WILLIAM BOYCE

Symphonies I-VIII

NEVILLE MARRINER

The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

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WILLIAM BOYCE

Symphonies I-VIII

The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

directed by

NEVILLE MARRINER

Side One		Side Two	
Symphony No. 1 in B flat major	7:30	Symphony No. 5 in D major	8:00
Symphony No. 3 in C major	6:11	Symphony No. 2 in A major	6:02
Symphony No. 7 in B flat major	10:02	Symphony No. 6 in F major	6:36
Symphony No. 4 in F major	6:26	Symphony No. 8 in D minor	10:56

By the time the eight symphonies were published (1760), Burney's "worthy old friend" Dr. William Boyce (1711-79) had attained a position of eminence and honour among English musicians. He held the post of Composer to the Chapel Royal (from 1736), and he was also one of the Chapel's organists. Receiving his Doctorate in music at Cambridge (1749), he then took office as Master of the King's Music (1755-59). His reverence for the old masters of English church music, which was encouraged by his teacher Maurice Greene, resulted in his completing Greene's projected collection of English Cathedral Music, the first volume of which was published in 1760.

While these posts required him to compose numerous anthems, and odes for solemn and festive occasions, he did not confine himself to such productions. To attain popularity as well as respect, it was necessary to write for the theatre and the pleasure gardens of Vauxhall and Ranelagh. Accordingly, between 1747 and 1760, Boyce employed his talents in composing masques, entertainments and incidental music to plays. Burney records this activity, mentioning that "Mr. Arne and Mr. Boyce were frequently concurrents at the theatres."

Vocal music was considered by most composers to be of paramount importance "the finest instrumental Music" being regarded as "an imitation of the vocal . . ." (Avison). It is not therefore surprising that some instrumental forms originated as introductions and adornments to vocal works. The symphony is one such form, having initially had the same function as the overture, with which it was interchangeable. Both the origin of the symphony, and the confusion in terminology are reflected in the history of many mid-eighteenth century symphonies, including those of Boyce and Arne. In 1760, Walsh published a set of "Eight symphonys (sic) in eight parts. Six for violins, hoboys, or German flutes, and two for violins, french horns and trumpets, with a bass for violoncello and harpsicord (sic) . . ." by Boyce, which were taken mainly from his overtures to odes, masques and incidental music. Arne's publication, also largely based on theatre music, was entitled "Eight Overtures".

At least one reason for the separate publication of these orchestral works may be found in the following comment by Avison in the preface to his edition in score of twenty-six of his own concerti (1758):

"When we consider the utility of full-music for ir truments, both in public and private concerts, and the essential variety which it gives to those elegant entertainments; it is somewhat to be regretted that so few composers have employed their talents in this extensive branch of the art."

Eighteenth century newspaper advertisements and subscribers' lists demonstrate the growth of musical societies and orchestral concerts towards the mid-century, and it is possibly to meet their requirements that works like the Boyce symphonies were published.

Burney's description of Boyce's church music as possessing an "original and sterling merit", and a "strength, clearness and facility", may well be applied to the symphonies. It is these qualities which must have appealed to a wider audience than would have been touched by the latest fashions in music. There is much variety to be found in them, ranging from the delicate beauty of the aria-like slow movement of Symphony I, to the brilliant and vigorous first movement of Symphony V. Thematic, textural and dynamic contrasts are also in evidence within a movement. For example, the straightforward opening theme of Symphony IV (1st. movement), is followed by a relaxed and lyrical phrase (like that which interrupts the severe dotted rhythms of the beginning of Symphony VI). Then comes a sudden outburst of repeated semi-quavers in all parts, the whole resembling Vivaldi in character and change of mood.

As would be expected of music originally conceived for the theatre, the fugal movements are not without their passages of effect. Strict contrapuntal procedure is often abandoned in order to add to the force of a climax. The most usual device is that of repeated semi-quavers, or another equally agitated figuration in the strings, coloured by the sustained harmonies of the wind. Such writing is found in the fugue of Symphony V, and followed by a powerful unison statement of the fugue subject. The magnificence of this effect may well have earned Handel's approval, as he was reputed to have remarked that the English "must be roused a little roughly, and are not of a cast to be easily worked upon by delicacies."

Boyce's style is equally striking and varied in the dance movements. There is the somewhat severe 'vivace' of Symphony III, and the Gavotta from Symphony VIII has an intense quality, which is aided by the asperity of the violins' double appoggiature. Then in complete contrast is the Minuetto of Symphony V, a work of almost Scarlattian vivacity.

The forms of the dance movements are also varied, and include a rondeau (Gavot, Symphony IV), and a ritornello movement (Symphony I, 3rd movement). First movements are of a more substantial scale. Those of Symphonies III and V-VIII are based, more or less strictly, on the French overture, while the others are binary in appearance, though with recapitulatory elements. The recapitulation generally takes the form of a summary of preceding themes, occasionally with some additional figurations, and a harmonic twist away from the tonic, before the final cadence.

'Development' in these works usually means harmonic and motivic intensification. In Symphony V this is accomplished by overlapping a series of sequential repetitions of a cadential motive from the fugue subject. The harmonic rhythm quickens as the cadences dissolve into each other. In Symphony VII, however, the attention is held by the constant uncertainty of tonal direction, which is aided by the relentless triplet movement and the unchanging harmonic rhythm of much of the piece.

Also carefully calculated in its detail is Boyce's scoring. He clearly endorsed Avison's suggestion that the composer "minutely observe the different Qualities of the Instruments", particularly in his treatment of wind instruments. Apart from those moveme s where the melodic lines of all instruments are dictated by th ecial characteristics of the trumpets or horns, the wind are not required to imitate the string figurations, but to colour the texture. They are used to emphasise a cadence, to point phrases and exaggerate contrasted material. They provide rhythmic punctuation, or add weight or brilliance to an animated string passage by sustaining the harmonies. (To claim that the sustained wind passages of the early symphonies rendered the continuo harpsichord redundant would be inaccurate. Anyone who has heard a harpsichord in even a small ensemble will realise that its effect is not primarily harmonic, but rhythmic.) An unusual example of individual tone colour is found in the Vivace from Symphony III. It is in two parts, the violins in unison, being doubled at the octave by a bassoon, with the cello and continuo supplying the bass.

Kate Eckersley

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Recorded in St. John's, Smith Square, London in 1976

Recording Producer: Chris Hazell
Recording Engineers: Stan Goodall and Martin Atkinson

Cover illustration: An extensive view of Westminster from Lambeth. This painting is attributed to Canaletto but other sources indicate the painter to be Antonio Joli. On the extreme left of the picture can be seen the towers of St. John's, Smith Square, the location for this recording.

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