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MADRIGALS FROM A SINGER'S POINT OF VIEW

THE Editor has asked me to write on the singing of madrigals as I see it, taking Mr. Kennedy Scott's *Madrigal Singing*⁽¹⁾ as text. I find after studying Mr. Scott's admirable book that my view of the subject is so similar to his that it seems hardly necessary for me to do more than strongly recommend all who are interested to read the book. I remember Countess Russell saying (as chairman of a meeting of the Musicians' Benevolent Fund) that she had been advised never to steal the thunder of speakers who were to follow her, and adding, in an exquisite small voice, 'the thunder of those speakers is perfectly safe with me.' Future writers on madrigal singing will find that their thunder has been by no means safe with Mr. Scott. He modestly adds to his title 'a few remarks on the study of Madrigal Music'; but these 'few remarks' are no exception to the rule that the sketches of a master are often more stimulating than the completed picture. Indeed, Mr. Scott has, for all practical purposes, amply covered the ground. But—even if I can add little—it may be of interest if I, as a singer, am able to endorse from the point of view of a different experience what he, as a conductor, has to say of madrigals.

The chief reasons why madrigal singing is difficult for modern singers are, I think, that madrigals were written for private and not public performance; and that they were conceived on an almost entirely different rhythmic basis from that of later music.

There were no audiences during the madrigal period. Madrigals were sung by small parties of music lovers after supper in country houses. The listeners would be few or none. Possibly some of the servants of the household might form a sort of audience. But there was no audience in our sense of the word. This fact is well known and often referred to; but its effect on the madrigal composers and their music has, I think, been rather overlooked. It accounts to a large extent for the inwardness, the impersonality and the quietude of so much of their work. And it is not only in the graver pieces that these qualities are present. Even in the lighter the gaiety has an intimate flavour that is not to be found in any later music—a gaiety that is shared with a few friends, and that has in it no sign of deliberately appealing to an audience. The madrigal composers had no audience-sense. They were concerned solely with saying what they

(1) *Madrigal Singing*: Ch. Kennedy Scott. Oxford University Press.

had to say as completely and as perfectly as possible. They had no thought of being effective in our rather tiresome sense of that word. This is not to suggest that their work is not effective: the best of it has the effectiveness of all good things completely said. To call to mind any music, whether for the chamber or the concert hall, written after audiences in the modern sense had arrived, will help to make the point clear. The most contemplative adagio of Beethoven contains the audience; 'Draw on sweet night,' 'Dainty fine bird,' are without it. Any scherzo of Beethoven is full of the audience; 'Fair Phyllis I saw sitting all alone,' and even 'Now is the month of Maying' have no hint of it.

All this, if it be true, must be taken into consideration in modern performances of madrigals. The modern singer is born and bred in a world of audiences, and of music that has the audience in it. If he is to sing madrigals he must forget that world. Many of the qualities that may be legitimate and necessary in singing audience-music (*e.g.*, emotional warmth, sudden dynamic contrasts, *sforzandos*, etc.) will be quite inappropriate in madrigals.

There must be no preoccupation with effectiveness, with making the points of imitation or even the words effectively clear. Such things must of course be perfectly clear; that is obvious; but there will be all the difference in the world between the conscious clarity that results from preoccupation with effectiveness and the unaffected clarity that is, so to speak, taken in one's stride in uttering the meaning.⁽²⁾

The utterance of the meaning—this should be the singer's primary preoccupation; not merely the meaning of the words but the whole meaning—the life—of the whole work. How often one hears a performance of a madrigal in which one feels that although every detail has been scrupulously and skilfully attended to, one has failed to apprehend the meaning, one has, in fact, not heard the madrigal. Very likely the singers themselves have failed to apprehend the meaning and have come to the madrigal with the idea of galvanising the dull looking stuff into some semblance of life. But it is possible that, having understood the meaning, they fail to convey it owing to the adoption of audience-moving artifices that are foreign to the very nature of the madrigal.

