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WHY IS THE "GREAT *IN NOMINE*" GREAT?

From the Performer's Perspective

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This article begins a thread where performers share what is special about a piece- from the player's perspective. The goal is to share our enthusiasm and to uncover the theoretical and musical causes for greatness in our repertoire.
This article covers the background and construction of Bull's "great in nomine" *before turning to meantone and its expressive uses in the piece.*

Bull began his musical career as a choir boy at the Chapel Royal (from 1572), and was later organist at Hereford Cathedral (from 1582), a gentleman sworn to the Chapel Royal (1585/6), and organist at the Chapel Royal (1591). He earned a Bmus (Oxon) and Doctorate (Cantab), and was first Gresham Chair of Music in London from 1596-1607. It is likely that the portrait of 1589 residing at the Faculty of Music in Oxford commemorates his doctorate.[1]

His teacher was William Blithemann, an organist at the Chapel Royal until his death in 1591.[2] He would have known Christopher Tye, William Byrd, and Giles Farnaby, among others.[3]

He resigned as Chair in 1607 (because the post could only be held by a bachelor) to marry the woman he had impregnated. A fuller picture of his character was given by the archbishop, who said of him, "The man hath more music than honesty and is as famous for marring of virginity as he is for fingering of organs and virginals."[4] In 1613, after a scandal with the High Commission, he fled to Brussels. A previous visit[5] in 1601 had given him the opportunity to visit Wolfenbüttel, Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam and to meet Sweelinck,[6] and he was taken into the service of Archduke Albert Philip.[7] Though Bull gave out that he feared persecution for Catholicism, James I was dissatisfied, and engineered his dismissal in 1614.[8]

He wrote to the Catholic Cathedral in Antwerp and secured a part time post as organist in 1617, and received alms, claiming the status of exile. He was confirmed in this appointment, and during this period the "Antwerp portrait" was painted.[9]

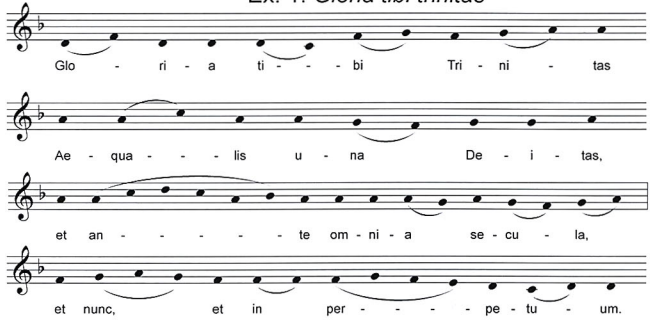
His music includes mostly keyboard works- variations both secular and religious, and fantasias, including works published in *Parthenia*.[10] Some Dutch tunes are the basis for works, but dating is problematic. Copyists of his work include Tomkins, Tallis, Cosyn, Tregian (*Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*), unknown in Vienna, and à Messaus (Flemish).[11]

Main Features

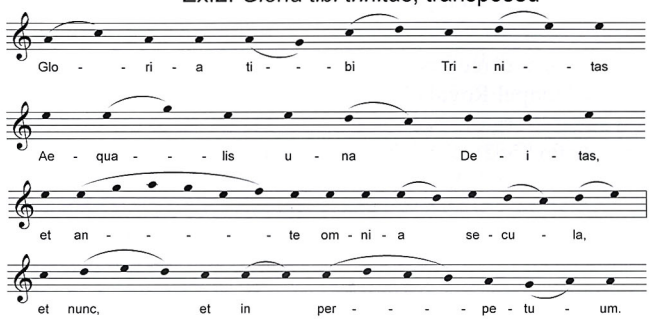
John Bull's "great" *in nomine* in a minor, K. 28 in 9/4 has been called "the great *in nomine*."[12] It is distinguished from the other eleven by Bull because:

- It has a changing metre each bar 4/4 4/4 3/4, with the final section in 6/4 6/4 9/8
- It displays "architectural" grandness of scale
- Its *cantus firmus* is in the bass all the way through
- It shows off techniques of composition and of performance
- Players respect the piece for what it can teach them

Ex. 1: *Gloria tibi trinitas*



Ex.2: *Gloria tibi trinitas*, transposed



Apel notes that the "succession of irregular blocks" in "this peculiar scheme helps to raise this work above others of its type."[13]

Names

Before looking at Bull's keyboard work, it may be useful to clarify its name, which is a misnomer, or one might say mis*nomine*! Even a casual observer will realize that the chant in Ex.1[14] does not include the text "*in nomine.*"

- John Taverner wrote a mass based on the plainchant *Gloria tibi trinitas.*

- The plainchant has its own text meant for First Vespers after Trinity. Taverner used the melody and set the mass text to it in a polyphonic setting, using the *cantus firmus* composition method.

