

## WILLIAM CROFT (1678-1727)

Address given at the Annual General Meeting, 15 July 1978

by WATKINS SHAW

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When it was first known that we were to have the privilege of holding this meeting in these beautiful and historic surroundings, the immediate thought of the Executive Committee was to have an address about the most famous musician ever to be connected with the Royal Hospital, that is to say, Charles Burney, celebrated historian of music and writer, who was appointed organist of this Chapel in 1783 by the last act of patronage of Edmund Burke before he finally quitted office.

Burney's career is of much interest, and his personality fascinating; and not only do we still read his writings for pleasure, but we continue to draw on the legacy which he left us as a historian. In these walls, which knew him so well, I salute his shade. But our Society is The Church Music Society, and it seemed fitting to choose a subject more closely associated with church music than Burney was; and as this year marks the 300th anniversary of the birth of William Croft, this address will deal with him—though I hope not to forget Burney altogether. I must take pains, however, to make it clear that Croft was far from being exclusively a composer for the church. Few English musicians between 1550 and 1850 have been simply that, just as few of them were not also connected with English church music in some form. We must think of such men as Byrd, Gibbons, Blow, Purcell, Greene, Boyce, Battishill as all-round composers and see their church music in this perspective, and not dub them, in an outmoded way, just as 'old English church composers'. So it is with Croft, even though he may be familiar to some only as a writer of anthems and hymn-tunes.

Not having made any first-hand investigations into Croft and his music, and being far from a specialist therein, it is not easy for me to strike the right note in this address, because I can only speak from commonly-shared knowledge. So I am unable to bring you any new information or assessment. Yet I owe it to you to avoid a mere regurgitation of hitherto

accepted authorities. What I will try to do, with your permission, is to reflect upon, and bring out some implications of, that knowledge.

Croft was baptized on 30 December 1678 at Nether Ettington in Warwickshire, the 4th child and 2nd son of William Croft who held a lease of the manor house there. The boy passed into the choir of the Chapel Royal at a time when the organists there were Blow, Purcell, and the aged William Child, thus coming under the tutelage of Blow as Master of the Children. In 1699 his first published music appeared—one song in a set of twelve headed by Blow, and in October of that year his first instrumental music—three violin sonatas—was announced for publication; other published instrumental and secular vocal music followed in the ensuing decade. In the later part of 1699 Blow was instructed to arrange for the organ from the Queen's Chapel to be re-erected in St. Anne's Church, Soho, and it is not surprising that the first organist to be appointed there in 1700 was his ex-pupil Croft; and in that year also it was arranged (again, no doubt, by Blow) that he and Jeremiah Clarke jointly should have the reversion of the next vacancy as organist of the Chapel Royal, which happened in 1704. When Blow died in 1708 Croft succeeded him in three capacities: as organist of Westminster Abbey, as Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal, and as Composer to the Chapel Royal. In 1715 he took the Oxford degree of D.Mus. His exercise for that degree was shortly afterwards published as 'Musicus Apparatus Academicus', and in 1724 two volumes of his church music appeared under the title of 'Musica Sacra'. He died at Bath, where he seems to have gone for his health, on 14 August 1727, a little short of his 49th birthday.

Details of this honourable, yet seemingly placid career are soon told, but they suggest some reflections. First, his parentage and lineage. We know too little of the family background of early English musicians. Many of them, of course, were bred up as choristers—but what of their parents? Probably several were themselves cathedral musicians, as in the case of Tomkins and Purcell, and we happen to know that Thomas Morley's father was both a 'beer-brewer' and cathedral virger; but for the most part the obscurity of their parentage suggests very humble origins. Croft is the earliest instance known to me of an English musician whose father, not being a musician himself, can be identified as 'generosus'. His maternal grandfather was a clergyman, and a paternal uncle and two cousins were also clergymen. These immediate relationships are more noteworthy than the fact that, nine generations back, he could claim descent from Sir John Croft, of Croft Castle, Herefordshire, as carefully traced by Lucy Roe.

Next, we again know too little of the personal relations between teacher and pupil in the early line of English musicians. Morley may have been a pupil of Byrd, as Blow and Humfrey certainly were of Henry Cooke; but that is as much as we know. It is clear, however, that the relationship between Blow and Croft as master and pupil was warm, that the



older man saw in the youth his potential successor, and that the younger man recognized his debt to the older. Croft's versified tribute rings more genuine than a mere conventional acknowledgment:

But Words fall short of what to Deeds I owe,  
And cannot pay the Debt they cannot show;  
A Father's Fondness, and a Master's Care,  
Should have returns beyond a Scholar's Pray'r:  
Yet since the Wishes of a grateful Heart  
May ease the swelling Debt, and pay in part,  
Accept 'em from the youngest you have reared,  
Your youngest Off-spring not the least endeared.

