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Robert Fayrfax

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Like Haydn and Mozart, like most too prolific artists, Liszt has written things that are unnecessary; the purest taste does not always govern his style. The same may be said of many great artists and poets. It is scarcely necessary to do more than mention a few chance names that come to mind: Rubens, Verdi, Shakespeare, Goethe, Victor Hugo. The latter even went so far as to say that lack of taste was the mark of genius.

Liszt's music has long been calumniated and traduced. Whereas certain critics looked upon it as 'pianist's music,' others accused the author of introducing philosophical systems into music. At last justice is being meted out to him, and I congratulate myself on being one of the first to plead his cause against the general hostility.

In bringing to a conclusion this short critical survey, I wish to express my regret at being unable to carry it further, M. D'Indy's work being still incomplete. With his great erudition and his power of analysis, he has much more that is interesting to tell us, and I earnestly hope that I may see the completion of the 'Course of Musical Composition.'

It is also my desire, by this brief study, to draw attention to so fine a work and to increase the number of its readers.

ROBERT FAYRFAX

By S. ROYLE SHORE

The present article is an attempt to raise the question of the true position of this eminent composer in the world of English music.*

The place and date of Fayrfax's birth are not precisely known. There is some evidence for Bayford in Hertfordshire, and about 1465 is usually suggested as the year. He became organist of the great Abbey of St. Albans, now the Cathedral of a modern diocese. The organ was a celebrated one, and had been presented in 1438 by Abbot Wheathamsted, while the post was doubtless of some importance and interest. Fayrfax took the degree of Doctor of Music at Cambridge in 1501 or 1502, and in 1511 was admitted *ad eundem* at Oxford. In 1509 he is found amongst the Gentlemen of the Chapel Royal, and in 1520 accompanied his King to the Field of Cloth of Gold. He doubtless kept up his connection with his post at the Abbey, for he was buried in a prominent place in the Presbytery, as also were his wife and children.

The stone over the grave has been despoiled of its brasses with figures, family arms, and inscription, but happily the full text of the last named is on record, and reads as follows: 'Pray for the soules of Master Robert Fayrefax, doctor of music, and Agnes his wife and her children, the which Robert deceased the xxiiij. day of October, the year of our Lord God mxxi. On whose soules Jeshu have mercy. Amen.'

The position of Fayrfax as the leading British musician of his day has never been questioned, and in recent times he has been increasingly appreciated, but it is clear that full justice has not yet been done to him. This is probably due to the fact that he is generally judged by the technical methods of the Netherlands School, that apparently only began to make itself felt shortly before the date of his death. He is frequently called the last of the conservatives, working on the methods of Dunstable,

and had nothing in common with his great contemporary, that admitted genius, Josquin des Prés, whose anticipation of the methods of Palestrina—who was not born until after his death—is a perpetual source of wonder.

The musical situation at this time in England is thus usually summarised: At the death of Dunstable in 1453, under whom it is conceded that we led in the world of music—a leadership never since regained—we were content to go on reproducing his methods, whilst the musicians of the Continent, whom formerly we had taught under Dunstable, were developing their art on new lines. National conservatism and the disturbing influences of the Wars of the Roses were doubtless responsible for this stagnation. With Fayrfax the Dunstable School may be said to have come to an end, and the ideals and methods of the musicians of the Netherlands thereafter attained pre-eminence.

A record of recent estimates of Fayrfax's music, from those who have a right to be heard, would assist the present writer in his task. The late Mr. H. E. Wooldridge, in vol. ii. of his 'Polyphonic Period' of the 'Oxford History of Music' (1905), thus refers to the compositions of Fayrfax and his contemporaries:

It is evident, too, that a new and reactionary school is forming, sincere in its rejection of the Netherland methods, and convinced that pure counterpoint, together with an occasional short point of imitation in the body of the movement, is sufficient to supply the necessary interest in music; of such a school Fayrfax, whose work perfectly represents the aims of the men about him, is the natural head. And although composers were of course soon to learn that counterpoint alone is not sufficient to maintain the interest of music, yet for the moment the endeavour to justify their convictions occupied the whole of their attention, and it may be said that this concentration of effort upon a single means of beauty was often rewarded by the discovery of extremely fine effects of sound.

