Morris and Early Music: the Shaw/Dolmetsch Connection

Andrew Heywood

In her recent article: 'Morris and Music', Lesley Baker has demonstrated that contrary to prevailing impressions, Morris did in fact, enjoy music, was musical, and even undertook organised musical activity in the form of plainsong; singing in Oxford in the 1850s. Baker makes the point that, like most of us “Morris reacted favourably to certain forms of music, and unfavourably to others.” True as this is, I feel that there is more to be said. In this article I shall argue that Morris's view of, and attitude to, music was part and parcel of his approach to Victorian society and its cultural productions in general. These he disliked, in a consistent way which stemmed from his own political and artistic views and sensibilities. Morris's response to music is conditioned by those same factors.

Perhaps more importantly, I shall suggest that Morris influenced the beginnings of what would now be called the revival of interest in 'early music'. The practice of early music may be defined as the study of music and performance of past periods (particularly though by no means exclusively that of the pre-classical periods) with a view to realising such music in historically authentic performance style and on the appropriate instruments of the time. Morris, I believe, was influential in two main
ways. Firstly, he challenged Victorian evolutionary ideology and its consequent inability to see the past in its own terms, and thus helped to change the intellectual climate, which in turn began to make possible a positive re-evaluation of the music of the past. Secondly, his acquaintanceship with George Bernard Shaw and Arnold Dolmetsch, both key figures in the development of changed attitudes to old music, gave Morris a direct influence during the early days of the early music revival, which had positive results. This article will not exhaustively cover this subject. What it can do, however, is indicate areas for future research – particularly on Morris’s relationship with Dolmetsch – and make some contribution to the task of seeing Morris ‘in the round’ in terms of his overall influence.

That Morris could be moved by choral music – probably that of a previous age – is suggested in the famous first letter to his sister Emma, which he wrote to her from Marlborough in April 1849. This letter shows Morris already able to appreciate the details of choral performance and to conceive of different realisations of the same work. Morris’s joining a plain-song society at Oxford along with Burne-Jones and others is attested by Mackail. Similarly his appreciation of choral music in a historic Gothic setting is illustrated by letters from his tour of northern France in 1855, notably on 10th August 1855 to Cormell Price about a visit to Rouen: “We were disappointed in one thing, however, we had expected Vespers every afternoon. We found they were only sung in that diocese on Saturday and Sunday. And weren’t they sung, just. Of my word! on the Sunday especially, when a great deal of the psalms were sung to the Peregrine tone, and then, didn’t they sing the hymns?”

That vocal and choral music from the medieval past were able to move Morris in later life also, is evidenced by a vivid passage in A Dream of John Ball where Morris evokes the atmosphere of medieval England: “And he fell to singing in a clear voice, for he was a young man, and to a sweet wild melody, one of those ballads which in an incomplete and degraded form you have read perhaps ... The men all listened eagerly and at times took up as a refrain a couplet at the end of a stanza with their strong and rough, but not unmusical voices. As they sang a picture of the wild-woods passed by me, as they were indeed, no park-like dainty glades and lawns, but rough and tangled thicket and bare waste and heath ...” And again a page later: “Then through the open window came the sound of another song, gradually swelling as though sung by men on the march. This time the melody was a piece of the plain-song of the church, familiar enough to me to bring back to my mind the great arches of some cathedral in France and the canons singing in the choir”. This is clearly written by someone who is moved by music and to whom music matters. It is also a passage displaying a real attempt to place music within a historical perspective in terms of its realisation and its associations.

