

LIR CLASSICS

LIR005 - PROGRAMME NOTES

O Mistris Myne ~ 150 years of English virginals music

The hundred and fifty years that take us from the reign of Henry VIII to that of William and Mary saw astonishing changes in most aspects of English life. In politics, the supremacy of the monarch was increasingly challenged, until civil war led to a new relationship between crown and people. In religion, the debate among competing ideologies frequently led to bloodshed, as well as influencing England's policy towards other European states. Alliances shifted in the political quicksand, and the country's links with France, Spain and the Low Countries seem at times to have been as changeable as the seas that formed a barrier to – and a connection with – mainland Europe.

Inevitably perhaps, these changes had their own impact on English music, and we find the keyboard repertoire reflecting contemporary social and political developments. The music chosen for this recording exemplifies these changes: the context became more secular, and the emphasis moved from the liturgical to the domestic, as the church gave way to the court, the theatre, and perhaps above all the home, as the focus of keyboard music making. For professional and amateur alike, the virginal was often the instrument of choice, while its repertoire absorbed influences from the English musical tradition, as well as from other cultures. Composers, players and instrument makers had to come to terms with all this, as well as accommodating the impact of changing tonal, stylistic and formal ideals.

Throughout this century and a half the presence of 'virginals' was a constant feature of musical life. In either the singular or the plural form, the word was applied to a range of plucked keyboard instruments, including the harpsichord. They came in a variety of polygonal forms, but all over Europe the rectangular instrument, with its keyboard on its long side was favoured at all social levels, and used in both 'public' and 'private' music. If the harpsichord has subsequently attracted more interest than the virginal, iconographic evidence tells a somewhat different story. The historical significance and musical versatility of the virginal are considerable. Fortunately this relative neglect is now being addressed: in recent years, research on the English virginal tradition has been carried out by scholars such as Darryl Martin, whose analysis of the surviving historic instruments has revealed how virginal makers adapted their designs to the changing demands of their customers. And in this recording, David Pollock's chronological survey explores the varied repertoire for which the virginal was used.

In England, as elsewhere, virginals were single strung, and came in a range of sizes, designed to sound at different pitches. Evidence suggests that the earliest

examples appeared in the fifteenth century, and — like contemporary organs — were small, high-pitched instruments. By the mid-sixteenth century, when the pieces by Tallis, and the anonymous *My Lady Carey's Dompe* were written down, the English virginal had a compass of C-a2, with a chromatic bass octave. This differed from the practice in much of Europe: Germany, Italy, Spain and the Low Countries all favoured the short octave, which in some places was retained until the eighteenth century. In England, the compass was gradually extended: by 1600 the keyboard reached c3 in the treble, and by the mid-17th century it was possible to order an instrument with a range of GG/BB-f3. It is interesting to note that keyboard compass often seems to have exceeded that of the music. For example, in the case of William Byrd, the majority of the music does not go above a2, and can be played on an instrument that must have been a little out of date for most of his career as a composer.

The two dozen surviving virginals made in England have the keyboard placed to the left of the soundboard, thus giving it some tonal resemblance to the harpsichord, yet with a distinctive timbre of its own. The sound is rich and sustained, with a depth of colour that the harpsichord cannot necessarily emulate. But this does not mean that they all sounded alike. The instrument gradually evolved, leaving behind the pungent sonorities of the late medieval and early Renaissance eras, in favour of the smoother tonal ideals of the Baroque. By the end of the seventeenth century, tastes had changed, and the instrument that had once co-existed with the vigorous wind bands of Henry VIII's day now had to match the sophisticated aesthetic of the *Violons du Roi*.

In order to convey this range of sounds, David Pollock has chosen an instrument copied from a Flemish, rather than an English original. His virginal, based on an instrument made in 1620, is of the Muselar type, with its keyboard set to the right of the soundboard. In England, neither native craftsmen, nor those who settled here as immigrants, enjoyed a monopoly, and they must have been keenly aware of the competition. English travellers abroad, as well as merchants, diplomats and musicians from all over Europe, saw to it that Italian and Flemish instruments also reached these shores. While no English example of a Muselar has been found, it is likely that they were made, and it is also quite possible that some were among the Ruckers instruments known to have been imported to Britain. Their quality was widely appreciated, and there was a good deal of musical interaction between England and the Low Countries. In the United Provinces, English composers found publishers for their work, while to the south, Flanders provided a sanctuary for Catholic musicians such as John Bull. The Muselar also has features that make it particularly suited to this programme: the special resonance of the bass strings and the presence of the Arpichordium, or 'bray' stop. The latter consists of a batten parallel with the bridge, in which are fixed a set of metal hooks that touch the strings when the stop is engaged. The result is a colourful 'buzzing' sound, reminiscent of the crumhorn, and perhaps inherited from the earliest phases of plucked keyboard design. The Muselar's sound complements the linear and harmonic complexity of the music, shaping each note in a way that gives it an intense resonance. This is particularly effective in the bass, where the plectrum meets the string at a point much closer to the centre than in those virginals with the keyboard to the left.