- Later, many composers focused on the *Benedictus* of Taverner's mass, ("Benedictus qui venit *in nomine* Domini") as a model for their own compositions.

- Some composers borrowed the entire polyphonic setting, but many simply borrowed the plainchant *gloria tibi trinitas* and added other counterpoint around it; instead of using the name of the plainchant for their works, they often referred mistakenly to the text of the mass.

- Settings of *in nomines* became popular n England around 1550, after the relative popularity of *Felix namque* settings. The Mulliner book has seven settings for organ, including six by Blitheman [Bull's teacher] often correctly titled "*Gloria tibi trinitas.*" Even more were written for viols.[15] It is possible that *in nomine* settings were vehicles for composers to show their ability to control musical materials; they also provided a structure for large scale works on a *cantus firmus.*

From chant to keyboard work: musical architecture and motif

A look at the chant (Ex. 1) reveals that it is in Dorian (with D final), and is Mode 1, with the *ambitus* (or range) being mostly above the final, and only dipping down to the C below the final. A is the reciting tone.

A translation of the plainchant:

Glory to you, O Trinity,
Equally one God
And before all generations
And now, and forever

If one maps the *Gloria tibi trinitas* text to Bull's *in nomine*, it fits perfectly; one simply allows two semibreves and a dotted minim for each note of the chant. This is the *cantus planus* style of setting—a subtype of *cantus firmus* setting, where each note of the chant receives an equal length in the bass of the new composition.[16]

Bull's setting uses an "A" final rather than "D", and for ease, Ex. 2 includes it in transposition, and pitches will be referred to with an A final. It may useful to have the score while reading this—- the edition referred to here is *Musica Britannica*- each 4/4 bar has a separate bar number.[17]

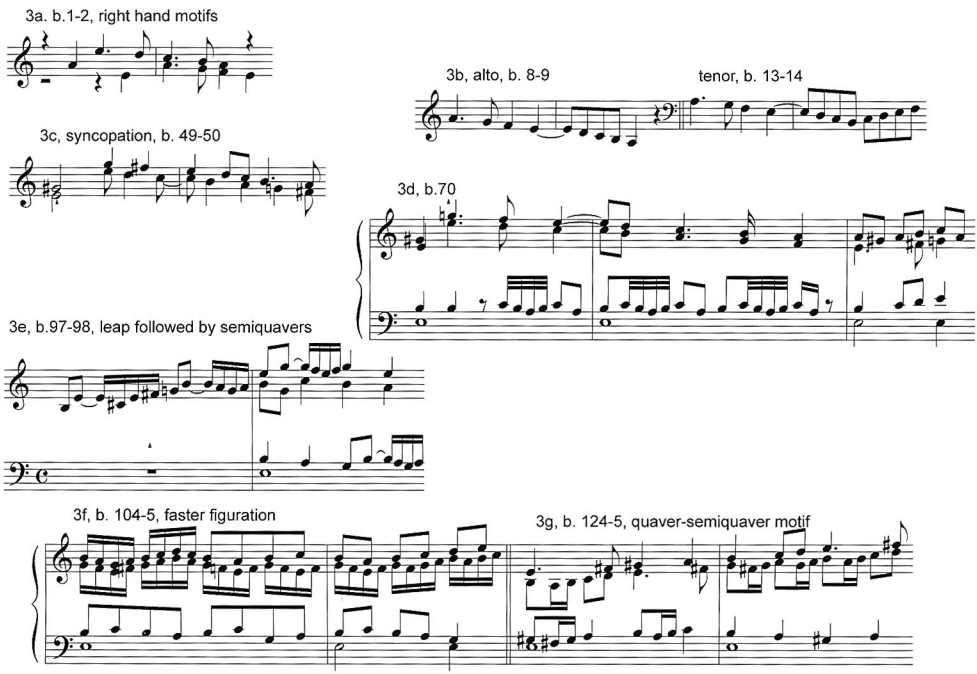
The work begins with a leap up a fifth which then descends, filling in the space of the leap; the leaps are from A to E, then C to G; other iterations of this theme include leaps of fourths. (See Ex. 3a and following for motives).