The attitude of Morris to instrumental music is less easy to pin down, yet also more significant, in that it indicates his criteria of musical judgment. Morris did not play an instrument and his attitude was critical of those of his own day. Aymer Vallance, an early biographer, states that “conventional instruments conventionally handled his soul abhorred”, and Vallance himself suggests that Morris would wait outside cathedrals to avoid hearing the organ. In ‘Labour and Pleasure versus Labour and Sorrow’ Morris says of furnishing a house: “Now unless we are musical and need a piano (in which case, as far as beauty is concerned, we are in a bad way), that is quite all we want”. It is perhaps already possible to suggest that Morris’s objection to the
organ may not have been to the instrument itself, though he may have been aware of some of the barbarities inflicted in the name of restoration, but to the diet of Stanford, Parry and their contemporaries which the Victorian organ so often played or accompanied. Similarly, Morris's objection to the piano probably had more to do with the latter's symbolisation of Victorian domestic taste and its inseparable links to nineteenth-century amateur musical production. This interpretation is supported by an anecdote from William de Morgan, on his first visit to the Firm, in Red Lion Square: "I chiefly recollect his dressing himself in vestments and playing on a regal, to illustrate points in connection with stained glass". It is intriguing to speculate how much Morris knew about the regal (a small medieval and Renaissance portable reed organ) and where he might have obtained one in that distinctly non-musicological age. The impression is, nevertheless, that Morris was prepared to take this instrument seriously enough to attempt a credible representation of its use in stained glass. This in itself was untypical – church restoration has destroyed much evidence about old instruments contained in glass, stone, and wood; it also indicates that Morris was prepared to invest an old instrument with sufficient importance to justify the care and attention to detail which he expended on his better-known subjects. In fact a regal or portative organ appeared in the window of St. John the Evangelist, Torquay the following year, and instruments featured consistently in Morris and Co. stained glass throughout the lifetime of Morris. According to Peter Stansky, Jane Morris kept a harpsichord which Arnold Dolmetsch tuned for her; although this does not prove that Morris himself liked the harpsichord, the fact that he wished for virginals on his deathbed (discussed later) combines with this information to reinforce the view that while Morris was critical of the instruments associated with Victorian music-making, he was appreciative of those linked to the music of earlier periods.

Morris's view of history would inevitably make him critical of the attitudes prevalent amongst those who made music for the Victorian middle and upper classes. For Morris, Victorian society was not the culmination of thousands of years of 'progress'. The past could not be seen simply as an imperfect preparation for the present – indeed it could be better than the present in important respects – and should be examined as a distinct complex of social and economic relationships and not simply 'compared' to the present. Victorian music very much reflected the prevailing self-image of the age. Music became a mass celebration of a self-confident society; the middle classes packed into venues such as the Royal Albert Hall for spectacles such as Mendelssohn's Elijah, while popular songs such as 'Jingo' by G.W. Hunt (1877) summed up an aggressive patriotism: "We don't want to fight but by jingo if we do, ... The Russians shall not have Constantinople". Morris was at this time engaging in his first political campaign, opposing the Balkan war, and he must have been painfully aware of this memorable ditty.

In the Victorian age, music of the past was treated, in the main, as of merely antiquarian interest, with a few 'great' exceptions being made for such composers as Handel and Mozart. These were 'improved' by re-orchestration and by performance by ever larger forces. Old instruments were seen as inferior precursors of their more 'efficient' and powerful modern counterparts, while the performance-practice of the past was dismissed as primitive. Morris had already applied his alternative approach to the past in politics, design and in his attitude to the restoration of old buildings; his connection with, and influence on, George Bernard Shaw and Arnold Dolmetsch
was to provide a catalyst for a fresh examination of the music of the past and its performance.

By the time the first biographies of Morris came to be written, there was a perception that Morris had a case to answer as far as musical appreciation was concerned. In his 1897 biography Aymer Valliance referred critically to the fact that “several persons who professed to know have taken upon themselves to assure the public that William Morris was not musical.” One is left to wonder who these persons were; meanwhile, significantly, Valliance draws on an extended citation by George Bernard Shaw as a rejoinder: “as a matter of fact he had a perfect ear, a most musical singing voice, and so fine a sense of beauty in sound (as in everything else) that he could not endure the clatter of the piano forte or the squalling and shouting of the average singer. When I told him that the Amsterdam choir, brought over here by M. de Lange, had discovered the secret of the beauty of Medieval music, and sang it with surpassing excellence, he was full of regret for having missed it; and the viol concerts of M. Dolmetsch pleased him greatly. Indeed, once, during his illness, when M. Dolmetsch played him some really beautiful music on a really beautiful instrument, he was quite overcome by it.” In this passage Shaw perceptively makes the distinction between Morris’s attitude to the music of his day, and his delight in earlier music properly played; a distinction which would probably have been lost on most of Valliance’s nineteenth-century readers, but one to which we shall return. The passage also introduces for the first time in a published biography one story which recurs in subsequent publications; that of Arnold Dolmetsch’s visit to Morris’s death-bed to play a pavan and galliard by William Byrd, using a pair of virginals owned by Dolmetsch. (This instrument still exists in playing condition in a private collection).