(Verses by 'William Crofts, Organist of St. Ann's' prefixed to Blow's 'Amphion Anglicus', 1700.)

The style and character of Croft's compositions make it interesting that he should have been a pupil of Blow. Before he died, Blow had come a very long way from the unformed state of English musical composition in the first twelve years or so after the Restoration of 1660, but the style of his music never became firmly crystallized, and he was always open to new influences; and though to the end of his life archaic elements are to be found in his music, and his use of more modern elements was somewhat uncertain, it must be that he was wise enough to point the way and encourage his protégé when he perceived his grasp of up-to-date style. It is indeed noteworthy that one of Blow's anthems in particular ('O sing unto God, and sing praises') is extremely close in some ways to what became Croft's manner; and this anthem may well have been a product of the 1690's.

With regard to Croft's career as a composer, all the indications are that his interest in secular music, for whatever reason, did not survive after about the first ten years of his adult career. What we do not know is how far this arose from personal predilection, or how far it derives from discouragement or lack of opportunity. It is certainly noteworthy that though he contributed incidental instrumental music to certain London plays, 1700-1704, he showed no further interest in the theatre, and played no part in the interesting but short-lived movement towards an English school of dramatic composition of 1715-1718, with which the poets Gay and Hughes were associated and of which Handel's 'Acis and Galatea' was a product.

There is an interesting point about Croft's Oxford doctorate. For a degree in music, whether Bachelor or Doctor, the long-standing requirement was a musical composition by way of 'exercise', but until the mid-eighteenth century we have hardly any knowledge of such compositions. Exceptionally, however, Croft not only furnished two fairly substantial works for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra, but arranged for their

publication in an extremely handsome form. This seems to tell us that he took the matter seriously and regarded the degree as a dignified affair; and the fact and style of publication perhaps suggests something of his feelings as a native-born composer in view of the presence in England of two notable foreigners with whom he was thrown into contact.

J. C. Pepusch, a talented and learned German who played an active part in English musical life, took his Oxford doctorate at the same time as Croft, and two years earlier (1713) another and greater German, Handel, had composed the *Te Deum* and *Jubilate* for the official celebration of the Treaty of Utrecht. From Burney's tribute to Croft's character, as we shall see, it is unlikely that there was any bad feeling. But is it not possible that the exceptional plan of publishing the doctoral exercise, and in so sumptuous a manner, was a quiet demonstration by Croft that he, an English-born musician, could sustain his own position?

Finally, among these reflections on his biography, there is his enterprise in publishing a substantial body of his church music in two volumes under Walsh's imprint in 1724. Not only is this the first published anthology of such music by a single writer (and it was to have many, and some unworthy, successors), but it was engraved in score, the advantages of which are cogently expressed by Croft in his Preface. It is impressive in format, a worthy companion to 'Musicus Apparatus Academicus'.

I promised you I would not forget Burney. And to give an insight into the personality of Croft one cannot do better than quote Burney's words, written some 60 years after the composer's death:

... he seems to have gone through life in one even tenor of professional activity and propriety of conduct. We hear of no illiberal traits of envy, malevolence, or insolence. He neither headed nor abetted fiddling factions; but insensibly preserving the dignity of his station without oppressing or mortifying his inferiors by reminding them of it, the universal respect he obtained from his talents and eminence in the profession seems to have been blended with personal affection.

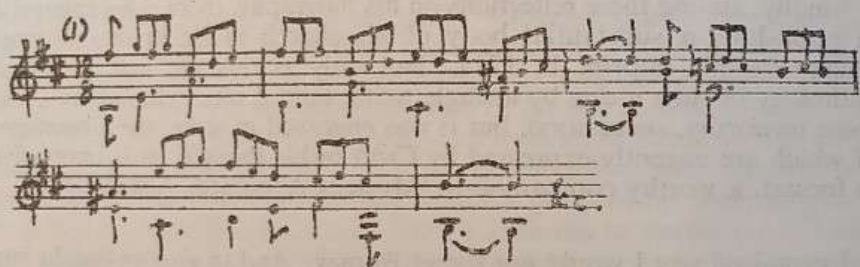
(*A General History of Music*, vol. 3, p. 603.)

