

William Byrd's "Battle" and the Earl of Oxford

by Sally Mosher



AMONG close to three hundred pieces contained in the most famous keyboard manuscript of the English Renaissance, now known as *The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, is William Byrd's "The Earl of Oxford March" (*Fitzwilliam* II 402). The Oxford March has become well known to present-day early music enthusiasts, and apparently was well known at the beginning of its life as well (*Musica Britannica* II 207). The most beautiful and best-preserved surviving manuscript of keyboard music from the period, *My Lady Nevell's Book* of 1591, includes it under the title "The March Before the Battle," where it precedes and sets the mood for a group of nine individual sections called "The Battle" (Nevell 15). In Thomas Morley's *The First Book of Consort Lessons* of 1599, an unsigned, truncated version of the march, arranged for a mixed group of instruments, appears as "My Lord of Oxenford's Maske" (Morley 134). Anthony Munday's 1588 *A banquet of daintie Conceits*, a collection of his lyrics for various well-known tunes, contains verses to be sung to a melody he describes as "a gal-lant note" called the "Earle of Oxenford's March" (Munday 227).

Circumstances surrounding the Oxford March and the battle pieces suggest an association of at least ten years between the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford and William Byrd.

WILLIAM BYRD (c. 1540-1623) is considered the greatest composer of the English Renaissance, and perhaps of the entire Renaissance. A fine singer and keyboard performer as well, Byrd was eager to rise in the world, and in this he was aided by influential patrons, including Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Oxford. He was a devout Catholic, and was officially named as a "recusant" a number of times, but nonetheless he continually escaped any serious consequences for openly professing his religion.

Byrd was born in London sometime between October 1539 and the end of September 1540, one of the seven children of Thomas and Margery Byrd (Harley, Byrd 4). By 1572, he was employed full time as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, the group of about twenty-four male singers and organists charged with providing church music for the royal household, who remained with the Queen as part of her entourage as she travelled from palace to palace.

Byrd was a protégé of the noted composer Thomas Tallis, with whom he shared royal patronage, beginning in 1575 with an exclusive 21-year patent for printing music, and continuing with shared authorship of a book of sacred songs dedicated to the Queen. Throughout his active life, Byrd composed more than 500 works for diverse instruments and

voices, ranging from short simple pieces to large works of great complexity.

Byrd was successful right from the beginning. His ambitions to own a country estate were realized by the early 90's when he moved to a manor at Stonden Massey in Essex, near some of his most important patrons, the Petre family of Thorndon and Ingatestone Halls (Bennett 129). This desire to acquire property involved him in at least six property-based lawsuits throughout his life, one lasting about twelve years. Nor was he unwilling to complain openly or become involved in disputes outside the courtroom. For example, when the music patent he shared with Thomas Tallis was not bringing in enough money for them, Byrd complained to the Queen, who then granted him a lease on a lucrative manor in Gloucestershire (Kerman 539).

Byrd was brave enough to write letters defending fellow Catholics and openly to publish Catholic sacred music as well as the Protestant music required by his job (Kerman 543). His lifelong patron Queen Elizabeth described him as "a stiff Papist and a good subject," and he never suffered more than a moderate fine for the profession of his faith (Byrd, *Nevell* iii). Interestingly, it appears that the rest of Byrd's family was Protestant, which, as can be determined through written records, did not prevent him from remaining on good terms with them (Harley, *Byrd* 67).

EDWARD DE VERE (1550-1604), acknowledged by students of the period as an accomplished courtier poet, gifted musician, and generous patron of writers and musicians, also got off to a notably successful start. In the early 1570's, for a brief while he appeared to be Queen Elizabeth's chief favorite at Court. The son of the Earl and Countess of Shrewsbury (the redoubtable Bess of Hardwick) observed in a letter to his father: "the Queen's Majesty delighteth more in his personage and his dancing and valiantness than any other" (Hibbert 126).

It is from this early period that we see the first indication of Oxford's patronage of Byrd, the grant in 1573 of a lease for 31 years (either through gift, or sale on favorable terms) of an Essex manor property variously called Battysshall, Battylshall, Battelshall or Batayles, to take effect at the death of Oxford's uncle Aubrey de Vere (Harley, *Byrd* 54). When Aubrey died in 1580, Byrd was sued by a man who claimed that Byrd had granted the lease to him, while Byrd claimed he had guaranteed it to his brother, John Byrd (Fellowes 4). Byrd lost in court and could have faced financial ruin if Oxford had not intervened by selling the manor to his brother (Harley, *Byrd* 84). This suggests that Byrd and Oxford remained on good terms throughout the 1570's and early 80's.

