Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*, 1597

Special Collections featured item for August 2005 by Tim Eggington (former Rare Books Librarian)

Morley, Thomas, 1557 or 1558-1602. *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* London: Peter Short dwelling on Breedstreet hill at the signe of the Starre, 1597

Item held in the Reserve Collection, University of Reading Library Special Collections

This month’s featured item is the Library’s first edition of Thomas Morley’s *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (1597). As well as being the most famous musical treatise in the English language this work constitutes a prime example of the encroaching influence of Italianate culture over Elizabethan England and the role publishing had in advancing this.

Morley’s father is thought to have been a verger at Norwich Cathedral where at some point Thomas Morley was a chorister, becoming Choirmaster and Organist by 1583. It was from these beginnings that Morley became one of the most revered figures in English Music.
As a composer Morley was a key figure in that golden period of English music occurring during the reign of Elizabeth I when a school of talented composers raised English music to a height unsurpassed before or since. The most important of these composers was Morley’s teacher William Byrd (c. 1540-1623) to whom A Plaine and Easie Introduction is dedicated[see below]. Arguably England’s greatest ever composer, Byrd is famed for his learned style, most evident in his sacred music. In this Byrd forged a characteristically English version of the highly complex Renaissance musical language, thus reflecting an insularity typical of English cultural life in his day. As a composer Morley mastered this grave and erudite style, in a number of serious and highly regarded sacred works.
In his *A Plaine and Easie Introduction* Morley included a number of vocal compositions. *Dentes tui sicut greges* is a motet (a sacred equivalent to the madrigal) for 5 voices (Cantus, Quintus, Altus, Tenor, Basis) printed in “table-book” format (Two parts are printed upside down and two sideways). If the volume is laid on a table, each of the five singers can stand around it and see their part [see below].

However, Morley’s principal contribution was in transforming English music by assimilating Italian influences. Inspired by the prevalent Italianate Renaissance ethos, Morley achieved this principally through his appropriation of an Italian form of part-song known as the madrigal. In the works of the greatest Italian composers the madrigal had become the most important musical genre of the late Renaissance. Morley propagated the madrigal in England by publishing both Italian examples and his own versions of the genre. Through the latter Morley established an ‘English Madrigal’ which represented a highly influential model for a whole generation of English composers. Well known examples of Morley’s madrigals included *Sing We and Chant it, April is in My Mistris Face,* and *Now is the Month of Maying.* Morley’s role in this cultural shift is evident not only through his work as composer, editor and publisher, but also as a theorist.

In *A Plaine and Easie Introduction* Morley explained and promoted all the Italian musical forms along with their underlying aesthetic premises. The treatise is divided into three sections, with the more complex matters consigned to *Annotations* at the end. A remarkable feature of the work is the degree to which Morley was able to display his immense learning throughout, without seriously detracting from his instructive purpose. This was to train the average and ignorant music lover to the point where he could compose a madrigal or motet in Italian Renaissance style.

In his treatise Morley deploys a pleasing, if curious literary style fashioned in the form of a dialogue between a Master (Morley) and two pupils, Philomathes and his brother Polymathes. Interacting in a manner to be expected of a novel rather than a music treatise, the brothers study, discuss and mock each other whilst the Master patiently instructs and
encourages. Through these means Morley provides a highly effective elucidation of even the most complex aspects of 16th century music theory.

Perche tormi il cor mio by Thomas Morley. An Italian madrigal composed for 4 voices, printed in table-book format. Madrigal...is a kinde of musicke made upon songs and sonnets...to men of understanding most delightfull

Here the Master explains to Philomathes the musical scale -
Throughout, Morley includes musical examples and diagrams through which he brings his subject to life.

Here Morley illustrates a particularly learned form of composition known as canon. In this different parts take up the same subject one after another, either at the same or at a different pitch, in strict imitation. It was popular to present canons in the form of puzzles requiring ‘resolution’. Following this example, Morley goes on to demonstrate how a 4 part composition can be deduced from this cross.

In addition to explaining practical musicianship Morley sought to equate practical music of his day with speculative theoretical traditions dating back to ancient Greece. Here Morley illustrates the mathematical proportions fundamental to the two octave diatonic scale using ancient Greek note names.
In the table below Morley alludes to the Pythagorean notion of the “harmony of the spheres”. According to classical accounts, the planets made music as they travelled, each sounding a different pitch of the major scale, according to its distance from the earth. Thus it had been thought that the numerical relationships of the major scale manifested a principal underlying the make-up of the universe.

Ancient traditions of musical theory saw the notion of ‘proportion’ as central to both time and pitch in music. This illustration shows how the proportion 6:4:3 can result in the intervals between C, G and C an octave higher.

Morley never allows theoretical complexity to obscure the fundamental objective of music, a point which the pupil Philomathes makes through the following observation: As for musick, the principal thing we seek in it, is to delight the eare, which cannot so perfectly be done in these hard proportions, as otherwise.
The owner of the Reading University copy

A notable feature of Reading’s copy of Morley’s treatise is an inscription revealing it to have been owned by the 18th century theorist, organist and composer Marmaduke Overend of Isleworth (d. 1790).

A pupil of the composer William Boyce, Overend was one of a group of English 18th century musicians who combined a fascination for ancient Greek musical theory with a taste for ‘Ancient music’ by which they meant music of the previous 200 years. Although the notion of playing or listening to ‘early music’ was unusual at that time, these figures sought through these pursuits to define the principles upon which music in its highest manifestations had been founded. Through this they hoped to counter what they perceived to be the commercialisation and triviality of popular concert life at that time. To people such as Overend, Morley’s treatise was revered as a manifestation of the theoretical principles upon which the music of England’s greatest composers had been founded.

References

• Brett, Philip: 'Morley, Thomas', Grove Music Online ed. L.Macy [Accessed 26/07/05]
• Foster, Michael W., 'Morley, Thomas (b. 1556/7, d. in or after 1602)' Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. [Accessed 26/07/2005]
• Morley, Thomas, A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musick, ed R.A. Harman , 2nd ed rev. 1963
• Kerman, Joseph, The Elizabethan madrigal: a comparative study, 1962
• Roche, Jerome, The madrigal, 1972