

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Recording the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book

Pieter-Jan Belder

Over the last decade I have devoted quite some time to studying, practising and recording one of the greatest manuscripts of the early 17th century, the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book. This manuscript, which is of rather enigmatic provenance, was actually one of the main reasons for me embarking upon studying the harpsichord, along of course with the works of J. S. Bach. Around the age of thirteen I discovered a music library in Rotterdam, where I went to school. This library, which was actually full of outdated editions, was a true paradise for me, and it must have been around this time that I had the two volumes of the Dover reprint of the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book in my hands for the first time. My interest in the early English repertoire had already been triggered by a radio broadcast of a concert by the King's Singers, and a L'Oiseau Lyre recording by Colin Tilney of Dowland harpsichord works did the rest. It was another four years before I took my first harpsichord lessons, when I started at the Royal Conservatium of The Hague as a recorder student. Indeed, in my first harpsichord lesson I played Bach (the Three-part Ricercare from *Das Musikalisches Opfer*) and Farnaby's arrangement of Dowland's *Lachrimae*. According to later comments by my teacher Everdien Daanje, it sounded horrible! With my next teacher, Bob van Asperen, the first piece I had to study was the *Pavan & Galliard Pb. Tr.* by William Byrd, and inspired by van Asperen's great John Bull recording I studied lots of Bull, Byrd, Tomkins and Sweelinck. At that time early fingering was not a concern in van Asperen's lessons. When I recorded my Sweelinck disc in the early 1990s I started seriously studying early fingering and learned to enjoy the rhetorical qualities of this kind of *applicatio*. I started dreaming of making a nice overview recording of the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, and after being turned down many times by various labels, Brilliant Classics allowed me to make such an anthology. The financial support of one of my students, Gerhard Boogaard, an amateur harpsichord builder trained by Martin Skowroneck, was decisive in order for Brilliant to give it a chance. The production was rather successful, which made the label decide to carry on with the project. When I recorded the first volume I choose only my favourite pieces, although Bull's *Walsingham* won out over Byrd's version, because I thought it would be good that the first piece in the manuscript was included in such an anthology.



(Illus. 1) Recording on the Ruckers double

The question arose after this first anthology as to how to proceed. Recording 555 sonatas by Scarlatti was relatively easy: one starts with the first sonata, and plays until the last piece. Since I think the ordering of these sonatas was more or less chronological, this seemed the best solution. In the new project, however, chronology was very difficult to establish and after the release of that first volume it was not possible to follow the ordering of the manuscript. I therefore decided to concentrate on volumes devoted to certain composers. As there are four composers very extensively represented in the FVB, Bull, Byrd, Farnaby and Philips, the choice for the next volume was easy: I devoted it completely to William Byrd. There was however another issue to resolve. On Volume 1 I used the instruments which I had at home, apart from a Skowroneck 8'4' Ruckers-type instrument. Basically I used the same instruments as in my Scarlatti recording, a double manual harpsichord after Ruckers by Cornelis Bom (illus.1) and a Italian harpsichord by the same builder. The Italian instrument has a 4' as well as the two standard 8' registers and was actually quite suitable for the project. I had my doubts about the Ruckers copy. Since Byrd obviously had instruments with a short octave, I decided that a Ruckers instrument 8'4' would do very well. On the first disc I combined the Italian Bom and an instrument by my student and former sponsor in Ruckers style. For the second disc I had the great opportunity to use an original spinet virginal by Ruckers, owned by Giuseppe Accardi and restored by Sebastian Nuñez. This fragile looking instrument, with its beautiful soft sound, was an absolute marvel. Short-octave instruments were, however, soon outdated in England, and therefore I had an instrument built in Ruckers style, 8'4' with a broken octave, which made it possible to perform a piece like Peter Philips' *Pavana and Galliarda Dolorosa* (FVB Nos.80-81, ex.1).

