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Music life in England at the end of the 16th century was colourful and multifaceted. The repertoire ranges from sacred music for the liturgy to instrumental music for domestic performance and music for the theatre. Two aspects are particularly notable: on the one hand the opposition between the dominant Church of England and those who had remained true to the Catholic faith, and on the other hand the growing influence of Italian music. These two aspects manifest themselves in the two discs under review here.

The first is devoted to an interesting collection of music, known as the Commonplace Book, put together by John Baldwin (bef. 1560-1615) and preserved at the British Library. Baldwin was a singer, composer and music copyist. At the age of 15 he was a singer in St George's Chapel in Windsor and from 1594 he was one of the Gentlemen in the Chapel Royal. His main activity for which he is known today is his copying of various collections of music, the most famous of them My Ladye Nevells Booke, a collection of keyboard works by William Byrd. It seems likely that he put together that collection in close cooperation with the composer. Byrd was the composer he admired more than anyone else, as he expressed in the Commonplace Book: "[The] rarest man hee is in musicks worthy arte that now on earthe dothe live". In this collection Byrd is also prominently represented: the first part includes eighteen pieces by him.

That first part is devoted to textless copies of vocal works, most of them for five voices. The pieces by Byrd are mostly sacred, but this section also includes thirteen madrigals by Luca Marenzio, who at the time in England was the most famous master from Italy. Despite the lack of texts, most pieces could be identified. Obviously one wonders why Baldwin copied these pieces without a text. At the time this book was compiled, between 1586 and 1591, Catholic worship was forbidden in public; mass had to be celebrated in secret. Those who stuck to their Catholic conviction and did not want to take part in services of the Church of England were known as recusants, and had to pay an annual fine. Because of that there was no use for Latin texts, and the inclusion of these pieces without a text reflects the habit of performing vocal music instrumentally. The recording by Musicke & Mirth includes several examples of this practice.

The second part of the collection includes vocal pieces for two to four parts in separate voice parts. Many pieces are rhythmically complex and experiment with changes of metrical proportion. This part has a clearly pedagogical purpose and may have been used for the teaching of the choirboys in the Chapel Royal. There were not only taught to sing, but also learned to play an instrument, such as the viola da gamba. Part of the education was also solmisation, the naming of tones with specific syllables according to a system traditionally associated with Guido of Arezzo (early 11th century). This leads to an interesting part of this recording. In addition to instrumental performances of vocal works, we also get some pieces - vocal and instrumental - that are performed vocally on the names of the notes according to this system. Byrd's Memento mori is an example of the former, the anonymous In Nomine a specimen of the latter.

The third part of the collection consists mostly of three-part pieces in single voice parts. Most of them are mass settings, but there are also English songs with texts. These may also be part of the pedagogical material in the manuscript.

Baldwin was the first owner of the collection and included a number of pieces of his own pen. According to Roger Bray, in New Grove, these are "of indifferent quality", and that may be the reason that

only two of them have been selected for this recording. The list of composers includes some of the best-known, such as Byrd, Tye and Taverner, but also relatively little-known masters as Nathaniel Giles and Elway Bevin. One notable feature of the manuscript is the time span of the repertoire: Bevin is the most 'modern' composer, the oldest is John Bedyngham.

Undoubtedly, this disc is very interesting from a historical point of view and musically compelling as it gives us deeper insight in the musical world of late 16th-century England. Its value is enhanced by the way the programme is performed. Apart from the excellent singing and playing, the performers decided to use historical pronunciation, which is still pretty rare but deserves much praise. It is a substantial addition to what has been achieved in the field of historical performance practice. The lyrics have also been printed in the booklet in the original spelling (with a 'translation' into modern English).

The inclusion of madrigals by Marenzio in the *Commonplace Book* indicates the interest of English composers and music lovers in Italian madrigals. Such pieces circulated in manuscript in England as early as the 1530s. Further influence came from Alfonso Ferrabosco I, who for some time was in the service of Elizabeth's court. A token of the growing popularity of Italian madrigals was the printing of several collections of such pieces in English translations. The most famous of them was *Musica Transalpina* (1688). It was only in the 1590s that composers started to adopt the form for the writing of madrigals on English texts. One of the best-known collections of English madrigals was published in 1601 under the title of *The Triumphes of Oriana*. The most prominent madrigal composers were Thomas Morley, Thomas Weelkes and John Wilbye.

They are also represented at the second disc reviewed here, which is devoted to a special category of madrigals: elegies, which express sadness about the death of a loved one. Some are about David, lamenting the death of his son Absalom (Tomkins, *When David heard*) or his friend Jonathan (Ramsey, *How are the mighty fallen*). The death of Henry, Prince of Wales and heir to the throne, was also the subject of such elegies (Ward, *Weep forth your tears; No object dearer*). Weelkes's *Noel, Adieu thou Court's delight* addresses the courtier Henry Noel, who died in 1597. Tomkins composed *Woe is me* at the occasion of the death of his brother John.

For this madrigal he chose a verse from Psalm 120. Most texts are secular, but obviously the pieces about the laments of David have strong biblical connotations, and in *How are the mighty fallen* Ramsey set verses from 2 Samuel. It is notable that in *New Grove* Tomkins's lament is ranked among the anthems, but the piece itself is included in his *Songs of 3.4.5. & 6. parts of 1622*. Orlando Gibbons's madrigal *Faire is the rose* is part of *The First Set of Madrigals and Mottets, apt for Viols and Voyces* (1612). The fact that this collection comprises motets and madrigals once again attests to the fact that at the time there was no watershed between the sacred and the secular.

The madrigals selected for the recording by the Ensemble Alerion show that the English madrigal composers had learned a thing or two from their Italian models. There is quite some text expression, and some composers also use harmony for expressive reasons. These features are emphasized by the ensemble's interpretation. They have worked on it under the guidance of Anthony Rooley and Evelyn Tubb, and that has borne fruit. The ensemble's approach to the text is essential in communicating its meaning and emotional content, and the singers are also not afraid of strong dynamic contrasts. This has resulted in highly expressive performances, in which the elegiac nature of these pieces comes off to full effect.

As was to be expected, the singers don't make use of historical pronunciation. That is not something for which one can blame them: what can one expect from an ensemble of non-English origin, if British performers don't take the lead in this department? And Rooley seems never to have been interested in

this matter. It does in no way compromise my great appreciation of this recording. Given that English madrigals are not that often performed and recorded, this disc is a substantial addition to the catalogue. © 2022 musica Dei donum