To take one of the less obvious examples. Slow sustained chords (especially *pianissimo*) are a familiar audience-moving device in modern choral music. They are conceived in effectiveness and will easily be brought forth in success. There are no examples of slow

(2) I have avoided the word 'expressing'; it has acquired, in use in connection with music, the sense of 'uttering with expression' and is better left unused in the present argument.

chords of this kind in English madrigals. The madrigal composer, for one thing, was too much concerned with getting the verse he was setting 'said' in music; and for another, he had hardly begun to be concerned with the sensuous aspect of sound, certainly not as a means of appealing to an audience. The last thing he would do would be to stop the action to dwell on sustained chords for the sake of their sound.⁽³⁾ Such sustained chords as do appear in his music are purely incidental. Unless the modern singer understands this intrinsic difference his tendency will be to apply his modern methods and to take such passages too slow—to dwell on them. He will try to make them do what they were never intended to do, and his performance will be lifeless.

It will be said, 'surely the attitude which has been advocated'—of putting the meaning as a whole in the first place—is just as right for later music.' Perhaps it is. My point is that the attitude is essential for madrigal music. Audiences must not be deliberately and directly appealed to in the singing. They must be allowed to overhear it.

The other difficulty for the modern singer of madrigals—the rhythmical difficulty—is the more important and much the harder to overcome.⁽⁴⁾

The music of madrigals is based on the 'music' of words spoken aloud.⁽⁵⁾ This music of spoken words has rise and fall, accents of varying strength and irregular recurrence, and sounds—single words and syllables—of varying lengths. (It has also, of course, 'qualities'—vowels and consonants—but these are beside the point.) The source of inspiration of the music of the madrigal composers, its driving force, was their sense of the 'music' of words; not their sense of the meaning in the ordinary literary connotation, but their sense of the living thought and feeling exactly conveyed in the sound—'the very life of it.' Their object was, as Byrd said it should be, to frame their music to the very life of the words. (It must be remembered that in their day the habit of silent reading—reading

(3) There is an interesting passage in Marenzio's 'Scaldava il sol' in which, at the words 'Dormia'l pastor,' the action *is* stopped with slow chords. This is an example of one of the essential differences between the English and the Italian madrigal.

(4) Very few words in the language have been made to do more varied duty, to bear a greater variety of shades of meaning, than the word 'rhythm,' and, for the moment at least, I shall attempt to make my meaning clear without it.

(5) I am alive to all the qualifications necessary to make this statement true, *e.g.*, that the madrigal composers were beginning to be interested in the music of the dance with its independence of the sound of words; that the music is metrical and has an organised life of its own; but the statement is nevertheless true enough.

to oneself—had not yet been acquired and that the habit of reading verse aloud was usual. A poet would not say 'read my verse,' but 'listen to it.' 'Meaning,' with the Tudor musician, would habitually be associated with the sound of it.) The effect of this attitude towards words is seen not only in the individual musical phrases where the accents normally follow the irregular accents of the spoken word; where the varying lengths of spoken word and syllable are closely followed; and where the melodic shape often tends to follow the rise and fall of speech; but also in the very form of the madrigal, where the balancing of the phrases and sections often, if not always, corresponds approximately to the 'sound-shape' of the verse when read aloud.⁽⁶⁾

Post-madrigalian music (*i.e.*, roughly music of the last three hundred years) is based on the dance, with its measured time and regularly recurring accentuation. The influence of the dance is to be traced not only in the details of the musical phrases but also in their form. The phrases no longer follow the rhythms (I am going to allow myself the word now) of individual groups of words nor the subtle balance of the sound-shape of sentences spoken aloud; they follow instead the regular steps of the dance, and, in their form, the precise and rather obvious shape of the dance as a whole.

Music from the sixteenth century onwards gradually became more self-sufficing, and very soon completely lost its dependence upon words (in the madrigalian sense) for its inspiration. It could think of tunes and manipulate them entirely on its own account. Its notation became more highly organised and more exact; the bar-line was introduced to mark the regular accents, marks of expression became common. The symbols of the notation, if the meaning of the music noted was to be made clear, required almost literal observance. There was no question of the meaning of the words as represented by its sound in speech, influencing the relative values of the symbols; for the meaning was now in the music itself, it had become purely musical meaning.

This change in music—the dance instead of the voice 'calling the tune'—has been described as 'probably as complete a revolution as has ever occurred in the history of any art.'⁽⁷⁾ (I am inclined to think sometimes that music has paid the piper; but that is another matter.) The nature of the rhythmical difficulty for the modern singer of madrigals is patent. He is a three hundred years old son of this revolution and the results of it are in his very bones: and he is

(6) See 'The Form of the Madrigal,' E. J. Dent, *MUSIC AND LETTERS*, July, 1930.

(7) George Dyson: *The New Music*.

asked to sing music, which, if not prerevolutionary, was made at the very beginning of the revolution.

