

Was William Byrd's "The Battell" Composed for the Theater?

Sally E. Mosher

William Byrd (1543-1623) is generally considered the greatest composer of the English Renaissance, at once prolific and highly original. Among the nearly 70 pieces by Byrd included in the most famous collection of works for solo virginal from the period, *The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* (c. 1609-19), there is one entitled "The Earle of Oxfords Marche." The same piece also appears in the best-preserved manuscript of the period, *My Ladye Nevells Booke* (1591), which contains 42 pieces by Byrd for solo virginal, where it is entitled "The Marche Before the Battell." Here it introduces "The Battell," a multi-sectioned piece depicting a battle from call to arms to final retreat, and the whole group is concluded by "The Galliarde for the Victorie."¹

A shorter instrumental version of the same march appears in Thomas Morley's 1599 collection, *The First Book of Consort Lessons*. Here it is entitled, "My Lord of Oxenfords Maske."² The scoring is for "broken consort," a mixed group of viol and lute-type instruments. Although there is no attribution in Morley's collection, this version is identical to Byrd's keyboard setting in melody, time signature, key, and harmonies.

Only in Nevell does the March appear in conjunction with the Battle pieces. The Battle appears in four other manuscripts without the March as introduction, although in two of them it is followed by "The Galliard for the Victory."³

A number of scholars have suggested that the March, the Battle and the Galliard were composed at different times and then assembled as a group for *Nevell*. The grounds for this are principally the difference in key: the March and the Galliard are both in G Major, while all sections of the Battle are in C Major. The March and Galliard, therefore, are like symmetrical pillars in G Major flanking a group of C Major episodes.⁴ This would suggest that the Galliard may have been composed for *Nevell* in order to produce this symmetry. Further, both March and Galliard are musically self-contained, and both are far more complex than the battle pieces. The strong appeal of the Battle lies in its

Music critic, concert manager and musician, Sally Mosher can be heard playing the harpsichord on the 1995 CD, William Byrd: Songs, Dances, Battles, Games. She is presently working with choreographer Charles Maple, formerly a soloist with American Ballet Theater, on a ballet using Byrd's battle pieces.

combination of rhythmic vitality with a kind of onomatopoeia evoking the sounds of drums, marching feet, horses, and various musical instruments, but musically it is quite simple.

During his career, Byrd composed about 100 pieces for virginals or harpsichord; scholars have differed on the exact number.⁵ (A virginal is a small box-shaped harpsichord that was popular in 16th century England.) Both virginal and harpsichord were in use in England during Byrd's career as a composer, which spans nearly 60 years, from 1563 until his death in 1623. Moreover, harpsichords were readily available from the 1580s onward, when Flemish craftsmen were making instruments in England, and Flemish instruments were being imported.⁶

There is considerable extrinsic evidence of Byrd's authorship. Among other sources, Byrd is listed as composer of the 42 pieces in *My Lady Nevell's Book* (his name appearing only at the end of two pairs of pavans and galliards, and the three numbers of the battle suite), approximately 70 pieces in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* (in which there are some duplications from *Nevell*), and eight pieces in *Parthenia*, the first printed collection of music for the virginals in England, published circa 1612. Byrd also composed religious choral music for both Protestant and Catholic church services, instrumental works and songs, and is credited with having created the verse anthem form.

Byrd was a recusant—that is, someone who continued to profess the Catholic faith, yet this never disturbed his relationship with the Queen, who was a noted music lover and regarded by her contemporaries as being an excellent virginal player. She gave frequent indication of her favor to Byrd, describing him as “a stiff Papist and a good subject,” and while some suffered greatly for their faith, the worst that Byrd experienced was a heavy fine.⁷

Until recently, Byrd's reputation has rested primarily upon his sacred vocal works. In the last generation, however, excellent replicas of period harpsichords using modern materials have become available, and Byrd's keyboard repertoire is beginning to receive more attention. The difference in style between Byrd's religious choral music and his secular keyboard music is comparable to that of J.S. Bach's large sacred choral works and his French and English Suites (groups of stylized dances for solo harpsichord).

In examining the origin of the March and the Battle pieces, it is important to distinguish between their musical style and their content. While the style of keyboard writing is characteristically Byrd's, some of the musical material may have come from other sources. Byrd used the melodies of well-known contemporary songs and dances in many of his virginal pieces, only occasionally mentioning the source. A number of these tunes were also set by other composers. Typically, Byrd will first state the familiar tune simply and in a straightforward manner, going on to elaborate and vary it in a number of

The Elizabethan Review

disparate individual sections. We could call this a “theme and variations” approach, and he employs it often. A number of Byrd’s pieces appear in multiple manuscripts (e.g., “The Carman’s Whistle” is present in seven), indicating a high degree of popularity. Indeed, Byrd’s use of popular tunes prefigures Liszt’s 19th century piano paraphrases of operatic and symphonic works, which also enabled people to play arrangements of their favorite music in the privacy of their homes.

This brings us to the content of the Battle pieces. Although battle pieces for harpsichord became a genre by the 17th century, these are still the longest and most detailed battle pieces extant, and also the first written for harpsichord.

Why would Byrd compose such a lengthy work depicting a battle? The dramatic character of the pieces suggests they could have been used for theatrical performances. However, solo harpsichord was not used for accompaniment at this time, and this hardly seems the type of music for private enjoyment. Could the Battle music have had another pre-1591 life in an instrumental version used to accompany theatrical performances? Perhaps Byrd arranged the Battle for virginal because it was already popular, like many of the other pieces in *Nevell*. If this is the case, when was the instrumental version composed, and for which plays was it used?