The reason why Valliance should have chosen Shaw as an authority in respect of Morris’s musicality is important. It is well known that in the 1880s and '90s, when he knew Morris, Shaw was a luminary of the Fabians and an increasingly successful playwright. It is less well known that he was a witty and effective music critic. In order to supplement his income, Shaw drew on his extensive musical knowledge to produce criticism for a number of publications including The World and The Star. Shaw’s admiration for Morris lasted throughout his life and his books and voluminous correspondence abound with references to and quotations from Morris, including numerous assertions of Morris’s musicality. As late as 1944 he was to write: “Morris when he was dying, was moved to tears by old music that was not banged at him from steel-framed concert grands, but played as it was intended to be played. I can testify that he could sing perfectly in tune.” As a critic, Shaw championed the performance of early music, notably by Arnold Dolmetsch, with whom he was acquainted. He also took a critical look at contemporary performance of early music by established performers. In both these endeavours, the influence of a radical approach to music history is obvious: “... before playing a suite of pieces by Matthew Locke, Mr. Dolmetsch had been lucky enough to get hold of an old copy with the fingering marked; and he improved the occasion by describing the XVII century keyboard technique, which was virtually the same as that rediscovered by the above-mentioned critic, and which produced what Mr. Dolmetsch happily described as the ‘winglike’ action of the player’s hand as we see it painted in old pictures of St. Cecilia and other celestial musicians.” Shaw here is a generation ahead of his time in his appreciation of Dolmetsch’s researches. Sometimes, Shaw makes what
he sees as the intellectual connection between Morris and the reappraisal of early music explicit:

... there is going to be a great awakening of the purely musical conscience by men like Arnold Dolmetsch, who sits down with a beautiful old clavichord before him, and makes a still more beautiful new one with his own hands instead of reading books by Wolzogen on Wagner. That clavichord will start just such a reform in musical instruments as William Morris started in domestic furniture. It is noteworthy, by the way, that Morris, whose ear, as I can testify from personal observation, is as good as any musician's, and whose powers as poet, artist and craftsman have made him famous, hates the pianoforte, and is evidently affected by modern music much as he is affected by early Victorian furniture. He will not go to an ordinary concert; but he will confess to a strong temptation to try his hand at making fiddles; and he has been seen at one of Dolmetsch's viol concerts apparently enjoying himself. Probably he will not make the fiddles; but Dolmetsch will make more clavichords; ... Fourth you will have, concurrently with the movement in instrument-making and interacting powerfully with it, a revival of the best of the beautiful music composed before the opera came in the XVIII century...\(^\text{17}\)

Or again: "The fact is, we want some genuine artist to take up the work of producing fine instruments, just as Mr. William Morris has taken up the work of producing beautiful printed books. The instrument-makers will never do it, because all their efforts are aimed at better intonation, greater facility of execution, and perfect smoothness of tone. Now smoothness of tone is all very well in its way; but the question remains, what sort of tone?"\(^\text{18}\). The influence of Morris upon Shaw is unquestionable; that Shaw functioned as an important source of moral support and favourable publicity for Dolmetsch and others is also clear.

Born in 1858, Arnold Dolmetsch became perhaps the most significant musicologist and maker plus performer on early instruments, until the Second World War. As a young man, Dolmetsch settled in London where he collected old instruments and studied music and performance practice of the pre-classical era. Encouraged by Morris and others he began to make instruments and at the same time to develop a unique series of concerts in which vocal and instrumental music of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries was performed on lutes, viols and keyboard instruments played by Dolmetsch together with his family and supporters. He also published musicological works and produced modern editions of old music; in many ways he resembled Morris in his remarkable breadth of ability and in his pioneering depth of vision.