Was this the time that the march and battle pieces were composed? Although there are many musical indications that the pieces were not originally intended to be grouped together, they might nonetheless have been written separately around the same time. That their

first known appearance is in the 1591 *My Lady Nevell's Book* virginal manuscript is certainly no reason to assume a composition date in the late 80's for either work, since both internal and external evidence indicate that the forty-two pieces included in Nevell cover a span of as much as twenty-five years (Neighbour 259). Further, they may well have appeared in a number of earlier manuscripts, now lost.

Byrd may have composed the march in honor of Oxford, either in response to a specific request or in gratitude for his patronage. It is dashing and military in character, and many of the passages sound like trumpet calls or drum beats. It is, indeed, almost onomatopoeic in its recreation of trumpet and drum sounds.

Like most of his fellow peers, Oxford was trained for commanding troops in the front lines, and it may have been through his jousring skills that he first rose to favor, by excelling in the tournaments that were considered a training ground for real battle by the Court community. Machiavelli's 1521 treatise *The Art of War*, written for his patron Lorenzo de' Medici, discusses the use of trumpet calls and drum beats for communication among the troops during battle, as well as to rouse their spirits and to frighten the enemy. Music has been used in battle since well before the time of Alexander the Great; it is mentioned in Homer. Alexander's favorite musical mode, the Phrygian, supposedly so aroused him that he would reach for his weapons whenever he heard it (Machiavelli 647).

The custom at all Renaissance Courts was to announce the entrance of highranking persons by playing a brief flourish on the trumpet and drums, known as a "tucket" (Randel 882). Such musical identifications were part of a system that identified persons of rank by the style and colors of their livery, the "badge" worn on the sleeve of the livery, as well as their crest, impresa and various mottos. The Shakespeare plays are full of tuckets (see *King Lear*, *Henry V*, *Henry VIII*, et al). In *Othello*, when Iago hears "Othello's trumpets," it means that he recognizes Othello by his "tucket." The brief and open-ended rune that introduces Oxford's march has all the earmarks of this kind of semi-military identification.

In dedicating his *The First Set of English Madrigals* to Oxford in 1999, the composer John Farmer states that "using this science as a recreation, your Lordship has overgone most of them that make it a profession" (Chiljan 95). Thus, Oxford himself could well have written his own tucket, with Byrd later devising an elaborate march around it.

THE nine sections of "The Battle" are highly descriptive, rhythmically compelling and even more military than the march. The Englishman Francis Markham in 1622 published a treatise describing English military practices for the preceding century, this being the first written record with names and descriptions of various musical signals. The army used drums for the infantry and trumpets for the cavalry (Markham 36). There is, unfortunately, no musical notation for military melodies or rhythms in the treatise. I suggest that many of

the passages in the "Oxford March" and "The Battle" that sound like drum beats or trumpet calls may be in fact real military calls.

In the "March to the Fight," the words "tantara tantara" are written in the manuscript above one passage that certainly sounds like a trumpet call, and later the words "The battles be joined" appear over a passage that sounds like the insistent drum beat played when the infantry finally begins its charge (Byrd, *Nevell* 35, 36). Oxford, a veteran of real military action by the time he and Byrd met, would have known the military calls in use and could have supplied them to Byrd. Others among Byrd's noble patrons could also have supplied them; or Byrd might have heard them himself at tournament practices.

Nevell is the only surviving manuscript that presents the entire battle suite, concluding with "The Galliard for the Victory." The galliard may have been written expressly for the manuscript to complete the suite, for it is much more complex and sophisticated than either the march or the nine battle sections. Further, there are no "calls" or military themes. Like the march, it is in G major (while "The Battle" is in C) and thus taken together with the march gives the suite as a whole a kind of symmetry.

By the 17th century, battle pieces had become a popular genre, so Byrd can be said to have launched a new keyboard genre in addition to composing the first English keyboard suite. All in C major, sections of "The Battle" are harmonically very simple; for the most part they alternate between the tonic and the dominant, using no more than a handful of chords. Like the march, they often suggest trumpets and drums, but they also quite successfully suggest the sounds of soldiers marching, of horses walking or running, of flutes, drones and bagpipes. Their presence in a number of later manuscripts indicates their popularity well into the 17th century (Byrd, *Musica Britannica*, II 207). Like the music used for silent films, they certainly seem intended as accompaniment for some sort of theatrical piece portraying military action.

