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978-1-108-06174-2 - A General History of Music from the Earliest Times to the Present: Volume 1

Thomas Busby

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The writer, composer and organist Thomas Busby (1754–1838) is best remembered for his highly entertaining *Concert Room and Orchestra Anecdotes* (1825), which paints a vivid picture of musical life at the time. The son of a coach painter, Busby was originally articled to the composer Jonathan Battishill, but found the experience unrewarding. His compositions (many now lost) include songs, theatre music and oratorios. His literary output included journal articles and monographs, among them *A Grammar of Music* (also reissued in this series) and *A General History of Music*. First published in 1819, this two-volume work proved controversial as it was alleged that Busby had plagiarised the great histories of Burney and Hawkins (also available in the Cambridge Library Collection). However, acknowledging his indebtedness to them, Busby provided a popular interpretation of their work for the general reader. Volume 1 covers the period from the ancient Greeks and Romans to the Renaissance and the invention of printing.

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VOLUME 1

THOMAS BUSBY



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A
GENERAL
HISTORY OF MUSIC,
FROM
THE EARLIEST TIMES TO THE PRESENT;
COMPRISING
THE LIVES
OF
EMINENT COMPOSERS AND MUSICAL WRITERS.
THE WHOLE ACCOMPANIED WITH
NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS, CRITICAL AND ILLUSTRATIVE.

BY THOMAS BUSBY, MUS. DOG.
AUTHOR OF A MUSICAL DICTIONARY, MUSICAL GRAMMAR, TRANSLATION OF LUCRETIVS, &c. &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

London:

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SIMPKIN AND MARSHALL, STATIONERS' COURT.

1819.

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BARNARD AND FARLEY,
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PREFACE.



DESCANTING on the value, or effects, of a particular science, writers seem more subject to the anomaly of over-charging, or under-rating, its peculiar claims to cultivation and patronage, than to any other error. This remark applies with particular force to disquisitions on the properties of Music! Treated by a professed theorist, or a scientific amateur, Harmony and Melody are apt to assume moral and intellectual importance,—to affect to ameliorate the heart, and edify the mind; while, in the estimation of an author unacquainted with their principles, and insensible to their real though limited pretensions, they sink, perhaps, into empty recreation; and, represented by his coldness, as amusements barely rational, appear little worthy of the philosopher's cultivation, or of occupying the leisure hours of the reflecting portions of society.

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An esteemed writer of our own country *, asserts, That Music raises noble sentiments, and fills the mind with great conceptions ; while a classic of a neighbouring nation affirms, That harmony aims but to please the ear, and is qualified only to entertain the idle and effeminate †. But assuredly, neither of these speculatists is perfectly correct. Truth lies between the extremes they maintain. If Music aspires not to the value of ethics, political economy, or natural philosophy, neither does it yield to the beauty of imaginative poetry, or the dignity of the nobler species of architecture. If mellifluous numbers and lively description sooth the sense, and enchant the fancy, and temples and palaces present to us images of symmetry and grandeur, musical composition is qualified to charm our ear, awaken our finest feelings, and elevate the soul.

Sensible to the effects of harmony, and not uninformed upon the subject of its principles, I have easily been induced to devote several months to the history of a science, the progress and powers of which the learned of all ages have not disdained to discuss and develop ; and may be allowed to confess, that the task was undertaken, not without a degree of confidence in the qualifications derived from the uninterrupted study of many years.

* Addison, Spect. N°. 405.

† Fenelon, Treat. on Eloq.

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To some, probably, it will appear problematical, whether, since the public already possessed two English Histories of Music, the present undertaking was necessary : and were the case simply a question of *merit*, it might soon be decided by the admitted claims of the works to which I allude. But when it is recollected, that Dr. Burney's production occupies *four bulky quarto volumes*, and that of Sir John Hawkins *five* ; and when it shall appear, that not only all the requisite points on which those writers touch, but a variety of super-added particulars connected with the more recent state of Music in this and other countries, are included in *two volumes octavo*, the propriety of supplying the lovers and cultivators of the science, with a Musical History upon such a scale, will scarcely fail to be obvious.

Though with two authors before me respectable as those just mentioned, it was natural, if not indispensable, to make some use of the materials afforded by the ample latitude of their matter, and the general justness of their criticism, I have, I hope, been sparing in the appropriation of their ideas, scrupulous in the adoption of their language, and, duly careful not to descend to servile imitation. But while every invasion of the property of Hawkins, and of Burney, whether in their conceptions, or their expressions, is denied, it will not, perhaps, be improper, or unnecessary, to conciliate the reader's candour

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towards my occasional dissensions from their sentiments. The best apology, however, for differing from such precursors, will be deduced from the *meditation* which dictated, and the *independence* which emboldened, criticisms equally free and well considered.

But the present work differs not more in its critical remarks, than in its plan and conduct, from the several musical histories, English and foreign, by which it has been preceded. Designed for the entertainment of the general, as well as intelligence of the curious, reader, it is sparingly encumbered with the dry and unengaging theories of the ancient speculatists; preferring to dwell upon topics, at once more modern, and better calculated to invite, and repay, the amateur's attention, it chiefly devotes its pages to the narration of interesting events, and the investigation and eulogium due to sound science and extraordinary talents.