Dr. Ernest Walker, in his 'History of Music in England' (1907), thus refers to the subject:

Fayrfax himself, however, . . . while the most prominent figure of the time, is not altogether, to us, one of the most sympathetic. He shows little direct trace of Flemish influence; not very much imitative writing is to be seen in most of his works, and he has a distinct liking for pure note-against-note counterpoint, out of which he not infrequently produces results of smoothly massive sound that are thoroughly dignified, but at the same time (as a rule) decidedly heavy and inclined to be dull. But, though specimens of his work occur in well nigh all the numerous collections of MSS. of the period, he does not by any means completely represent his contemporaries; some, such as Turges, seem to have had the same general tendencies, but others—and indeed a larger number—show more affinity to Flemish methods, though, until about the accession of Henry VIII., these methods are adopted only tentatively. . . . Others show an expressiveness of style that we rarely or never find in Fayrfax.

Later on, in referring to Taverner's five-part 'Dum transisset Sabbatum' he says:

We shall see that, in spite of its being built on the basis of a plainsong melody, according to older fashion, there is yet a sort of real distinctiveness of utterance of which a pure conservative like Fayrfax was not capable.

By far the most valuable published utterances dealing with Fayrfax will be found in Mr. H. B. Collins's paper read before the Musical Association in 1917, and the discussion which followed, to which

* Dr. Grattan Flood made Robert Fayrfax the subject of No. IX. in his series 'New Light on Early Tudor Composers' now appearing in the *Musical Times* (see June number, p. 384).

Mr. W. Barclay Squire, the chairman, and Dr. R. R. Terry made some notable contributions. Mr. Collins, in referring to the Albanus Mass, evidently composed in honour of the Patron Saint of the Abbey about the year 1500, said :

I may say at once that I expected at this early period to find something that would sound crude and harsh to modern ears, or at least to ears accustomed to the finished style of Palestrina. In this I was agreeably disappointed. The counterpoint (of its kind) is fluent and melodious, and the harmony pure and clear. Except for an occasional passing discord on the accented beat, there is hardly anything that from this point of view Palestrina would have challenged. . . . It is impossible, I think, to resist the conclusion that Fayrfax was a great master-musician, and that he had at his entire command all the musical knowledge and resources of his age and country. Whether he can also be called a great genius, as his contemporary Josquin undoubtedly was, is much more doubtful. There is in Josquin's best work an originality and force that I cannot pretend to have found in that of Fayrfax. . . . Josquin's counterpoint, too, is altogether of a freer and more advanced character than that of Fayrfax, approximating more to the methods of Palestrina and Lasso. . . . In the case of Josquin and Fayrfax, . . . the Englishman certainly shows to advantage in this respect. Fayrfax always appears to express himself with perfect smoothness and facility, while Josquin's work often looks rough just because he was striving after an expression which was in advance of the technique of his time.

Dr. Terry, in the course of many valuable remarks, underlined the great importance of practical performance if the music of the period is to be judged truly. This too little regarded fact was prominent in the minds of Mr. W. L. Lutman—Fayrfax's worthy successor at St. Albans—and the present writer in connection with the recent lecture in the Cathedral on Fayrfax and his music, and the demonstrations by the choir. The impression made by the music was so great as to reveal more clearly than ever that the true position of Fayrfax—particularly as regards his modern feeling and artistic contrasts—had not yet been adequately realised. The examples sung were taken from the Magnificat of the First Tone, the Albanus Mass, and the Anthem 'Aeternae laudis lilium,' and were rendered partly in the original Latin and partly adapted English, Mr. Collins most kindly placing his scores at the service of the venture.