The Battle Suite by William Byrd:

1) *The March before the Battle*

2) *The Battle:*

The Soldiers summons

The march of footmen

The march of horsemen

The trumpets

The Irish march

The bagpipe and the drone

The flute and the drum

The march to the fight

The retreat

Three other sections, of doubtful attribution, are included in the cited edition because they appear in another ms. of the period as part of *The Battle*:

The burying of the dead

The morris [dance]

The soldiers dance

3. *The Galliard for the Victory*

ALL of these versions of the Earl of Oxford March that have come down to us, however, are arranged for the virginal (except for the short piece in the Morley collection), and in Elizabethan England the virginal was *not* used for accompaniment, either in the theater or for singers. The virginal was a solo instrument, one that was frequently found in noble households. Queen Elizabeth herself played an Italian virginal, adorned with the Boleyn arms; there are a number of descriptions of her as an excellent player (Williams 66; Somerset 371). If, as Farmer declared, Oxford was close to professional in his musical skill, that skill would imply instrumental proficiency, probably on both lute and keyboard. The likelihood is strong that both Oxford and the Queen would have played these pieces by the composer whom both had patronized.

Singers usually accompanied themselves on the lute, while music for dancing, some vocal accompaniment, and dinner music (there was always music as a background for the Queen's public meals) were provided by groups of instruments known as "consorts." There were two types of consorts. In those called simply "a consort," all the instruments were from the same family: viols, lutes, recorders, etc. In the other, known as "a broken consort," instruments belonging to different families were combined (Ripin 199). When Shakespeare speaks of "broken music," he means a broken consort. "My Lord of Oxenford's Maske" is an arrangement of the Oxford march for a broken consort of lutes, viols and flute (Morley 134).

Today the word *virginal* is used only to describe a small harpsichord with one set of strings and a single keyboard (although there are "double" virginals, and virginals with two sets of strings), usually enclosed in a rectangular box (Harley, *Harpsichord* 162). In England, however, well into the 17th century, the word *virginal* was used to describe all plucked keyboard instruments, including the kidney-shaped instrument that we now call a harpsichord (Ripin 411). Further, despite the association of virginals with Elizabethan England, there wasn't a specifically English-designed virginal until 1641, and the last one was built in 1679 (Kottick 46). Thus, all the virginals in England during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I were made either on the continent or in England using continental designs.



In the smaller towns, on the other hand, music was provided by groups called "waits," which were made up of wind instruments plus singers and dancers, and sometimes strings as well. The name "waits" had its origin in the Middle Ages with horn players who were paid to wait on the town parapets, watching the roads, ready to play as soon as they saw someone coming (Randel 930). Most of this music is lively, robust stuff, an amalgam perhaps of Court and countryside.

MUSIC played by both consorts and waits would have been notated with a minimum of effort in a kind of shorthand. While the melodies would have come from well-known songs or dances, drum parts probably depended on the players' own rhythmic sense rather than on any sort of detailed notation, much like the "lead sheets" and improvisations of twentieth-century jazz. Later, a skilled composer like Byrd might write a keyboard version of some of the more popular pieces, notating it exactly as it was to be played, a common practice at the time by many composers, including Giles Farnaby and John Bull, as well as William Byrd.

Trumpets in the 16th century could only play the natural notes of the overtones, that ascending series of higher pitches that sound after a string is plucked or a pipe is blown. In practice, trumpeters focused on just one section of the overtones, the military players doing the larger, lower intervals—octaves, fifths, fourths, and major thirds, for the most part—while the smaller, higher-pitched intervals, which were considerably harder to blow, were reserved for the more highly skilled Court players. Queen Elizabeth had a group of sixteen trumpeters in her service under the command of a Sergeant Trumpeter (Borren 342). Like certain fabrics, colors and styles of clothing, high-pitched trumpet playing was considered to be the purview of the aristocracy.

A nobleman when travelling had a trumpeter called a harbinger among his retinue, whose job it was to precede the noble's train into town, playing flourishes on the trumpet so that the townsfolk could arrange a proper welcome for the Lord, a practice mentioned in *The Taming of the Shrew*. We know from a note in Burghley's hand that a harbinger was among the retinue that accompanied the Earl of Oxford in January of 1575 when he set forth on his tour of the Continent (Ward 101). On occasions like this, or on his entry into the lists of the various royal tournaments in which he competed, both in England and on the continent, audiences would become familiar with his tucket and would know who was coming.

THE manuscript containing the entire battle suite, opening with the piece we call "The Earl of Oxford March," is known as *My Lady Nevell's Book* and was most likely commissioned by one of Byrd's patrons. The 42 pieces that make up this manuscript were drawn from the previous twenty-five years of his oeuvre; the copyist was John Baldwin, Byrd's colleague from the Gentlemen of the Chapel Royal, noted for his beautiful music penmanship.

To date, no one knows for sure which "Lady Nevell" was the intended recipient, but the present owner of the manuscript, John Henry Guy Nevill, 5th Marquess of Abergavenny, may be her descendent. A member of his family, Edward Nevill, Fifth Baron Abergavenny (probably pronounced A-ber-gen'ny), known as "the Deaf," was supposed to have presented it to Queen Elizabeth I, after which it moved among some private owners until its return in 1668 to the Nevill family. At some later point it again left the Nevill family, appearing in the library of the famed 18th-century music historian Charles Burney and returning to the Abergavenny family by the 1830's, where it has remained since (Fellowes 197).