(Ex. 1) Short octave, Peter Philips, *Pavana Dolorosa*, bars 80-83

The next volume was dedicated to Philips, one of the 'continental' virginalists, since he spent most of his life outside England. He fled the country as a result of his Catholic convictions (in fact, most of the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book composers were Catholic). Bull left England for the same reason, according to his letter to the Antwerp city council. The true reason, however, he fled wasn't mentioned in that letter for obvious reasons - when trying to become organist of the local cathedral one does not mention the sex scandal which made you leave England for fear of prosecution.

William Byrd was a recusant (a Catholic who didn't take part in the Protestant liturgy of the Church of England), and although he was tolerated, he got in trouble several times for that reason. Recusancy is also an issue concerning the provenance of the manuscript. Already in 1899, when Fuller Maitland and Barclay Squire published the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book for Breitkopf and Härtel,¹ they came up with the hypothesis that Francis Tregian, son of the notorious recusant Francis Tregian the Elder, was the compiler of the manuscript. Tregian had been imprisoned in the Fleet prison for debt: these debts were the result of attempts to buy back the lands which were confiscated from the family by the Crown for religious reasons. The Fleet prison, where Tregian was held until his death, was a special prison for the lucky few who had the means to pay for their own apartments, and some even had family lives. When Tregian died he left hundreds of books, which he had in prison. Would he have had the time though to copy one extensive collection such as the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book? In exactly the same hand as the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book are three more large manuscripts, which would also have been copied by him. For that reason the attribution to Tregian has been questioned over and over again. Ruby Reid Thompson made a case for the possibility that the book was created in a copyists' workshop, since she was convinced the handwriting was by different scribes. But of course this thesis has been challenged again,² and Tregian's name does pop up in the manuscript, as 'Tregian' or at least the letters 'Tr.'. Maybe I am a romantic, but I am attached to the idea of the attribution to Tregian. With all these Catholic connotations of the manuscript I, as a properly raised orthodox reformed boy, might have had problems

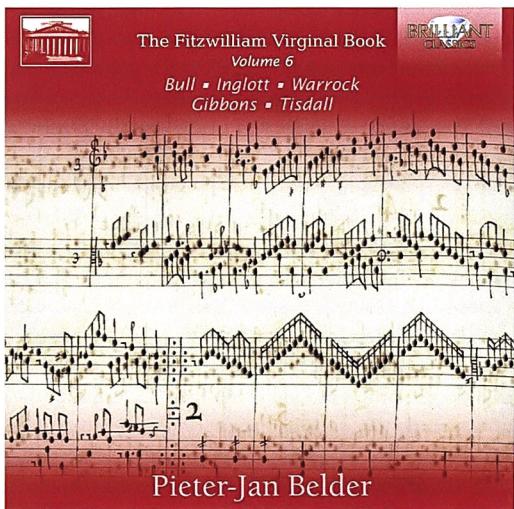
of conscience with the manuscript. Fortunately I had no idea at the time.

As I mentioned, volume 3 was dedicated to Peter Philips. I combined his works with those by Sweelinck, one of the few foreign composer in the manuscript. Sweelinck and Philips were acquainted, and they even met when Philips paid Sweelinck a visit in Amsterdam. Sweelinck on his part reworked one of Philip's pavans, 'The first one Philips made'. After his visit to Amsterdam, Philips was arrested on his way back to Antwerp. In Middelburg, where he visited the harpsichord builder Grauwels, Philips became ill and stayed there for two weeks. He was however arrested on charges of conspiring against Elisabeth I, and was transported to The Hague and kept imprisoned in the Gevangenpoort. At the trial he was eventually acquitted, but new studies suggest that Philips was perhaps not as innocent as he wanted the judges to believe. But perhaps he was involved in the conspiracy without knowing exactly how. It seems however strange to travel to Antwerp through Middelburg, which was also a major port and trading centre with England. The *Pavana and Galliarda Dolorosa*, perhaps Philips' best known piece, was composed in prison, and it might very well be possible that this prison was a Dutch jail.