Added to this motive are four-note patterns, as in alto, b. 9, and tenor, b. 14, which give a circular motion. Around b. 34 and especially b. 42, this intensifies with more parallel sixths and parallel thirds. (See Ex. 3b)

At b. 49 the downward line is varied as a chain of syncopated rhythms (in alto and tenor, b. 49, soprano, b. 52, again in alto, b.55, etc.) giving the piece more a sense of leaning forward. (See Ex. 3c)

The arrival at D major, b. 61 seems an arrival point, with the syncopation extending through longer lines; the syncopation continues the motive function as at b.49. The top note of each chain is approached by a leap up a fourth, a sixth, or even a seventh.

At the word "ante", b. 70 the cantus firmus has a melisma (EGAGEFE). The



motives set with the chant include leaps approached by brisk, ornamental "turns;" the right hand has the pitches GFE in one bar, a sort of "diminution" of the longer chant tune (See Ex. 3). The leaps are intervals of thirds (b.70) and sixths (b. 73). B. 79 functions as did b. 61—as an arrival point. From this bar, tension is not released but builds up until b. 85 where F is reached. (See Ex. 3d).

The move to the flattened 6th degree in the chant is marked by a striking arrival at F (Major) in the setting, b. 85 (see Ex. 4a). A listener would mark this as extraordinary, because it is the first time that the pitch Bb is heard, and it is covered a markedly different harmonic place. It is about the half way point through the bar count (85/160), but considering that the last 21 bars are accelerated due to the change in meter, it is more likely two thirds of the way through.

A large scale Phrygian cadential motion occurs as the bass returns to E (with G# present). From b.97 (the beginning of the word "*omnia*") there is the sense that the conclusion is beginning. A new motivic/rhythmic impulse begins in the soprano line. (See Ex. 3e) The leap of a fourth and "turn" followed by a leap of a third is distinct, short, sequenced, and introduced in different voices in rapid succession . The figuration intensifies; for the player, or someone looking at the score, this is fairly obvious; the listener will hear semiquavers and many thirds, more plucking, and heightened rhythmic activity.

In b. 104, (see Ex. 3f.) the resonance is substantially increased with consonant stepwise thirds, and intensity increases with passagework comprised of parallel thirds, which move stepwise and in circular motion.

At b. 124, a new rhythmic motif emerges; one quaver and two semiquavers, are used to decorate a rising line of four notes, as in tenor, b. 124, and alto, b. 125. (See Ex. 3g)

As the work nears "*et in perpetuum*," it gradually slows (b.136-142, Ex. 4b). At the word "et" (b. 130), the frenetic activity of the last passage is slowed and controlled, and a greater resonance is possible, with more closely spaced notes that can be overheld. The final section begins with *perpetuum* in a C chord (b. 136-142), perhaps signifying the perpetuity and perfection of the Trinity, and marking the change of proportion. An obvious gloss is that the use of triple meter at the end, both in the large (6/4) and in the small (9/8) is a musical representation of the Trinity. Some of the groupings, as at

b. 153 (See Ex. 4c) create a delightful rhythmic ambiguity; in this case, the right hand creates a duple feel against the regular left hand triplets. The final section with passages up down gives a sense that the piece might carry on longer after the last chord is struck.

