

## **Full Circle? Observations on Keyboard Music to c.1630 in *Musica Britannica* and some Thoughts about the Future**

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The recent appearance of Orhan Memed's volume containing the complete keyboard music by Benjamin Cosyn brings the editing of music by the so-called English virginalists in *Musica Britannica* to a natural conclusion just as new, source-based editions of some of the main manuscripts have begun to appear in Jon Baxendale and Francis Knights's lavish editions published by Lyrebird.<sup>1</sup> It is as though we have come full circle. It is worth remembering that the very first volume in *Musica Britannica* was an edition of a keyboard source, the Mulliner Book,<sup>2</sup> and that this reflected the approach of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editors. Although Jon Baxendale and Francis Knights uncovered numerous issues in the editions of Fitzwilliam Virginal Book by J.A. Fuller-Maitland and William Barclay Squire,<sup>3</sup> and of *My Ladye Nevells Booke* by Hilda Andrews,<sup>4</sup> they shared with these earlier editors an approach that focused on the source (and, by implication, the scribe) rather than individual composers. It is with the fifth volume of *Musica Britannica* that we find a paradigm shift where the composer takes centre stage:<sup>5</sup> Stephen Tuttle's edition of keyboard music by Thomas Tomkins borrows from literary and classical scholarship in conflating all available sources to try to arrive at an archetype for each piece, attempting to establish (by implication, at any rate) the composer's 'original' on the assumption that texts become corrupted as they are transmitted over time.

Editors of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century music fall into two camps when it comes to dealing with the myriad discrepancies between sources in what is largely a manuscript tradition with very few autograph sources: they opt either for a 'best text' approach, where one source is privileged over all others, or for one where all sources are taken into consideration. In fact, those opting for the latter approach have to determine the

‘base’ source for each piece as well, and the question is more to do with the degree to which other witnesses are brought to bear on the edition. There have been those who have been critical of conflating sources on the grounds that the resulting text is one that never existed at the time. However, we need look only at the Le Strange manuscripts of consort music in the British Library to realise that this criticism itself is somewhat anachronistic:<sup>6</sup> the texts contained in them were compared with the copies owned by Nicholas Le Strange’s friends and acquaintances, and annotations record every single difference regardless of whether or not it affects how the music sounds. Indeed, the level of detail far surpasses anything found in a modern collected edition. None the less, the approach taken in the *Musica Britannica* volumes tends to obscure the variation between sources and underplays the role of the scribe-player in the creation of texts. The underlying assumption is still that of the ‘work concept’ in that there is some sense of creating a single, scholarly text for each piece. Indeed, we still talk about keyboard ‘works’ in this period in a way that is unhelpful: we underplay the role of memory, which lay at the heart of an early modern education and led to composers writing out a piece (my preferred term) differently on many occasions, and to scribe-players making their own adaptations in performance or on paper.

The ‘best text’ approach, however, also has its drawbacks: at what point does editing become transcription? The desire to focus on the one source can lead to modern editorial interventions that would be unnecessary if other contemporaneous manuscripts were consulted, or even to the retention of errors that could easily be corrected in relation to concordant texts.<sup>7</sup> Yet the implications of consulting every source containing concordant texts for each piece in large-scale anthologies such as the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* are huge: carefully examining them all would be a massive undertaking. One suspects that this may have been one reason why – consciously or not – the *Musica Britannica* series began to focus more on composer than source.

The Musica Britannica editions of English keyboard music which conflate texts have sometimes come in for somewhat harsh criticism which arguably is unjustified when the focus is on the composer rather than the source.<sup>8</sup> That said, there are some aspects of earlier volumes in the series that have not stood the test of time. For example, the way in which note values were halved in the edition of music by Tomkins obscures our understanding of it and gives a misleading sense of the music which not help the player. This is particularly true when comparing it with the latest volume: the shortest note values in Cosyn are original in a way that those in the Tomkins volume are not, which arguably skews our sense of the tempos at which the music of these composers should be performed.<sup>9</sup>

There are, however, some features of notation other than pitch and duration that vary between sources and are not served well by either editorial approach. A study of the pieces in *My Ladye Nevells Booke* in relation to all the manuscripts containing concordant texts shows that no two sources agree in terms of single- and double-stroke ornament signs.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, whether or not the beaming of the shorter note values in this music may have implications for performance in terms of phrasing or articulation, the sources do not agree, suggesting that such matters belong to scribe or player rather than composer. When sources are conflated, the tendency is to modernise beaming, which, given the diversity in the manuscripts, presents us with something just as valid as taking the beaming from any one original source: in neither case will the user have any sense of the full range of possibilities. This is even more true of the ornament signs: indeed, the issue with the ‘best text’ approach is that it can give a false sense of security since there is no way of conveying the variety of ornament placement found in the sources. Although in principle an edition conflating texts could include ornaments from more than one source, in practice it is difficult to distinguish between the sources in the notation beyond printing some of them at a smaller size, and it is therefore impossible to include them from more than a couple of manuscripts. In any case, mixing ornaments from

several sources tends to obscure the picture rather than enhance our understanding of their use.