If he is to comply successfully he must by some means or other get rid of his existing rhythmical habits and form new ones: he must adopt a new attitude of mind. How may he best set about the task?

As a beginning he may read Mr. Scott's book and get to know all he can about his subject. But this is not enough, as Mr. Scott would be the first to admit: habits are not formed by knowing. Mr. Scott has suggested the practice of speaking verse aloud. This is indispensable. But it will not be of much avail unless the speaker trains himself to become conscious of the *musical* vitality of the verse as he speaks it—conscious of the way in which the sounds of his speaking are the very meaning of the verse made audible. The speaking must be extremely sensitive to the meaning. The 'rise and fall' must on no account be 'put on': it must be the 'rise and fall' *imposed* by the meaning. The stresses and their relative values must similarly be imposed by the meaning. This is more obviously true: but they must not be exaggerated and the speaker must train himself to hear them (without altering them as a result of hearing them) whilst he is speaking. If the singer goes through this fascinating process assiduously he will acquire one important part of the technique of madrigal singing.

Mr. Scott has also recommended the study of plainsong. He makes rather less of this suggestion than he might have done. Nothing is more likely to assist the formation of the new rhythmical habit than the singing of plainsong; its practice may be strongly recommended. The simplest of the hymns are best for the purpose. The music has little or no accentuation in itself and the accents and varying lengths of sound—the rhythm—are provided by the singer's sense of the meaning of the words.⁽⁸⁾

Equipped with the knowledge and technique thus acquired the modern singer may approach the singing of madrigals with some hope of success. At least there will be less likelihood of his ingrained musical habits forcing their will upon his singing and making it almost impossible for him to sing the music in its appropriate style. He will be more easily able to follow the path which the composer himself has taken. He will not only know, he will feel that the driving force of the music has been for the composer the meaning of the words and he will allow that meaning to be *his* driving force too.

Following the path of the composer in this way gives to the singer a

⁽⁸⁾ The fact that the music was originally for singing to Latin words does not matter. It may make the accentuation and balancing of phrases more difficult, but this may be an advantage from the point of view of acquiring skill.

curious sense that he is not only singing but helping to create. His own thought seems to be taking a share in giving vitality to the music. He feels, moreover, that unless this sense of creating is always present in him the music will have no vitality. And he is right. The musical stuff of madrigals is to our later ears for the most part comparatively dull and it will remain dull unless the performance has the creative vitality which I have been trying to describe.

The unique pleasure which the proper performance of madrigals gives to the listener is due, I think, largely to this vitality. However that may be, I am quite sure that it is the creative feeling in the singer that makes madrigal singing for him so delightful an art.

A warning is called for here. The singing must not be too free. Excessive 'verbal' freedom may result in a flippancy, a glibness even, that would be as far removed from truth (and as hard to bear) as was the stiffness of the old-fashioned, four-square singing. The music of madrigals has a logical and coherent musical meaning which demands satisfaction as such. It is a music which is a peculiarly perfect blend or fusion of spoken sounds and musical sounds; but it is a 'music,' not a kind of plainsong or musical speech. The satisfaction of the claims of this musical meaning will not prove so very difficult for the singer who has fully achieved the necessary new attitude of mind. For it is not so much in the variation of the details of the musical phrases that the effect of allowing the words to be the driving force will appear, as in the forward-moving flow and in the meaningful balance of those phrases as a whole. The extent of the variation from the exact lengths of the musical notes is, in any case, infinitesimal: so small indeed that it can hardly be measured in terms of duration but only in terms of vitality. In other words, the singing will as to detail be sufficiently faithful to the note-values as written. On the other hand, when the singer meets (as he frequently will) with passages in crotchets followed by passages in minims he will not hesitate to allow his sense of the meaning as a whole to force him to take the minims faster in relation to the crotchets than a strict adherence to the notation would justify. In passages where the music changes (as it so often does) from duple to triple time he must be similarly guided. The strict observance of the mathematical relationship between the note values in such changes will as a rule result in ungainliness. Whenever the music is made to sound rhythmically awkward or unbalanced the cause is most likely to be found in a too strict adherence to the notation: for nothing is more true of madrigals than that they are never ungainly, awkward or unbalanced in their rhythm.