Dolmetsch and Morris would probably have met through the Art Workers Guild of which Morris was the most prominent member, becoming president in 1892. Morris attended Dolmetsch concerts from 1894, encouraged by Burne-Jones. Dolmetsch seems to have rented a workshop from the Art Workers Guild when the latter was at Barnards Inn\(^\text{19}\). Morris is known to have encouraged Dolmetsch to build his first harpsichord; the famous ‘green harpsichord’ which was exhibited at the Arts and Crafts exhibition of 1896. In 1897 Dolmetsch made a clavichord for Margaret Mackail, the daughter of Burne-Jones who decorated the instrument.
Further evidence of the developing personal relationship between Morris and Dolmetsch during the 1890s, is provided by the meeting arranged between Morris, Dolmetsch and Burne-Jones on 8th January 1894 to discuss the possibility that the Kelmscott Press would publish an edition of the British Museum manuscript known as Henry VIII's music book, containing 109 songs and instrumental pieces. That the project was viewed seriously is suggested by an item in the Musical Times of 1st March 1894 which refers to a report that: “His majesty’s compositions are to be published, explained and illustrated respectively by Messrs. Dolmetsch, Hollis (i.e. Morris) and Burne-Jones. Some little pecuniary difficulty at present bars the way – perhaps also there may arise a further “little difficulty” of deciding “the precise locality” where Henry VIII begins and his music-master leaves off”.

Though the project was never realised, presumably because of Morris’s declining health, the audacity of such a planned excursion into music printing is impressive. In the event the important collection was not published in full until 1962 by Musica Britannica.

Dolmetsch himself summed up his debt to Morris much later:

So far, William Morris, our leader, had not heard any of this music. He did not go to concerts. Burne-Jones had taken him to recitals and orchestral concerts, but, however much he tried, he who had mastered so many arts, remained impervious to music. It was not his fault, however, but that of the music which had been offered to him; his direct fundamental genius could not be interested in the conventionalities and display of executive ability that had nearly driven poetry out of music. One memorable day in 1894 Burne-Jones brought Morris to one of my old English performances in Dulwich. He understood this music at once, and his emotion was so strong that he was moved to tears! He had found the lost Art! He heard plenty of it henceforth, and on his deathbed summoned me to Kelmscott House, to let him hear once more the music he loved.

A sort of informal club had come to exist in London, containing all the poets and creative geniuses then alive; William Morris, Selwyn Image, Herbert Horne, Arthur Symons, W. Yeats, Swinburne, Sturge Moore, Laurence Binyon and others were my friends. I spent much time in their company. Their ideas filled my mind, and I became capable of illustrating their words with sympathetic music, or rather of crystallising the latent music enshrined in them.

Even allowing for Dolmetsch’s overstatement of the extent to which he awakened Morris’s musical sensibilities, this is eloquent testimony indeed, and illustrates the extent to which an examination of the influence of Morris on Arnold Dolmetsch shows the significant, if indirect, contribution made by William Morris in a wholly unexpected area of activity. Interestingly, the relationship between Dolmetsch and the Morris family was close enough to survive the death of William Morris. In May 1898 Dolmetsch wrote to May Morris: “I am pleased that you are coming at (sic) my next concert, which will be of special interest. I enclose a ticket for a good seat.”

None of this shows that Morris was himself a fine musician, or that he undertook serious musicological work, though we may speculate on where his abandoned project with Henry VIII's manuscript might have led him. What it does show, however, is that Morris influenced attitudes to music and musicology in a significant way, and that his sensitivity to music was consistent with his general approach to his own society and to the past.
NOTES

9 Mackail, Vol. I, Ch. VII.
20 British Museum. Add. Ms. 31922.
21 ‘Mr. Dolmetsch’s Recitals’ in *The Musical Times*, March 1st 1894.