What of the future? Editions of keyboard music by all the main keyboard practitioners from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries who left written music have now appeared in *Musica Britannica*, so what next? An AHRC-funded project, ‘Digital directions for collected editions: keyboard music by British musicians before *c.*1700’,<sup>11</sup> sought to investigate the potential for digital editions to transform the way in which we approach this repertoire. A digital infrastructure would allow for the presentation of texts in parallel, or for variant readings to be brought up on screen. My own view is that such editions must involve the encoding of each source in its entirety rather than just encoding variants. This would facilitate a multidimensional approach to editing music incorporating the best of both approaches, with composer- and source-focused editions coexisting side-by-side. Someone interested in giving a concert of Byrd’s keyboard music, say, could opt for a version that focuses on the composer and takes all sources into consideration. A performer wishing to make a recording of music from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, on the other hand, might wish to use a version sitting within the same edition but based but on the one source. Issues surrounding how to present the diversity of ornament placement and how small note values are beamed would be solved for the user at a click of a mouse.

‘Digital directions for collected editions’ also considered matters of inclusion and long-term sustainability, both financial and of data. Typically, the volumes of *Musica Britannica* sit on library shelves in reference collections and are too expensive for an impoverished student to purchase for the sake of perhaps one or two pieces (although it should be pointed out that offprints are available for purchase from Stainer & Bell). More to the point, the way in which sheet music is consumed has changed beyond all recognition. As anyone involved in music publishing is all too aware, there is now an expectation that music

be available for free, instant download. Few appreciate the value of a critical, scholarly edition (whatever editorial method is employed), which suggests the need to educate students and players more generally. However, promoting high quality editions is a fruitless task unless they are just as accessible as cheaper (or free) alternatives. Of course, this raises significant questions about the business model of the future, but the ability to download a single piece effortlessly and at little or no cost is clearly going to become vital for the long-term viability of serious editions of this – and indeed other – repertoire. In the UK, part of the solution may lie in the increasing emphasis placed on the impact of research on the wider community by funding bodies, and an understanding that our heritage extends beyond physical artefacts to include that which is intangible. Music is an excellent example of this because it is not the sources themselves, nor the texts contained in them, but the way they are realised in sound during performance that constitutes the intangible cultural heritage. A digital platform will allow great accessibility since access to high quality editions need not be restricted to those who can access a library or have the financial resources to purchase them. The encoding of data also allows music to be understood and communicated in different ways to different communities both aurally and using other kinds of graphical representation, including Braille music. Finally, there are many questions surrounding this repertoire that may be answered using computational approaches. To take just one example: a study of the contexts in which single- and double-stroke ornaments appear may reveal patterns not immediately obvious to the eye of the musicologist or performer and help determine how they should be interpreted, and whether this changed through time or from scribe to scribe.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Cosyn, *Complete Keyboard Music*, ed. Orhan Memed, Musica Britannica, cvii (London: Stainer and Bell, 2022). Lyrebird editions of manuscripts include *The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, ed. Jon Baxendale and Francis Knights, 3 vols (Tynset: Lyrebird Music, 2020); *My Ladye Nevells Booke*, ed. Jon Baxendale and Francis Knights (Tynset: Lyrebird

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Music, 2021); *Will Forster's Virginal Book: Lessons by Mr Byrd & C*, ed. Jon Baxendale and Francis Knights (Tynset: Lyrebird Music, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> *The Mulliner Book*, ed. Denis Stevens, *Musica Britannica*, i (London: Stainer and Bell, 1951).

<sup>3</sup> *The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, ed. J. A. Fuller-Maitland and William Barclay Squire, 2 vols (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1899).

<sup>4</sup> *My Ladye Nevells Booke*, ed. Hilda Andrews (London: Curwen, 1926).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Tomkins, *Keyboard Music*, ed. Stephen D. Tuttle, *Musica Britannica*, v (London: Stainer & Bell, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> London, British Library, Additional MSS 39550–4.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of several examples drawn from the keyboard music of Peter Philips, see David J. Smith, 'Editing Early Keyboard Music: The Role of the Scribe in the Transmission of Music by Peter Philips (1560/61-1628)', in Theodor Dumitrescu, Karl Kügle and Marnix van Berchum (eds), *Early Music Editing: Principles, Historiography, Future Directions*, Epitome Musical (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 141-69.

<sup>8</sup> For an example, see David J. Smith, 'Changing Approaches to the Study of English Keyboard Music before c.1630', in David J. Smith (ed.), *Aspects of English Keyboard Music before c.1630*, Ashgate Historical Keyboard Series (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 4–5.

<sup>9</sup> Note values were similarly doubled in John Bull, *Keyboard Music I*, ed. John Steele, Francis Cameron and Thurston Dart, *Musica Britannica*, xiv (London: Stainer & Bell, 1960) and *Keyboard Music II*, ed. Thurston Dart, xix (London: Stainer and Bell, 1963). The latest revised edition of volume xix by Alan Brown reverts to original values, although curiously the third edition of volume xiv does not.

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Between Text and Act: Fresh Perspectives on the Significance of Single- and Double-Stroke Ornaments in William Byrd’s Keyboard Music’, in Samantha Bassler, Katherine Butler and Katie Bank (eds), *Byrd Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2023), forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Digital directions for collected editions: keyboard music by British musicians before c.1700’ was an AHRC-funded networking grant led by David J. Smith involving a series of symposia and a conference between August 2021 and May 2023. The aim was to bring together musicologists with special expertise in the critical editing of keyboard music, music technologists, computational musicologists and computer scientists to engage with the issues involved in revitalising the collected edition for the digital age.

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