of the same title. But it is *Peascod time* (MB30) that is climactically brilliant – and a stunning virtuoso challenge. Emerging effortlessly out of madrigal-like beginnings is an increasingly dense display of rhythmic ambiguities, releasing in the latter half of the piece a boundless digital dexterity.

Perhaps to the horror of a certain type of purist this first complete recording of Gibbons' keyboard music is performed on the piano. But here the attempt is not only to present this conveniently slim oeuvre in its entirety; it is also to explore how the finest productions of this era in English music may transcend issues of tuning and medium. In the sleeve notes to his record of seventeenth century keyboard music Glenn Gould

speaks of Gibbons' keyboard works as a "music of supreme beauty that somehow lacks its ideal means of reproduction". His recording then includes four pieces by Gibbons in characteristically arid sound. Gould thereby refuses to engage with the many different traditions of handling the sonority of the piano as a means of reaching into a world of instrumental metaphor – ie. he paradoxically does not seek to use the piano in such a way as to address the supposed problem of means of reproduction. Yet the keyboard writing of Gibbons seems to conjure so frequently the soundscapes of fervent vocal ensemble, lively and sensuous string consort, the lute and, naturally, the organ in its devotional, contemplative and glorifying capacities. Gould perhaps would that Gibbons' writing were 'indestructible' in the way Bach's is seen to be, capable of successful representation in almost any medium – the medium being indeed immaterial, or perhaps, to Gould, merely an obstacle to abstraction. And yet, in coming alive in an anachronistic setting, on a modern instrument with a wide frame of reference that can draw on traditions that are not necessarily imbedded in the performance history of Gibbons in addition to those that are, this music reveals itself to be resilient and transcendent.

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