The next volume was dedicated to Dr John Bull and Giles Farnaby, and a bigger contrast in personality and background of these two composers is difficult to imagine. First of all, while Bull was proud of his academic title, Farnaby was a joiner (and perhaps instrument builder) rather than a professional musician. Although Farnaby is often considered an amateur composer, this is not true. In fact he graduated as Bachelor of Music in Oxford on the same day as John Bull. The two composers probably knew each other and perhaps Farnaby had even lessons from Bull, as can be surmised due to similarities in their use of diminution technique. Technically some of the works are very demanding indeed, and, even if it is difficult to imagine a joiner would be able to play such complicated repertoire, it seems likely he could. Bull, known for his capricious way of living, must have been quite a different character to Farnaby, who was of Puritan background. All but one of Farnaby's keyboard works are to be found in the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book

and a close relationship between him and the compiler is therefore evident to me. Perhaps Farnaby did some maintainance work on Tregian's instrument, if he had one in the Fleet prison? Again, there are lots of question marks here.

During the recording process the search for good instruments continued. In 2014 I acquired a Ruckers (Colmar) copy by Titus Crijnen which somehow suited Bull's music very well. The next two volumes were dedicated to those composers which were present in the manuscript by a few works only. Works by Mundy, Morley, Gibbons and Tomkins, all of them great names, found their way into the Fitzwilliam manuscript. Again my small Ruckers harpsichord did great service, along with my new Crijnen. I was lucky however to come across a fabulous instrument by Adlam Burnett (1980) which I revised with new stringing, voicing and damping. For me, this instrument is the best vehicle for the repertoire. Based on the Edinburgh Ruckers double (1638), but with aligned keyboards, it suits the repertoire beautifully. The instrument has three 8' ranks, one on the lower keyboard and two on the upper. The dogleg system makes it possible to play two 8' together. The 4' register is from the player's viewpoint the furthest register. It plucks the string rather towards the middle of the string, which results in a very round Ruckers 4' sound. Instruments with 8'8'4' were known in England, as the famous 1579 Theeuwes claviorgan in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, proves.



(Illus. 2) Complete Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, volume 6

The first CD of the sixth volume (illus.2) was again devoted to John Bull, with various anonymous composers.

Some of these latter compositions are quite obviously made by amateur composers. The scope of them is usually small, the voice-leading clumsy, and they are not always very imaginative. The first anonymous *Galliard* (No.21), however, could easily be by Bull and the attribution missed by the scribe. I could very well imagine that the scribe (Tregian?) himself is responsible for most of the pieces which were not attributed. Some of the anonymous pieces seem to be simplifications of more difficult pieces. In the case of Tomkins' *Barofostus' Dreame* (No.131), the references in the anonymous *Barofostus' Dreame* setting (No.18) are quite obvious. The second disc included pieces by Warrock, Galeazzo, Tisdale, Ingloff, Marchant, Oldfield and Blitheman. Some of these works sound fine on a muselar, which I borrowed from my harpsichord-building student Gerhard Boogaard.

The final Volume VII consists of three discs; Byrd and Farnaby are the central composers here, along with several anonymous compositions. The Adlam Burnett Ruckers played a key role here, together with a muselar by Theo de Haas which was given to me by conductor Kenneth Montgomery.

There are several issues to solve when recording such a collection. A big issue for me has been, and still is, the way the ornaments which are given in the manuscript are to be performed. Even after fifteen discs I am still doubting about main-note or upper-note trills. We have to accept that we don't have clear evidence on this issue. Most of my colleagues are quite strict in applying main note trills for the double strokes. Although this is convincing most of the time, it sometimes leaves me unsatisfied. Especially when coming from above in rapid passages, the main note trills do not articulate very well and I rather use an upper-note trill instead. Even less is known about the single stroke ornament. Is it a mordent, is it a *schleifer*? Quite often the double stroke trill also works very well as a mordent. In the end I decided on the spot which ornament was suitable for each actual situation. Since all written out trills start on the upper note, obviously it wasn't considered unusual to use this type of trill.

Fingering issues also arose. I like to use early fingering, but again, using it all the time in every situation seems a bit excessive. Also, sometimes there are places where (especially in Bull) the standard 34 34 34 or 32 32 32 patterns do not apply. Anyone who has tried to play the variations by Bull on Dowland's *Piper's Galliard* (No.183) will know it is impossible to use the two-by-two paired fingering system at the speed required. It seems quite obvious Bull used a somewhat more developed system.