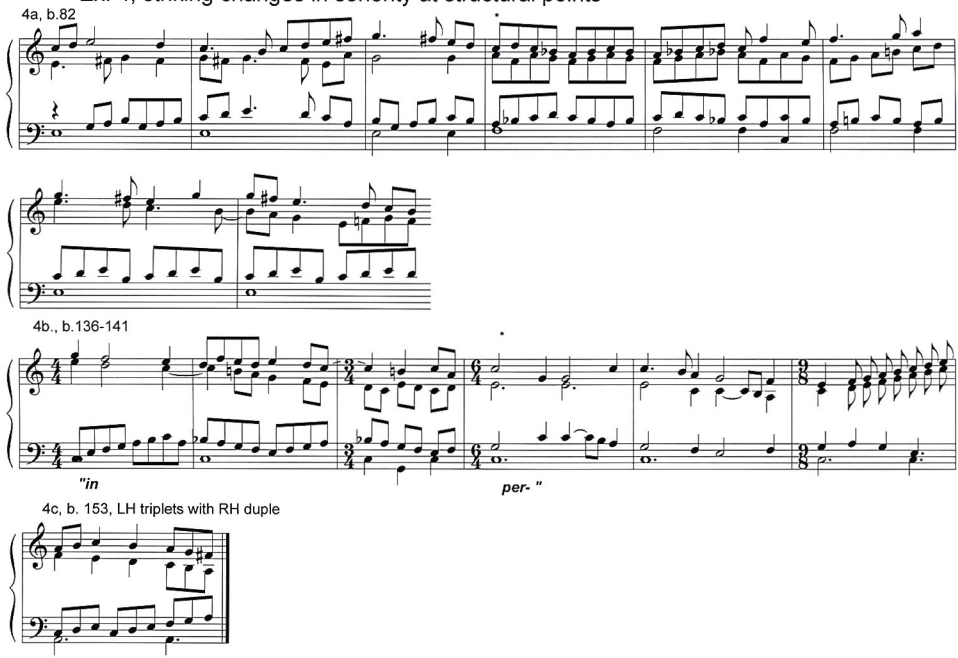
From an economy of means --one plainchant melody, leaps of fifth and fourths, which descend, filling in the empty space, motives which have a strong rhythmic element but similar melody element, and gradually diminution-like rhythmic decoration of the melodies --one gets the sense of increased intensity and involvement. Bull creates moments of relaxation and arrival on important or interesting harmonies, such as F, b. 85, E with C# present (b. 97, Ex. 3e), and C Major (b. 130 and following).

The increasing presence of decoration and rhythmic activity at smaller and yet smaller levels allows for virtuosity with a purpose. The entire "architecture" is continually present and is supported by the carving, filigree, and illumination of small detail. This parallels a long-term religious practice that is illuminated by short, regular devotions such as Vespers.

Historical background and meaning

The Sarum rite was abolished in 1547, and there were many uses of the *in nomine* in the 1560-70's.[18] (Might the emphasis on the Trinity have had stronger meaning in the religious politics of the time? This was a world where Byrd, White, Tallis and others witnessed

Ex. 4, striking changes in sonority at structural points *



tremendous shifts in the English religious practice. We do know that Latin was continued in the Chapel Royal as well as other more conservative establishments,[19] so perhaps this use of Latin was simply a nod to tradition.

It is known that Bull fled England in 1613. There are many possibilities ranging from moral indiscretion,[20] Catholic recusancy, and problems with the High Commission Court . In 1601, Bull was ill enough to require a substitute at Gresham College, yet travelled to the Continent during that period. This leaves a tantalizing gap in our knowledge.[21]

The work creates an impressive structure upon the foundation of the chant; the tune might well have been a way for the player to meditate slowly on one word or syllable at a time, as mystics had done with other prayers. While devotional works may be more appropriate on the organ, expressions of devotion at the virginal were certainly not uncommon.

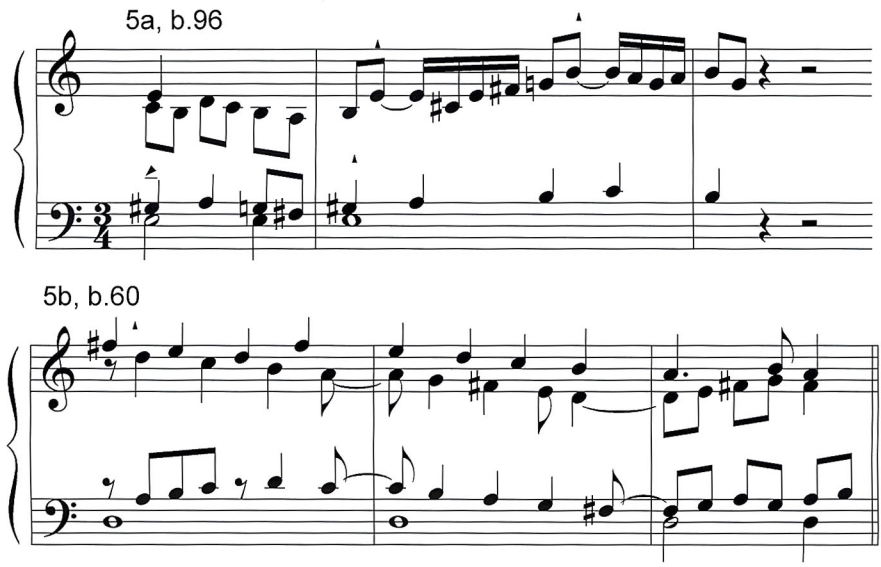
Meantone as an expressive device:
As performers know, awareness is half the battle- if a performer glibly passes through an extremely dissonant passage, we as listeners are bothered because it either sounds like a mistake, or the painful passage isn't quite painful *enough*.