Another warning may be necessary. What has been said about words has nothing to do with what is known as word-painting: nor has it anything to do with clearness of enunciation. The beauty

of the sound of individual words will be purely incidental. The singer must not 'paint' words as in modern music where the composer has deliberately provided him with the opportunity to do so. A great deal too much may be made, I think, of the importance, generally, of clearness of enunciation. The clearness should be automatic, as the result of technical skill: it should not be a matter for preoccupation in the act of singing. In madrigals, in fact, one must go so far as to cultivate a habit of under-enunciating in imitative passages in order that the sounds of the consonants (and to some extent of the vowels) may not obscure the musical meaning. After all, the same verbal sentences are so often repeated in the various voice-parts that their meaning in the literary sense is certain enough to be apprehended; and besides, as I have tried to show, the literary connotation of words is not the aspect which chiefly concerned the composers.

The modern singer may be inclined to say that the attitude towards words which has been described is not so very different from his own. He may say that in singing 'later' music he is driven by a sense of the words, he aims at being true to the verbal rhythms, and so on. To show how different in fact his attitude must be, one need only consider what actually happens with later music. The songs of Hugo Wolf will serve the purpose of comparison best because Hugo Wolf is noted for his faithfulness to his poets. What happens is something like this: the musical imagination of the composer is set going by the poem; the accentuation and the 'line' of the musical phrases will follow the accentuation and line of the verbal phrases; the form of the song as a whole, even, will follow (although, as a rule, only in a very general way) the shape of the poem as a whole. But the result will be music that is almost entirely self-sufficing. The result is not 'a blend or fusion of spoken sounds and musical sounds,' as in the madrigal; it is pure music, possessing a complete rhythmic life of its own. The words, having done their work, have been, so to speak, discarded; their life has been, as it were, translated into purely musical life. To sing this music 'by the words' in anything like the way of the madrigal singer, is to run a grave risk of impairing its rhythmical integrity and devitalising it. The driving force for the singer is now, primarily, not the words but the music. The more musical his attitude, the more satisfactory will his performance be. The failure of so many performances of *lieder* is, I think, due to an exaggerated idea of the importance of the words. The listener has a feeling of being cheated of the music owing to the interference of the words.⁽⁹⁾

(9) Is the 'unmusical' listener to any extent responsible for this insistence on the words? Unable to apprehend and obtain satisfaction in the musical meaning he demands the literary meaning: just as the 'unpictorial' looker at a picture, unable to find satisfaction in the pictorial meaning, insists on its 'story.'

If the modern singer is still unconvinced I can only suggest that he should try the experiment of singing a passage from any madrigal⁽¹⁰⁾ of which he does not know the words, to 'lah'; and, similarly, a passage from any song of Hugo Wolf. (The song should be sung with the pianoforte accompaniment—for that, of course, through its harmonies, has an enormous influence on the accentuation; and the madrigal with the requisite number of voices.) The madrigal will sound almost completely lifeless and the song almost completely satisfying.

I have written rather as though madrigals consisted of only one voice part, but everything that has been said applies of course to all the parts equally. Mr. Scott goes so far as to say that

in the performance of his part the Madrigal singer has scarcely ever to consider any other part, or to regulate the expression of his part, *in order that some other part may be shown up*. In fact it may be said, as a general rule, that the less attention he pays to what the other parts are doing, the better. In expressing his part well he has sometimes to assert himself a little more than the others, but the others never have to give way to him. When he seems to yield, it is only because his part gives him no opportunity for making it prominent.

There is much truth in this; but it is, I think, somewhat overstated. It seems to overlook the fact that one part cannot be sung really 'well' unless the singer is conscious of the other parts. A part at any moment will be what it is because of what the other parts have been or are doing, and the 'well'-singing of it will depend on the singer's consciousness of its relationship to the other parts. Moreover, various subtle adjustments (*e.g.*, synchronising the incidence of vowel sounds) are not possible unless one part is alive to the others. Perhaps Mr. Scott's advice may be taken more usefully when there are several singers instead of one to each part. Personally, I think I should feel deprived of a good deal of pleasure if I were to follow it!

There is one matter, the only important one, upon which I am inclined to disagree with Mr. Scott. He tends to put too much faith in the efficacy of expression marks as guides to right performance.

All marks of expression are questionable in that they tend to make the singer depend upon them rather than upon the music in which they are inherent. (In the perfect musical world most of them would not be used at all; after all we do not think of using them with printed words in order to guide a speaker in his delivery of the meaning.) But their use in madrigal music is open to an additional objection.