Some mystery arises here. Edward Nevill, the deaf Baron Abergavenny, died in 1589, two years before the existing manuscript was copied, so it cannot be he who presented it to Elizabeth. Was it his son, also Edward? His widow, Grisold (Turbet 296)? Or was there another, earlier copy of the manuscript? Did anyone ever present it to Elizabeth?

We know that the Abergavenny Nevill family was Protestant at this time, while most of Byrd's patrons were Catholics. Could this particular Lady Nevill have been a member of one of the Catholic Nevill families? Byrd is known to have been friendly with a Catholic Nevill family from Cowley in Middlesex county, near where he lived until the early 1590's (Turbet 296). Further, one of the pieces in *Nevell* quotes from a well-known Catholic plainsong ("Salve Regina") in honor of the Virgin Mary, making it even less likely that it was compiled for a Protestant patron (Harley, Byrd 259).

"The March Before the Battle" in *My Lady Nevells Book* is essentially identical to "The Earl of Oxford March" in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*. While its position introducing "The Battle" is the most probable reason for renaming the Oxford March in *Nevell*, it is worth noting that there had been enmity between the Abergavenny Nevills and the Earl of Oxford's family. Henry Nevill, Fourth Baron Abergavenny, was seriously reprimanded and "committed to ward" (imprisoned) for striking the 16th Earl of Oxford in the Chamber of Presence (Debrett 7). As an Earl, and one with an honorary office (Lord Great Chamberlain), Oxford outranked Baron Abergavenny by two degrees. Although Nevill was pardoned about a month after the incident, the Oxford name might not have been welcome on a manuscript dedicated to any Nevill family member. In addition, Oxford's loss of votes by the Garter Assembly, beginning in 1590, reveals him to have been in such disfavor with important members of the Court community that even Byrd, who had worked with him and benefitted by his patronage, may have been hesitant to use his name in 1591 (Moore 8-11).

To summarize: William Byrd and the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford were both at the Court of Elizabeth I from about 1572 on, both were involved in activities that provided music for the Court, and during this period Oxford saved Byrd from possible bankruptcy by selling a certain property to Byrd's brother.

A piece usually known as "The Earl of Oxford's March" has been preserved in at least four versions; thus, it was clearly well-known during the period. Since a number of William Byrd's keyboard works (including some in *My Lady Nevell's Book*) are, like this one, arrangements of well-known tunes, their originality lies in the quality of the keyboard writing.

Oxford was known for his musicianship. He was also a ranking Earl who would have had his own "tucket," or musical signature, to signal his arrival at tournaments and while traveling. The tune that lies at the heart of "The Earl of Oxford's March" has all the earmarks of such a tucket. In deference to his dreams of martial glory perhaps, or else to provide an entertainment at Court, at some point during their close association William Byrd worked Oxford's tucket into a musical setting that called up visions of battle. Because of its popularity, Byrd later decided to include it in *My Lady Nevell's Book* of 1591.

Nor was this the only piece composed by Byrd and based on something by Oxford, for his musical setting of a poem usually attributed to Oxford, "If Women Could Be Fair," was included in a collection of Byrd's vocal works published in 1588 (Mosher 35). Since a great many manuscript collections remain unexamined, there may very well be more evidence of their collaboration to discover. _____

Sally Mosher has been active as pianist, newspaper music critic, teacher, and concert manager, and now concentrates on performing early music and her own compositions on harpsichord and synthesizer. She studied for degrees in music at Manhattanville College and the University of Southern California, obtained her Juris Doctor from USC Law School, and is a member of the California Bar. A reader at the Huntington Library, she has presented recitals and written articles on Renaissance topics for the Renaissance Conference of Southern California, the Shakespeare Authorship Roundtable, the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, the Shakespeare Oxford Society, and *The Elizabethan Review*. Those who would like to hear "The Earl of Oxford March" for themselves can obtain her CD recording through her website: NewMixMusic.com; by writing to her at 1260 Rancheros Road, Pasadena, CA 91103-2759; or by calling or FAXing her at (626) 795-3146.

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SONNET CXXVIII

How oft, when thou, my music, music play'st,
 Upon that blessed wood whose motion sounds
 With thy sweet fingers, when thou gently sway'st
 The wiry concord that mine ear confounds,
 Do I envy those jacks, that nimble leap
 To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,
 Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap,
 At the wood's boldness by thee blushing stand!
 To be so tickled they would change their state
 And situation with those dancing chips,
 O'er whom thy fingers walk with gentle gait,
 Making dead wood more bless'd than living lips.
 Since saucy jacks so happy are in this,
 Give them thy fingers, me thy lips to kiss.