

BOOK REVIEW

THE SCIENCE OF MUSICKE

Christopher D. S. Field and Benjamin Wardhaugh (eds), *John Birchensha: writings on music*. Ashgate, Farnham, 2010. Pp. vi + 331, £65.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-0-7546-6213-6.

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To be remembered to posterity, a musician had better be a composer, and a talented one at that. Second choice would be a theorist, preferably a published one, and trailing distantly in historical terms come 'performer' and 'teacher'. The name of John Birchensha (ca. 1605–?1681) is not well known even to present-day musicologists working on the seventeenth century for the reason that he made little mark as composer or performer, and has come down to us only as a teacher (Samuel Pepys was a pupil in 1662) and unpublished theorist. Had his planned comprehensive treatise 'Syntagma musicæ' ever seen the light of day he would undoubtedly have merited more than a footnote in musical history. However, despite soliciting subscriptions, and with a publication date of 1675 announced, the great work never appeared, and now seems to survive only in fragmentary manuscript form.

There are two principal ways in which Birchensha has a claim on posterity: first, his invention of a method that would enable even the untutored to compose 'correctly' according to certain rules ('True as to the exact rules of art, but without much harmonie' was the view of John Evelyn); and second, his involvement with the Royal Society in the 1660s and 1670s. The first

we can dismiss as inevitably of little artistic value (one wonders whether he knew of the 'Arca musarythmica', a composing cabinet described and illustrated in Athanasius Kircher's *Musurgia Universalis* of 1650), but Birchensha's specifically scientific interest in music is much more unusual and interesting. In an age when the thousand-year old treatise of Boethius, *De institutione musica*, was still current, music lagged far behind many other subjects in being examined with any intellectual rigour. His treatise of ca. 1664 entitled *A Compendious Discourse of the Principles of the Practicall & Mathematicall Partes of Musick* marks him out as giving some notion of equality to both theory and practice. That the manuscript was presented to Robert Boyle also says something of its author's desire to seriously engage the finest minds of the age with the theory of music. This treatise also shows familiarity with scientific method, being laid out in a systematic way that is atypical of other English musical writings of the period.

The present volume gathers together Birchensha's writings, together with extensive commentary by editors Christopher D. S. Field and Benjamin Wardhaugh, in a surprisingly substantial volume of nearly 350 pages. The material includes manuscript and printed works, letters, minutes and

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material from notebooks, forming an extensive record of Birchensha's interests; we can measure their completeness against a synopsis of 'Syntagma musicæ' that he made for the Royal Society in February 1675/6.

Birchensha's technical discussions are extensive, and include a 'Grand scale' table describing 63 different pitches; his discussions of temperament include impressive-looking mathematical calculations, but they are rendered impractical by his use of the Pythagorean tuning system, which was unusable in the music of his period. Birchensha's tendency here and elsewhere was to privilege theory over practice, and his deficiencies in the latter were demonstrated embarrassingly at a meeting of the Royal Society on 10 August 1664,

when it was discovered that he was unable to distinguish by ear a difference of about a quarter of a semitone on a monochord.

The present volume seems likely to be sufficient to satisfy any possible interest in Birchensha for many years to come. The impression it leaves is of a musician caught up in the scientific excitement of the age, a period during which the young Royal Society was flourishing, but whose musical and intellectual skills fell far short of the hugely ambitious projects he undertook. Expertly edited and generously annotated, *John Birchensha: writings on music* illuminates a previously obscure corner of seventeenth-century English music history, and is to be warmly commended.