The first example now given is taken from the Magnificat, and shows Fayrfax in his massive harmonic mood, foreshadowing clearly the musical feeling of a later age. This appears to contain a suggestion of a plain-chant *canto fermo* in the upper bass part, founded on the solemn form of Tone I., appropriate to the canticle in question. The time and expression marks were those provided for the guidance of the choir. The verbal text of the examples is usually applicable to the Cantus part only.

Ex. 1. Ad pa - tres nos

S. *f* to our fore - fa - thers,

A.

T.

B.

Allegro.

Allargando. tros.

ff our fore - fa - thers,

Maestoso. A - bra - ham.

A - bra - ham, A - bra - ham.

In marked contrast to this is the passage from the second verse of the 'Gloria Patri,' which Byrd himself might have written a century, more or less, later :

Ex. 2. sae - cu - la

mf is now, is now, and ev-er &c.

The Amen at the conclusion has a fine effect in a passing-note on an accented beat, and forms a wonderful conclusion to a composition which, as edited for use at St. Albans, ought to be heard in every Cathedral in the land. The rests in the Cantus and Tenor parts show that there were some limits to the composer's ability to anticipate modernity, but perhaps his singers forgot them sometimes, and gave, on their own account, an involuntary foretaste of other things to come :

Ex. 3. saeculorum, *rall molto.* A - men.

ff A men.

Mr. G. E. P. Arkwright, to whose original research all students and experts owe so much, relates that on March 28, 1502, Fayrfax received twenty shillings from Elizabeth of York (the Consort of Henry VII.) 'for setting an anthem of our Lady and St. Elizabeth.' There can be no doubt that the five-part Motet or Anthem 'Aeternae laudis lilium' was the resulting composition. It is extremely long. The middle part traces the relationships of those named in two-part writing only. When the word 'Elizabeth' occurs, the five voices enter one after the other, possibly in allusion to the Queen's name, which was thus rendered very prominent :

Ex. 4.

2-part writing. *mf*

quo Pa - tre E li - sa -

E - li - sa - beth,
E - li - sa - beth,
E - li - sa - beth,
E - li - sa - beth.

pp *rall.* - bis,
we be - seech thee.
pp *rall.*

Soon after this a beautiful passage occurs. Its sequential form and modern feeling are remarkable. English words are added to bring out both points with greater distinctness. As so often happens in Fayrfax's music, long passages are practically devoid of verbal text, and render adaptation very necessary whether the music is sung in English or Latin :

Ex. 5. *mp* in ma - tri - ce cis -
mf and she spake out, . . . spake
out . . . with a loud . . . voice, &c.

In great contrast to this is the opening of the Gloria, which gives an example of what Mr. Collins describes as the composer's occasional resort to imitation of an 'innocent character.' The subject is a kind of motto theme, every movement of the Mass—save the Benedictus, which is really a part of the 'Sanctus'—commencing with it. The full form of the subject and its possible origin will appear in a later example :

Ex. 7. Et in ter - ra pax ho - mi - ni -
bus bo - nae vo - &c.
pax ho - mi - ni - bus.
mi - ni - bus.

Extracts from the Albanus Mass will now engage notice. The following, from a few bars of the Agnus adapted to the conclusion of the Responses to the Commandments—the Mass, as usual with Masses of the period, contains no Kyrie—is a wonderful example of modern feeling. The Tenor has a *canto fermo* of plain-chant :

Ex. 6. *mf* re no -
mf us, and write all these thy
laws in our hearts

The next example seemed to be so orchestral in feeling, that the organist, Mr. Alleyne Warren, accompanied it, and was instructed to 'let himself go.' It was in marked contrast to the severity of the background he provided for the verses unset by Fayrfax, and sung to the proper plain-chant by the choir and a congregation of about six hundred :

Ex. 8. *Maestoso.* Gra - ti - as a -
mf Gra - ti - as a - gi - mus ti -
bi prop - ter
bi prop - ter - nag - nam

The concluding example from the Albanus Mass entirely consists of the last portion of the Agnus Dei, which closes the Mass. The full text of the passage will be found in Wooldridge, vol. ii, p. 320. The verbal text assigned to the twenty-three bars consists of the word 'pacem.' Adaptation becomes imperative. The English words used at the demonstration are therefore given without further apology. The upper Bass part contains the full plain-chant subject used throughout the Mass, repeated here five times over in succession, a note lower each time :

Ex. 9. *pa* Lamb of God,
Solennemente.