But again, we don't know; the music has to decide. At some point in my life I realized being right is not a goal in itself, but to be convincing is more important than being right. That is also true with early fingering. Apart from that, it is important to discuss the effect use of early fingering wants to achieve: is the aim a pairwise articulation which is so often heard in performances, or should it rather have a timing effect? In other words, are the fingers in charge or is the music; are the 'obvious' effects the goal or is it necessary to fight these effects? I have the impression that early fingering is a system which is designed for a non legato, detached way of playing. So rather than let the hand dictate the articulation it is necessary to correct these flaws. As in modern fingering, which aims at an equal, legato way of playing, one has to learn to control the desired effects. After thirty years of playing early fingering in English and Dutch repertoire,

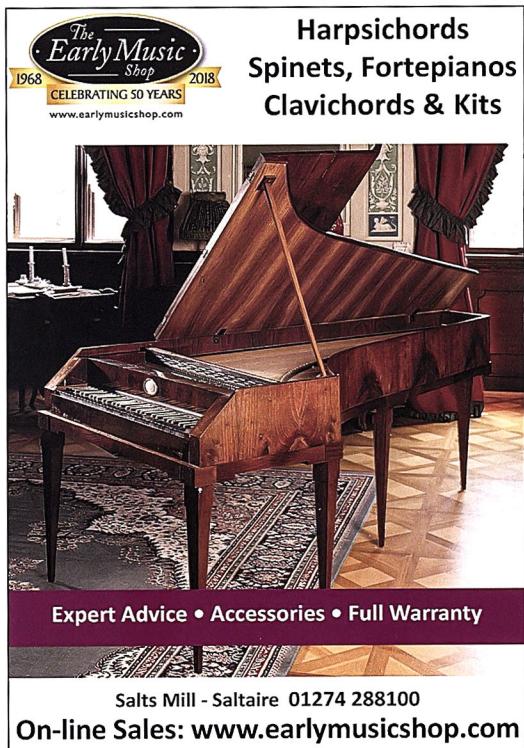
I still fight the flaws of this system (or my inability to make it sound good enough), and in some situations one has to be practical. Especially, downward scales in the right hand are difficult to get to sound right for me, and sometimes, I admit, I cheated. But in general early fingering has a great rhetorical quality which is impossible to imitate with modern fingering, and is therefore the obvious thing to do in spite of some of the difficulties one has to conquer.

It has seemed more difficult to part from this now-completed project than other projects I have done, such as the complete Scarlatti, and I am very much looking forward to new recordings planned for the future, including the remainder of Byrd's keyboard music, by far the greatest of them all.

Pieter-Jan Belder studied at the Royal Conservatorium of The Hague and at the Amsterdam Sweelinck Conservatorium, and has a busy career as harpsichordist, clavichord player, organist, fortepianist and recorder player. He has made over 130 CD recordings, including the complete Scarlatti keyboard sonatas, the complete keyboard works of Rameau and Soler, the complete Fitzwilliam Virginal Book and many discs of Bach. He has also recorded Bach, Corelli, Purcell and Telemann with his ensemble Musica Amphion. <https://www.pieterjanbelder.nl>

Endnotes

1. J. A. Fuller Maitland and William Barclay Squire (eds), *The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* (Leipzig, 1899).
2. See Ruby Reid Thompson, 'The "Tregian" manuscripts: a study of their compilation', *British Library Journal*, xviii (1992) and 'Francis Tregian the Younger as Music Copyist: A Legend and an Alternative View', *Music and Letters*, lxxii/1 (2001), pp.1-31; and David J. Smith, 'A Legend?: Francis Tregian the Younger as Music Copyist', *The Musical Times*, cxxxiii, No.1879 (Summer 2002), pp.7-16 and 'Seven solutions for seven problems: the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book' in David J. Smith (ed), *Aspects of Early English Keyboard Music before c.1630* (Abingdon, 2019), pp.163-183.



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