Turning attention now to Croft's music we recall that he first appeared before the public with one or two songs when not yet 21 years old. These need not detain us, but his three violin sonatas, published during his 22nd year, have some importance. They appeared with three flute sonatas by 'an Italian Mr' combined in the same publication. The identity of this Italian master has not been ascertained. What seems to be important about this coupling is that Croft thereby identified himself publicly with



Italian music, in just the same way as John Weldon (1676-1736) did in 1707 by describing his song 'In softest Musick' ('Monthly Mask of Vocal Music', March 1707) as 'after the Itallian Maner'.

I need hardly say that Italian influence of one sort and another had long been strong in English music. But to Croft and his contemporaries it meant something more up-to-date than it had meant in, say, 1670—something of which we find strong elements in Purcell's late works, e.g., 'The Fairy Queen', and which, rather fitfully, is also to be seen in Blow's later works. But Blow and Purcell worked forward gradually to this more up-to-date Italian idiom, and even then it was apt to be surrounded by older usages, sometimes indeed married to them. On the other hand, men like Croft and John Eccles (1668-1735, a wholly secular writer) came to it as to the manner born, grasping its more recent manifestations. To emphasize that I am speaking of a general idiom, not of Croft alone, I deliberately choose an example from a less substantial figure, Weldon, out of his song just mentioned:



So far as a single example of a few bars only may serve, that illustrates typical features of sequence, regularity of rhythmic pattern, harmonic progression, clarity of key, and suavity of melodic contour. Please note that I am not saying that such an idiom had not been heard in English music hitherto: with Purcell's 'Hark, the echoing air' in mind, that would be absurd. What I am saying is that this new generation came to it directly without tentative essays, and used it with consistency, firmness, and clarity. For a good idea of the confident handling of it let us hear the first and last movements (Adagio and [Gigue]) of Croft's Violin Sonata in B minor. [A recording of this Sonata is available on Oryz 730.]

#### Musical Illustration

If Croft's grasp of this idiom was good, it was not always that he was able to inform it with as much interest as in those two movements. This, I feel, is also true of much of his keyboard music, whether for harpsichord or organ, which tends towards dullness. But to illustrate his usage, as well as to demonstrate the forward movement in style, we will spend a moment on his organ music. First, Ian Curror will play two subjects, one by Blow, one by Croft. Then he will play the piece written by Blow on the first of them followed by that written by Croft on the second. Though

the subjects themselves are not violently dissimilar, the texture and structure of each piece is very different. After those two pieces, Mr. Curror will play a further short movement by Croft, based on a type of subject much less typical of Blow, and which from the point of view of Blow and Croft would be a modern subject, with the implications for treatment that this carries.

*Musical Illustrations. No. XIX of 'Thirty Voluntaries & Verses' by Blow (ed. Shaw: Schott & Co.). No. IXa and conclusion of No. 1 of Croft's Complete Organ Works (ed. Platt: O.U.P.)*

As with his keyboard music, so also, it seems to me, with Croft's early instrumental music for the theatre—the ayres in 'Courtship Allamode', 'The Funeral' (or 'Grief Allamode'), 'The Twin Rivals', and 'The Lying Lover': that is to say, always clean and competent but not striking or memorable (and why, indeed, should we expect such music always to be that?)

Moving now to substantial works on a larger canvas, we come to the Te Deum and Jubilate in D and the two odes written for the Oxford degree, all for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra. The Te Deum was written for a service in the Chapel Royal in February 1709 in thanksgiving for military successes against the French in 1708. It was only as recently as November 1708, following Blow's death, that Croft had become Composer to the Chapel Royal. In his new capacity he seems to have determined to put his best endeavours into an ambitious work which ante-dates Handel's 'Utrecht' setting, and the only models for which were Purcell's celebrated D major setting and one in the same key by Blow, of which a transcript exists in Croft's writing. It is possible, by the way, though not certain, that Croft set Te Deum alone in 1709 and that Jubilate was added by him somewhat later for occasions when, as we know, his Te Deum was again performed.