Like the surviving instruments, the original music manuscripts and printed sources have come down to us mainly by chance. Perhaps the vast majority is lost and, since early keyboard music was part of a mainly improvisatory tradition, there is

much that can never be recovered. But the composers who produced a large part of the surviving repertoire — Tallis, Byrd, Bull, Farnaby and Gibbons — reveal a chain of influence that ensures a continuous thread of development. Thomas Tallis, the teacher of William Byrd, can be seen as the foundation of the extraordinary tradition established by his pupil. With roots in the music of the pre-Reformation Church, Tallis's music has an unmistakably liturgical origin. Yet secularisation begins with him: the *In Nomine* settings — in two parts, with the ornamented plainsong melody in the bass — are inventive, and even daring in their use of false relations. Tallis will have been familiar with music from France and Italy, as well as from Flanders. Visitors to England in his youth included distinguished keyboard players from Venice and Antwerp, as well as the musicians who accompanied the Hapsburg Emperor Charles V to the court of Henry VIII in 1522.

My Lady Carey's Dompe may well have been composed for this occasion. Named after the wife of a prominent courtier, this is based — like all the pieces in this selection with the word *Ground* in their titles — on a repeated bass pattern. Above it, the anonymous composer skilfully weaves a layer of melody, sometimes in step with the *Ground*, and sometimes provocatively out of step. Here, the use of the *Arpichordium* reminds us of the music's relatively early date.

Such continental influences had a more obvious impact on the young William Byrd, whose achievements in every area of composition — notably in keyboard music — suggest comparison with J.S.Bach. Byrd was only a child when the marriage of Queen Mary to Philip II brought some of Spain's finest musicians, such as Cabezon, to London, but the austere yet glittering aesthetic of the Spanish court had a long-term impact on the English. This could still be discerned eighty years later, when Charles I's courtiers included some who could boast Spanish grandparents, and retained a high regard for Spanish culture. Byrd's absorption of such tastes, and his establishment of a sophisticated, secular keyboard tradition coincided with a demand for dance music. *La Volta* was reportedly Queen Elizabeth's favourite dance. Often, Byrd would take popular song or dance tunes, and write variations which transformed them into complex and often challenging keyboard pieces. This resulted in the many *Pavan* and *Galliard* pairs, and compositions such as *O Mistris myne*, whose popularity is reflected in the frequency with which they appear in the *virginal Books*.

In private and in public the *virginal* now had a place at the highest social levels. When the Princess Elizabeth married the Elector Palatine in 1615, Byrd contributed to *Parthenia*, a collection of pieces engraved as a wedding present for the couple. In this, he was joined by his pupil John Bull (who had taught Elizabeth to play the *virginal*) and Orlando Gibbons, who with him formed a triumvirate of keyboard virtuosi. Within a few years Bull would be in exile in Flanders, where he would become familiar with Flemish instruments. He may even have had the *Muselar* in mind when he composed the character pieces *Dr. Bulles Griefe*, and the *Gigge* known as *Myselfe*. The latter has a vigorous treble line, given additional texture by the *Arpichordium*, and underpinned by a firmly sustained bass.

Gibbons' *Preludium* also appears frequently in contemporary collections. Surviving sources give clear indications of original fingerings, typical of English keyboard music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Throughout this recording, David Pollock has consistently used these patterns, with all their implications for articulation. In the right hand, scales ascend in a 3-4-3-4-3-4 sequence, and descend with 3-2-3-2-3-2; while the left hand employs 1-2-1-2-1-2 ascending, and

3-4-3-4-3-4 descending. Gibbons and his two colleagues all died between 1623 and 1628, leaving behind them a powerful legacy of music that would continue to be played for a further half-century or more, before falling out of fashion. Their immediate successors included men inspired by their example, such as Giles Farnaby. And when the troubled times of the English Civil War led to the suppression of public music, the virginal came into its own as a domestic instrument. Puritan ideology permitted music in the home, and English families seem to have retained their attachment to the virginal. Yet soon it met a new challenge – one that was to have a greater impact than the upheavals of war: Charles II's restoration brought with it a new fashion for all things French. The new-fangled bent-side spinet, economical and space-saving, quickly caught on in England, finally ousting the virginal from court and home.

The longevity of the virginal, with relatively few modifications, is impressive. Above all, it is to be admired as the instrument that can recreate the soundworld of the period. Although profoundly influenced by the new tastes, Purcell was also the last great English keyboard composer to grow up steeped in the virginalist tradition. His music is highly effective on the Muselar virginal, and is represented here by several dance movements of unmistakably French flavour. David Pollock also plays Sefautchi's Farewell, written to mark the departure from England of the Italian castrato, Giovanni Grossi, known as Siface – a reminder that keyboard instruments now had a role in the theatre. With A New Ground, Purcell echoes the compositional technique used in My Lady Carey's Dompe, in the early years of the virginal, using the melody familiar as Here the Deities approve as the basis for a Court birthday ode. Purcell himself observed that "Musick...is now learning Italian, which is its best Master, and studying a little of the French Air, to give it somewhat more of Gayety and Fashion". And in this, English keyboard music was perhaps simply reverting to those influences which, a hundred and fifty years earlier, had found their way into the work of Thomas Tallis.

The instrument used in this recording was made by Ian Tucker, and is a Muselar virginal, an exact replica of one made in Antwerp in 1620, by Andreas Ruckers.

Paula Woods, March 2004