Lamb of God,
 grant us thy peace, grant us thy peace, thy peace, thy cem. peace.
 us thy peace.

The C.F. is repeated three times, each time a note lower, and then—
 Più lento.

The following, with others, may be possible sources of the plain-chant subject of which Fayrfax made so effective a use. The first is the opening phrase of one of the oldest forms of the Kyrie eleison as it appears in the Mass for the Dead from the Sarum Manuale. It was on this that Merbecke founded his Kyrie for the first Book of Common Prayer. The second is a phrase from the Introit to the same service. An allusion to the martyrdom of St. Alban may have been intended :

Ex. 10.

Ex. 11.

Fayrfax left behind him some six or seven Masses, two Magnificats, and perhaps a dozen and a half of Motets and Madrigals. If the above examples, culled from three of his compositions only, can be taken as fairly representing the rest, his position is not merely that of the last of the conservatives, or even the consummation of the work of those that preceded him—as was that of Palestrina, Bach, and Beethoven—but that of a commanding genius who anticipated the harmonic sense and musical feeling of centuries later. This alone should give him a pre-eminence that so far has not been assigned to this 15th and 16th century composer. Had he an equal in this respect at home or abroad? What is the opinion of the readers of the *Musical Times*?

Fayrfax had doubtless his lighter moments when off duty. It is not unfair to picture him a devoted husband, a great admirer of his wife, in whom he was much in love, and to suggest that he did not win

her very easily, there having been ups and downs in his courtship. The quotations from the following delightful little Madrigals seem to warrant these reflections: 'I have loved, and loved would I be'—'What was my joy, is now my woe and pain'—'What was my woe, is now my most gladness'—'Most clear of colour, and rock of steadfastness'—'Welcome Fortune!'—'Alas, for lack of her presence.' There is such a pleasing touch of Mozart—or is it Haydn—about the opening of the last-named, that readers might like to have a further proof of Fayrfax's extraordinary ability to anticipate the future, and that in an unexpected direction :

Ex. 12.

A - las for lack of her pres - ence,
 A - las for lack of her pres - ence,
 - ence, whom I serve, whom I
 whom I serve, and shall as long . . .

Perhaps Dr. Grattan Flood will try to find out something more about the life of this most attractive man and composer.

PURCELL IN HYDE PARK

The League of Arts gave two performances of Purcell's 'Dido and Æneas' in Hyde Park on Saturday, July 3, in a roped-off space between the Magazine and the Serpentine. Mr. Thistleton, the Secretary of the League, acted as producer, and the music was under the direction of Mr. Geoffrey Shaw. There were several thousands of spectators at each of the performances, and luckily the weather was fine. The production was laid out on the broad lines which suit the open air, and the colour-scheme, bright without being aggressive, was designed with a view to harmonising with the background of greenery.

It was, from first to last, thoroughly enjoyable, but I could not help being reminded of the plaint of one of the founders of Toynbee Hall, who said to me, more years ago than I care to remember, 'The trouble of all these attempts to educate the masses is, that they are always annexed by classes somewhat higher than those for which they are intended. The things we do for the working classes,' he added, 'are generally patronised by the lower middle classes, and the things designed for them, in turn become the property of classes higher still.' Thus, in this case, the audience was largely composed of musicians and others who could scarcely be described as belonging to the masses, although there was a democratic sprinkling.

On the other hand, the members of the chorus were chosen from all strata of the population. An intimate acquaintance with Purcell cannot fail to have been of benefit to everyone of them. It is unfortunate, however, that the cost of the performance should have been so considerable as to make its frequent repetition very unlikely.