

REVIEWS



BOOKS

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IAN BARTLETT, WITH ROBERT BRUCE

WILLIAM BOYCE: A TRICENTENARY SOURCEBOOK AND COMPENDIUM

Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011

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Last year, 2011, was the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of William Boyce, and this book was published to mark the event, as its title indicates. It is the work of two scholars who between them have produced most of the significant scholarly studies of the composer since the 1970s; Ian Bartlett wrote the main text and Robert Bruce contributed the ‘Catalogue of Works’. Boyce’s music never entirely passed out of use after his death in 1779. A few anthems continued to be performed by cathedral choirs throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, overlapping with the first revivals of the secular music, including an edition of the A major trio sonata published by Augener in 1894, the *Eight Symphonys*, Op. 2 (1760), edited by Constant Lambert in 1928 and a collection of symphonies taken from court odes and other works edited by Gerald Finzi for Musica Britannica in 1957. For most of the twentieth century Boyce’s best-known works were the Op. 2 symphonies and a posthumous set of *Ten Voluntaries* for organ. This unfortunate but common situation – the revival of an eighteenth-century composer beginning with relatively trivial instrumental works rather than major vocal works – began to be rectified in the 1990s, with a Musica Britannica edition and a recording of the serenata *Solomon* (1743) and subsequent recordings of the short oratorio *David’s Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan* (1736), the masque *Peleus and Thetis* (before 1740), the *Secular Masque* (c1746) and several odes. We now need good editions of all the major vocal works, and in my opinion the consistently high quality of Boyce’s music easily qualifies him for a scholarly collected edition, along the lines of those devoted in recent years to Locatelli, C. P. E. Bach and Geminiani.

This is the first book to be devoted to William Boyce, and it is likely to be the only one for a considerable time, so it is unfortunate that it is seriously flawed in its conception and execution. A basic requirement for a study of this sort is that it should be useful to prospective performers, so it is disappointing that the catalogue of works is so uninformative, despite being described as ‘comprehensive’ in the Preface. Works are only briefly listed by title, with no details of their scorings given and no references to modern editions, making it less useful than the work list in the article on Boyce by the same authors in *Grove Music Online*. Bizarrely, some editions (such as the Musica Britannica volumes or Richard Platt’s excellent Eulenberg edition of the Op. 2 symphonies) do make an appearance, but only because their introductions are listed in the bibliography. It is unhelpful that it is divided into a ‘Boyce Bibliography’ and a ‘General Bibliography’, the former subdivided into ‘Articles’ and ‘University Dissertations’. This makes finding items needlessly complicated and creates anomalies: why, for instance, is the composer’s entry in Thomas Busby’s *Universal Dictionary of Music* (1783) in the ‘General Bibliography’ rather than the ‘Boyce Bibliography’, and why does Peggy Daub’s 1985 dissertation ‘Music at the Court of George II’ appear in both sections?

The organization of the main part of the book is also unfortunate. It takes the form of a documentary biography mostly organized with a chapter for each decade of Boyce’s career, though with an initial chapter covering his life up to 1739 and a concluding one entitled ‘The Legacy from 1780’. As we might expect, the chronological sequence includes biographical material edited from primary sources, but it also includes



discussions of his works. This is workable when they can be securely dated, as in the case of the court odes or most of the theatre works, though works in printed collections are generally discussed under dates of publication rather than composition, and those of unknown date are either ignored or are inserted into the sequence wherever they can be made to fit. Thus the three manuscript trio sonatas are discussed with the published set of 1747, despite the fact that they seem to be rather earlier works; the four *concerti grossi* get lumped together with the Op. 2 symphonies, despite having little in common with them; and all the organ voluntaries are discussed under 'c1785', the probable date of the *Ten Voluntaries*, despite the fact that an eleventh work had appeared in an anthology published around 1780, and that there is a further set of *Twelve Voluntaries* (c1779) that could also be by Boyce. All this goes to show that a single chronological sequence is only feasible for a composer whose works can all, or nearly all, be dated precisely, and this is far from the case with Boyce, given the present state of research. It would have been better to have confined the chronological sequence to biographical matters and to have devoted a chapter to each of the main genres, allowing their source situation, musical style and cultural context to be discussed more coherently and in more detail than the chronological straitjacket allows.

It is also disappointing that the book is produced so shoddily. My copy is already parting company with the binding, the layout is rather inelegant and there are far too many spelling mistakes, typographical errors and inconsistencies of style. Reading through the book one gets the impression that the authors have had little or no help from a copy editor – all too common these days in supposedly scholarly publishing. More importantly, the difference between direct quotation from primary sources and editorial material is often not immediately clear, and the criteria for inclusion are sometimes open to question. It is useful to know, for example, that Boyce subscribed to many publications by others, but they take up far too much room. I would happily trade in the descriptions of them for more information about his manuscripts, and in particular about the surviving performing materials in the Bodleian Library. We have more original sets of parts for Boyce's works than for any other composer working in eighteenth-century England, Handel included, and they contain invaluable information about the size of groups, the identity of original performers and so on. For instance, a description of the original performing materials for the coronation of King George III in 1761 would have been a valuable complement to the material Bartlett prints from newspapers and an eyewitness description. This was an important moment in Boyce's career because he wrote all the anthems for the service in Westminster Abbey except *Zadok the Priest* (which he refused to set, declaring that 'it cannot be more properly set than it has already been by M^r. Handel' (149)). The relevant chapter in Matthias Range's 2008 Oxford dissertation 'Music at British Coronations from James I to Queen Victoria, 1603–1838, a Study and Edition' shows that Bartlett has not included all the surviving documentary material relating to the musical aspects of the coronation. The most important omission is Boyce's fascinating list of timings for each of the anthems, sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury the day before the coronation and now in Lambeth Palace Library along with other correspondence relating to the event. It is one of the most important contemporary sources of information about tempo, since, unlike overall timings of longer works such as *Messiah*, there are no ambiguities about the choice of versions, the question of repeats or whether they include applause.

All in all, this book is a disappointment. Scholars of eighteenth-century English music will need to have it on their shelves, and it is useful to have most (but clearly not all) of the documentary material relating to the composer in a single book. But it is poorly produced, it does not provide the proper study of Boyce's music and its sources that we have been waiting for, and it even fails to provide the essential information about the sources, scorings and editions of his works that is needed by prospective performers when planning concerts and recordings. Boyce deserves better.

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