Nevertheless, the several casts, or species of the Grecian and Roman, Jewish and Christian Music, have been considered; and their various principles laid down and discussed. The characters and powers of the ancient instruments, and the abilities of those who excelled as vocal or instrumental performers, have also been thought too worthy of notice to be neglected, as well as the effects ascribed to the ancient melopœia, and afterwards to such harmonic combinations as were known in the times of the earliest contrapuntists.

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Of the subsequent practical musicians and theoretical writers, the principal have been honourably distinguished, their respective merits examined, and the obligations of the musical science to their industry and talents, patiently ascertained, and faithfully stated. On the more modern masters of eminence, a still closer attention has been bestowed. Their comparative pretensions have been weighed and determined, and the learning and taste of themselves, and of their times, illustrated by a variety of examples.

Though, while cheerfully subscribing to the opinion, That other countries have earned the laurels they wear, I have not slighted the wreaths acquired by England (wreaths, which, cherished as they deserve, will bloom as long as those either of Italy or Germany) yet superlative foreign merit has received the *honours due*. The encomiastic notice taken of a Tallis, an Orlando Gibbons, or a Blow, is balanced by the just praise of an Orlando Lasso, a Gluck, or a Steffani. If to the life and works of the unrivalled Purcell, a distinct and entire chapter has been devoted, the sublime genius of Handel has received equal homage : and Haydn and Mozart, Arne and Arnold, Boyce and Battishill, are the worthy occupiers of three separate chapters.

A full delineation of the latter six composers was, indeed, the more necessary, since by Sir John Hawkins they are not even named ; and when Dr. Burney wrote, their careers were not termi-

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nated. To *one* of these ornaments of my time and country, two reasons have urged my particular attention; the magnitude of his deserts, and the slight, I may say, ungenerous, mention made of his merits by the last of our two musical historians. *Dr. Arne* was the possessor of talents of the first order; and an English cotemporary, (his pupil too!) by weaving for him a crown, would have accumulated honours for himself*.

When I first surveyed my accumulated materials, so vast and diversified a mass, native and exotic, presented itself to my attention, that some degree of perseverance was necessary, to examine, and some judgment requisite, to discriminate—to separate, and to arrange—to approve, and to select, the minor authors most worthy of appearing in company with examples of superior merit. Every admitted master could not be a diamond of the first lustre: but in a work, from its *compass*, needfully choice in its subjects, it would be expected that each should contribute to the general lustre of the casket.

To make this selection was, at least, a task of some trouble. To preserve the judgment unperplexed—to reject and to adopt by system; in one instance to resist the influence of an over-estimated name—to subdue, in another, the prejudice exist-

* Burney's three years' tuition under the composer of *Comus*, was, it seems, as insufficient to infuse into his mind the amiable liberality, as the practical taste, of his illustrious master.

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ing against obsolete excellence; to decide by the desert, not the reputation, of an author;—to give connexion and order to prominent incidents, and judiciously omit whatever would rather serve to surcharge, than to adorn, a concise though not uncomprehensive history—required, perhaps, not only much patience, but some little ability. To the Italian and the English opera, a sedulous and delicate attention was required; and modern German, and English, church composition, demanded an equally careful consideration. These have been duly regarded, as well as the general state of Music in England, from its earliest cultivation among us, to the present time.

Thus, though for general convenience, the subject matter of this undertaking has been limited to the size in which it is here presented, (and consequently offered to the public at a price much more moderate than that of the works which have been named) truth and justice will sanction my saying, that nothing material to the reader's information has been omitted; nothing forgotten by which needful knowledge might be communicated, or tasteful curiosity gratified; nothing overlooked, of a nature calculated to instruct, or to amuse.

Further, to promote these eligible purposes, annotations have been freely and copiously subjoined. While some of these convey collateral narrative, or suggestions elucidatory of the main

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text, others, it is presumed, will inform, as critical illustrations, or entertain, as curious anecdotes, or appropriate comments.

How far these several, and desirable objects, have really been attained, remains for the public judgment to determine. In palliation of the defects of his work, the author can only plead the haste in which it has necessarily been produced. Formerly announced in his *Dictionary of Music**, and lately in his *Musical Grammar*†, the long-promised History has been too frequently inquired after, not to have rendered those now concerned in its publication, anxious for its speedy appearance; and almost the whole of the matter has been written *currente calamo*, and sent to press the moment it was committed to paper.

If in a work produced under such circumstances, the style should not be found perfectly equal; if, in some instances, the phraseology should appear prolix, and in others too succinct; if the sentiment be not always strictly just, nor the diction uniformly select, candour will concede something to the urgency of the case, and criticism divide its regret between the deficiencies of the author, and the disadvantages with which he had to contend.

Chiswick, July, 1819.

* Published by Sir Richard Phillips.

† Printed for Walker, and G. and W. B. Whittaker.

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