The result is an elaborate work which, unlike Purcell's setting, discloses sections which are so extended as to form movements which, in a modern edition, justify separate headings. This is not simply a matter of length, but of compositional technique. Croft disposes his material in the form of musical designs which necessitate a certain length, no matter how few the words. For instance, 'Heav'n and earth are full of thy glory' is a 54-bar [Andante] movement over an ostinato bass with obbligato for two violins. In the manner of the late baroque, the movement maintains a unified characteristic 'affect' with a regular tonal scheme of Tonic, modulation to a firm cadence in the Dominant (bar 26), and return through Relative Minor, Mediant Minor, to the Tonic at bar 46. Ostinato technique, by the way, is a good deal in evidence throughout all Croft's vocal music, whether secular or sacred. The textures in this Te Deum have some degree of elaboration, as the quartet for four solo altos with concertante accompaniment for four-part strings, 'Also the Holy Ghost the Comforter'. On this size of canvas Croft is able to make

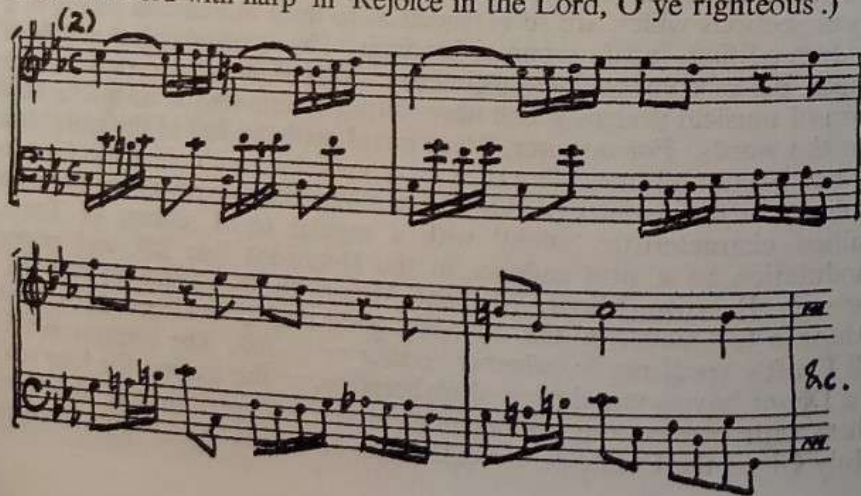


effective use of key contrast as between one movement and another, using not only B minor, D minor, and G minor (but not, curiously, A major), but, at a judicious moment, C minor ('We believe that thou shalt come to be our Judge'), and B flat major for an alto solo ('O Lord, save thy people') with elaborate solo oboe concertizing with the voice. Single voice and verse-ensemble movements (all, save one, with instrumental parts) carry the chief burden of the work. The choruses, when they are not just powerful homophonic utterances, are not extensive, but are sufficiently long to deploy broadly unfolding fugato, as the 25-bar 'ever world without end'. One or two examples of the characteristic rhythmic/thematic material will show something of the content of the work:

#### *Musical Illustrations*

Notice in these the clarity of harmonic implication and firm polarities of the bass. We are probably justified in saying that when he composed this *Te Deum*, perhaps a month after his 30th birthday, Croft's abilities as a composer were fully formed. It not only shows ambition but achievement, effective and interesting in performance and in the best tradition of Kapellmeister music. The two odes in *'Musicus Apparatus Academicus'* need not detain us after this. Both are written with skill and care, and one observes some feeling, at least, for the massing and apposition of choral and orchestral forces.

I have been speaking of what I term the modernity of Croft's style. This was freely carried forward into his church music. I am adopting, I need hardly say, the standpoint of Croft's seniors, for to us now this style is classical. It is indeed from the characteristic chord progressions and methods of modulation of this idiom that the pabulum of present day elementary instruction in abstract harmony is derived, with the result that what in Croft's day was the current and recent style strikes us as conventional. To hear such a passage as the following with the ears of the early 1700's requires from us some effort of historical imagination. (Croft: 'Praise the Lord with harp' in 'Rejoice in the Lord, O ye righteous'.)



The contours, rhythmic patterns, sequences, and harmonic direction are all indicative, however, of a firmly-grasped integrated idiom.

Croft's verse anthems are definitely organized into movements, rather than mere sections; the tempo, even if not always stated, is clearly evident; and each movement has its internal organization and 'affekt'. By these features, combined with the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic idiom, the English anthem was stamped anew in Croft's hands, and was passed on for a higher degree of artistic achievement to Maurice Greene. In this mould it had a long vitality until finally, as an old-fashioned style surviving by inertia into the 19th century, it was at last overtaken by S. S. Wesley. As Humfrey in the early 1670's and Wesley in the 1830's moved the English anthem forward to accord with a general trend in music, so Croft did in the early years of the 18th century.

Let me now show something of his constructional method and style by representing on the keyboard the material essence of the first movement of the anthem 'O be joyful in God, all ye lands' for bass solo, in which the organ performs a ritornello role in a classical key scheme.