Kris Verlhest, who teaches summer courses at the Vleeshuis Museum and regularly at Leuven in Belgium, teaches a special way of using meantone to accentuate the meaning of the dissonances, and to bring out lines.[22]

Many harpsichordists will recognize that a measurable increase in dynamic can be achieved by striking the key faster. Because there is a greater speed, the same force results in greater energy coming to bear on the plectrum. (A close look at levers and this all makes perfect sense). By striking faster, one also achieves a slight increase in pitch at the beginning of the note.

In other sources one can find graphs showing that the sound of a harpsichord is strong at first, and decays very quickly both in volume and in pitch --and instrumentalists are often admonished when tuning to listen only to the beginning of a harpsichord's pluck.

Ex. 5- using meantone to heighten/relax tension



Musical examples of using meantone:
In Ex. 3d, note the right hand change from G# to G natural.

in b. 70. It is desirable to make the G natural a bit higher by striking faster. There is a small arrow above the note that can be higher.

In Ex. 5a, RH b. 97, the E (which is tuned pure to C) and the B (which is tuned pure to G) are naturally lower in meantone, but the player can heighten the tension by striking fast, and thereby raising the pitch. In the left hand of b. 96, the phrase is ending and the pitches descend. The G# is naturally low, since it is tuned pure to the E, but the player can ensure that the G# does not receive any extra energy; in b. 97 the player can strike it more quickly, giving a higher pitch and more energy.

In b. 61 (Ex. 5b, the F# which begins the line is naturally low in meantone, being tuned pure to D. The player can choose to make this a bit higher to accentuate tension at the beginning of the phrase changing to relaxation.

There are numerous places where the player can decide to increase or to relax tension; these will be individual choices, but these are just a few examples of contexts where it makes sense. It is hoped that these practical ideas will find their way into music lessons, studios, and performances.

1 Thurston Dart, 'Calendar of the Life of John Bull,' John Bull. Keyboard Music :I, vol. 14, *Musica Britannica. A National Collection of Music.* Transcr. and ed. John Steele & Francis Cameron with introductory material by Thurston Dart. Published for The Royal Musical Association. (London: Stainer & Bell, 1960), xxii.

2 Susi Jeans, "John Bull," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., v.4, ed. Stanley Sadie. (London and New York: Macmillan, 2001), p.. 584.

3 Dart, *MB*, pp. xxii-ii.

4 Jeans, *NG*, 585.

5 Jeans , *NG*, 585

6 *MB*, xxiii.

7 *NG*, 584.

8 *MB*, xxiv

9 *MB*,.xxv.

10 *MB*, xxiv.

11 *MB*, xv.

12 Willi Apel, *The History of Keyboard Music to 1700*. translated and revised by Hans Tischler. (Indiana, London: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 305.

13 Apel, 305.

14 Plainchant text, *Breviarium ad usum Sarum* 1882.

15 *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2d ed., rev. and enl. Ed. Willi Apel. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 412

16 Apel, 304.

17 The edition used is *John Bull Keyboard Music*, ed. John Steele and Francis Cameron. *Musica Britannica*, (London: Stainer & Bell, 1960), Vol. 14, 86-90.

18 Howard M. Brown, *Music in the Renaissance*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall: 1976), 247.

19 Brown, 250.

20 Apel, 303.

21 John Harley, *William Byrd: Gentleman of the Chapel Royal*, (Aldershot: Scolar Press,1999), 134-5.

22 The author had a conversation with Kris Verlhest in August 2002 during a course at the Vleeshuis Museum, Antwerp.