(10) Not a ballet—the ballets have already the mark of the 'later' music upon them.

The marks are strongly associated with later music and they are liable to induce the singer to sing in the dynamic style of that later music, a style which as we have seen is foreign to the nature of madrigal music. It is difficult to escape the influence of the marks. I myself when I sing, as I do occasionally, from a marked edition, experience a feeling of being cramped; not because the marks are incorrectly chosen or placed, but because the free spirit of the music seems to be confined and weighed down by them. The dynamic life of the music for which they are being used is so much more subtle than that of the music from which they have been borrowed. I know that in practice, especially with choirs, expression marks are said to be convenient. But too much can be made of this and the price paid may well be too high. The early editions of Dr. Fellowes' great work⁽¹¹⁾ are in my opinion the best to use; they contain no marks of expression.

The use of bar-lines in modern editions is easier to defend. Various courses are possible in editions for the use of singers. (1) No bar-lines at all. This is quite unnecessarily inconvenient. The Elizabethan singers, it is true, used unbarred part-books, but there is no evidence as to how often they broke down or how long it took them to get started again. I have no doubt that their standard of performance was much lower than ours; it was, if anything, a supper-table standard; in any case it is not the kind of thing they would be primarily concerned with. They had one great advantage, however; the rhythmical idiom would present no difficulties; they would come to the music as to the manner born, to use the now worn-out phrase of the greatest of their contemporaries: they were prerevolutionary children. (2) Bar-lines to mark the rhythmical accentuation of each part. This course is also very inconvenient. Adopted in score it is confusing to the eye; but that is not its worst fault. The singer would be inclined to accentuate by the bar-lines instead of by his always freshly-felt sense of the 'meaning-accents' of the words. It omits, moreover, any indication of the 'metrical' basis of the music. (3) Bar-lines placed at irregular intervals where all the voice parts 'change the rhythm simultaneously'; with an accent sign > to mark the varying accentuations in each voice part where, as mostly happens, the change is not simultaneous. This compromise is the most convenient course and is the one invented and adopted by Dr. Fellowes. Objections to it are that both the bar-line and the accent-sign are strongly associated with later music. To ask the singer to *remember* that the sign does not mean an increase in force is to set him an almost impossible task. His habit will prove stronger than his memory and as often as not the force will be increased.

(11) *The English Madrigal School*: Edited by E. H. Fellowes, Mus.Doc.

Similarly his bar-line habit will make for a 'first-of-the-bar' accent after the bar-line.⁽¹²⁾

The subject of bar-lines has been discussed in some detail. If the rhythmical idiom of madrigals is their most distinctive feature and the most difficult for the modern singer to appreciate, then its notation must be of great practical importance. But when all has been said it remains true that unless the rhythmic principles underlying the notation have been fully grasped, and unless new rhythmical habits have been formed, the most perfect notational system will be of little avail.

The prevailing spirit of madrigal music is delicate and fragrant; it has, in Mr. Scott's phrase, a 'spring freshness'; it is modest and retiring; infinitely subtle. It is hard to catch and, when caught, easily bruised. When the singer, in the light of his understanding of the true principles, has by patient—I had almost said humble—study, found the 'meaning as a whole' in which this spirit is enshrined, he still 'has more.' He has to allow this meaning to be uttered: he must not interfere with it; he must not, for example, as he sings put his knowledge of the true principles into it; for if he does, the 'spirit' which he has been at such pains to capture will depart in the very moment of his performance.

I have touched on most, I hope, of the more important of the difficulties which are peculiar to the singer of madrigals. I do not pretend to have touched on them all. Many difficulties which are common to all part-music, whether old or new, I have intentionally disregarded: these, together with many others of great concern to part-singers, and indeed to all singers, may be studied with great advantage in the pages of Mr. Scott's book. I cannot do better than end as I began by recommending all who are interested to read it.

CUTHBERT KELLY.

(12) It might have been better to use new signs, e.g., υ instead of the accent and an approximate half bar-line or half wavy line (printed thin) instead of the full bar-line. The υ sign has no musical association and the thin 'half'-lines are much vaguer and less disturbing to the eye (the essence of the matter) than the customary thick full line. The tenacity of the bar-line habit cannot be overestimated. It is through the eye, largely, that the habit has been developed, and it is through the eye (by means of fresh and vaguer signs) that any attempt to reduce its strength must be made.