#### *Musical Illustration*

Instead of a fully harmonized thematic passage, as there, by way of ritornello, Croft's more frequent usage was to preface the entry of the solo voice by a bass theme given out on the organ, marked by some such words as 'Loud organ, left hand'. This theme would supply the initial part of the voice entry, and might also act structurally as a ritornello. It was a method used by Croft and his contemporaries in their secular vocal music (and compare, *inter alia*, 'Quia fecit mihi magna' in Bach's Magnificat). In my next illustration you will hear such an organ bass and also how, at the first entry, the voice takes up one part of this, and then, at his second entry, adopts and extends the whole of it.

*Musical Illustration: Part of bass aria 'Thou art about my path' from the verse anthem 'O Lord, thou hast searched me out'.*

Of the full anthem in Croft's hands we have an example in the best known of all his anthems, 'God is gone up'. It is unnecessary for me to remind you of this, and you will easily recall the use of fugato in the opening and closing sections, a technique which, in Croft's hands, was newly applied to the anthem. But as against that contemporary embodiment and renewal of the full style, Croft also maintained an interest in an older manner, a 'stile antico', as both Blow and Purcell before him had done in some well-known instances. His success in that style, as well as the clear separation he maintained between that and 'stile moderno'



is illustrated by the five-part anthem 'Hear my prayer, O Lord', of which we now hear the opening section:

#### *Musical Illustration*

Finally, we come to Croft's liturgical music. Three Services have come down to us, in B minor, A major, and E flat major. None of these contains the Evening Canticles, and, as with others of his period, Croft sets insufficient of the Communion Service to be of use to us today. That leaves the Morning Canticles only. In considering these we should recall that Service composition had fallen into low water by Croft's time. Where it was not dull (as with Aldrich) it was short-breathed and restless (as with Blow except when he deliberately adopted a neo-Jacobean approach), and no-one could regard even Purcell in B flat as an outstanding masterpiece. Croft in B minor does not improve matters much, but in both the A major and E flat Services he achieves a somewhat broader type of expression, made possible by his employment of reasonably extended sections in related keys, his command of imitation, and indeed the choice of phraseology. As the E flat Service is the less familiar of the two I will give some examples from this. The response to the words is warmer than anything found in English Services for many a long year, as for instance in the dark colouring of E flat minor at 'When thou tookest upon thee', leading to the more expansive phrase in the major at 'Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven'. The *grazioso* passage (actually marked 'Moderato') at 'Govern them' is unusually melodious for this class of work hitherto, and 'O Lord, in thee have I trusted' has a thoroughly appropriate degree of breadth.

#### *Musical Illustrations*

Croft's marvellous setting of the Funeral Service stands in a class apart. Solemn, yet moving, it is a masterpiece of simplicity employed with the art that conceals art. Like Byrd's Short Service, it is virtually in a note-for-note style. But Croft can choose from a richer palette of chords than Byrd, which he does with unerring sense of fitness; and, moreover, he has at his disposal possibilities and means of modulation not open to Byrd. In simplicity and devotional power, Croft's setting is linked with an age-old inheritance, but the technical resources which he so superbly controlled were contemporary.

#### *Musical Illustration*

As you will have gathered, it is no part of my thesis to present Croft to you as a genius, whether neglected or no. Burney's valuations are by no means always in accordance with today's judgments, yet I can adopt his summing up of Croft as a composer without much modification.

These are his words:

... though he, perhaps, never reaches the sublime, yet he is sometimes grand, and often pathetic. His allegros are always more feeble than his slow movements. But more melody is necessary, to support cheerfulness with decorum and dignity.

(Burney, *ibid.*, p. 611.)

Croft was a thoroughly competent craftsman who always produced a good job, sometimes a particularly good one, and occasionally an inspired one. A study of his music reveals to us a formative moment in the style of English musical composition and the significant part he played in it. In the last analysis we value a composer for the quality of the works which endure, however few in relation to his whole output. Do we enjoy 'Hansel and Gretel' less because almost all the rest of Humperdinck's music now seems to have no place? By a handful of works William Croft has secured the memory of his name now over 250 years after his death. And as for competent craftsmanship, shall we finish with the admirable Gloria to the Jubilate of the Service in A?

#### *Musical Illustration*

[The vocal illustrations to this address were recorded on tape by a group of students from the Royal College of Music. An edition of Croft's *Te Deum* in D with orchestral accompaniment is about to be published by Oxford University Press.]