The best place to begin is the obvious connection between the 17th Earl of Oxford and William Byrd and his Battle pieces: the use of Oxford’s name in the title of the March in two collections, and its appearance before the Battle in My *Lady Nevell’s Book*.

A type of processional, “The Earl of Oxford’s March” is full of the sound of drum beats and trumpet calls. It seems to have been universally known as “The Earl of Oxford’s March,” and the absence of the title only in *Nevell* could be the result of enmity between the Neville family and Oxford since the head of the Neville family was disciplined for striking Oxford in the Queen’s Presence Chamber sometime during the 1580s.⁸ The March apparently became well known on the Continent, and it is possible that it became a kind of personal theme music for the Earl both in England and Europe.

Byrd and Oxford began their careers at Elizabeth’s Court at about the same time—1570 and 1571. Byrd became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal at Windsor in 1570 and, by 1573, was organist there as well, which gained him the favor of the Queen. Sensitive to music and himself gifted, Oxford would have had both the opportunity and the taste to notice Byrd, especially when Byrd became organist at the Chapel.

Indeed, this seems to have been the case, for connections between Byrd and Oxford are noted by Byrd scholars, including Edmund Fellowes. Records show that, in 1573, Oxford gave Byrd the lease on a manor named Battails Hall in the County of Essex, exercise of which was contingent upon the death of

Oxford's uncle, Aubrey de Vere. In 1582, Byrd sued to obtain possession, but was unsuccessful.⁹

A more definite working relationship is suggested by the 1588 publication of Byrd's *Psalmes, Sonets and Songs of Sadnes and Pietie*, in which he set Oxford's poem, "If Women Could be Fair." (Although Oxford's authorship of the sonnet recently has been challenged, it is listed as Oxford's in the collected works of William Byrd.¹⁰) The sprightly syncopations of the setting recall some of Byrd's virginal pieces, and it is one of the songs that Byrd describes in his Epistle to the Reader as being for those who desired "to be merrie."

There is also documentary evidence of the Earl of Oxford's serious interest in and talent for music, including two dedications by composer John Farmer, the latter one stating that the Earl, though an amateur, was more proficient as a musician than were many professionals.¹¹

Contemporaries also referred to the 17th Earl of Oxford as an excellent playwright, although no plays survive under his name. Of greater import is that, like other nobleman at Court (such as the Earl of Leicester), Oxford patronized troupes of players, including two acting companies during the 1580s. One (Oxford's Men) performed throughout the provinces, while the second, composed of boy actors and choristers (Oxford's Boys), played in London at such private theaters as Paul's Church and the Blackfriars.¹²

Yet another link between the two is displayed by the military character of the March and the Battle pieces. Brief melodies known as "calls" and rhythmic patterns played by drums were used throughout the 16th century to maintain marching order among troops and to convey directions to soldiers in combat, since the human voice was incapable of carrying over the din and distance of the field. (Machiavelli, for instance, describes the use of rhythms and calls at some length in his *The Art of War*, written for his patron, Lorenzo de' Medici.¹³) Trained as a soldier, Oxford had served as a young man in the field during the Rising of the English Lords in 1569-70, and had briefly held command of English cavalry in the Netherlands in 1585. He thus would have been familiar with these devices, and could have provided them to Byrd to add greater verisimilitude to the battle music. As Oxford was musically gifted, he may have suggested some of the melodies as well.

Since it was customary for plays to be accompanied by instrumental music throughout the performance, Oxford's relationship with Byrd would have provided the Earl with easy access to a brilliant and prolific composer who could supply his troupes with music. Thus, the Battle pieces could have been ordered expressly for Oxford's plays or players—or for mock battle "entertainments" for the Queen, such as was choreographed by Oxford at Warwick Castle in 1572, with 200 men.¹⁴ If this be the case, the Battle could date as early as the

1570s, although it is more likely to date from the decade when Oxford was actively patronizing two companies of players.

Notes

1. Byrd, William. *My Ladye Nevells Booke*. Ed. Hilda Andrews. 1969. Originally published in 1926. Blanche Winnogron supplied a new introduction for the 1969 edition.
2. Morley, Thomas (collector). *The First Book of Consort Lessons*. Ed. Sydney Beck. 1959. The first edition was published in London, 1599.
3. Byrd, William. *Musica Britannica*. Vols. XXVII & XXVIII. Ed. Alan Brown. 2nd rev. ed. 1976.
4. Neighbour, Oliver. *The Consort and Keyboard Music of William Byrd*. 1978.
5. Byrd Studies. Eds. A. Brown and R. Turbet. 1992.
6. Byrd, William. *Musica Britannica*. Vols. XXVII & XXVIII. Ed. Alan Brown. 2nd rev. ed. 1976.
7. Byrd, William. *My Ladye Nevells Booke*. Ed. Hilda Andrews. 1969.
8. *Debrett's Illustrated Peerage*. London, 1972.
9. Fellowes, Edmund H. *William Byrd*. London, 1936. Also, "William Byrd," *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 5th edition. Vol. 1. Ed. Eric Blom. 1965.
10. Byrd, William. *The Collected Vocal Works*. Vol. XII. Ed. Edmund H. Fellowes. 1948.
11. Farmer, John. *The First Set of English Madrigals: to Four Voices*. London, 1599.
12. Chambers, Sir. E.K. *The Elizabethan Stage*. 4 volumes. 1923.
13. Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Art of War*. 1965. (*Machiavelli: the Chief Works and Others*. Trans. Allan Gilbert. Vol. ii, 561-726)
14. Ogburn, Charlton. *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. 1984.