

# JOHN PLAYFORD

## THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MUSIC PUBLISHER

### Part I

HOW few, save the musical antiquary, know the name of John Playford or the great debt we owe to him in the matter of seventeenth-century music! There can be but little doubt that but for him the music of that period would have been non-existent to the moderns, except what little had survived the wear and tear of manuscript copies. It was John Playford who, during the troublous and uncertain times of the Commonwealth, when music of a light kind was in disfavour, had the pluck to publish gay songs and pretty dances for the benefit of those whose hearts were not dulled by the Puritanic fanaticism. Had it not been for him music might have fallen stillborn from the brains of the few musicians who composed it.

Music publishing had been a dead letter in England for at least a quarter of a century, for after the age of Elizabeth, when in spite of the patents granted to Byrd, Tallis and Morley (who had sole power to print and publish music and a veto over imported music) madrigals were freely published. The musical works published between the death of Elizabeth and the advent of Playford were few indeed.

John Playford was born in 1623, died in 1686. If we are to believe the *Dictionary of National Biography*, he was of a Norfolk family, but of his education we have no knowledge, nor are there in existence any particulars of his early life. And, here to clear the ground, let me at once point out certain errors which have been repeated from Sir John Hawkins' *History of Music*.

Following Hawkins, the writer in the *Dictionary of National Biography* says that Playford invented, about 1660, the 'new tyed note,' by which groups of quavers and semi-quavers were united. This typographical feat was effected by Thomas Moore, a London music printer, and followed up by John Heptinstall and William Pearson. While it is quite easy by a stroke of a pen or graver to unite the tails of notes in manuscript or copper plate, with moveable type the notes were printed separately until Moore showed his way. The new style of note appears to have been first used in the second book of *Cornis Sonoris* dated 1688, and printed by Thomas Moore.

We first hear of Playford as Clerk to the Temple Church, with a shop, and perhaps, residence, 'near the church door'. I fancy a plate in Maitland's *History of London* gives a view of the shop as it appeared in the eighteenth century.

A parish clerk of those days, and for long after, was a very humble adjunct of the Church. He was but a poor creature, and at the beck and call of the parson and his family, for whom he did not disdain to perform many menial offices.

In the eighteenth century some parish clerks rose a little higher and collected and composed books of psalm tunes, prefaced with an essay on vocal music, by which the novice could attain to the art of psalm singing.

John Playford went beyond the usual run of parish clerks, and he began by being a music publisher. His first work was an oblong book of country dance tunes for the 'treble violin,' with the figures for dancing.

This was issued in the autumn of 1650 and entitled:-

*THE ENGLISH DANCING MASTER, or Plaine and Easie rules for the dancing of country dances, with the tunes to each dance.*

This was at a time when dancing and other secular amusements were not altogether favoured. It had, however, so much success that the 104 tunes were increased in a second edition of 1652 to 112, and it continued a favourite until the last edition of 1728. In due course it attained to three

volumes, with 918 tunes, most of them of great interest. It need scarcely be said that the early editions are of great rarity. Of the first edition there are but three copies extant, one being in America.

Having launched the *Dancing Master*, Playford ventured on works of greater importance and became a writer on the art of music. Where he got his musical knowledge or who he got to help is not known. The next work he published in conjunction with John Benson was *A Musical Banquet set forth in Three Varieties of Musick*, 1657. This work, of which there is a unique copy in the Bodleian, was the germ of Playford's most popular publications. The first part of the *Musical Banquet* consists of lessons for his Lira Viol, the second is a collection of 'Allemands Corants and Sarabands,' the third is a collection of Catches and Rounds; a further addition gives 'Rules and directions for such as learne to sing or to play the viol.' From this Playford derived his four books:-

*Musick's Recreation on the Lyra Viol,*

*Courtly Masquing Ayres,*

*Catch that Catch Can,*

*Introduction to the Skill of Musick.*

This first venture into music, other than country dances, Playford found so acceptable that he was encouraged to go in more largely for musical publications. He issued in 1652 *A Book of New Lessons for the Gittern*, a unique copy of which is in the Euing library in the Anderson College, at Glasgow.

In 1652 he published two folio works-- *Select Musicale Ayres*, by sundry composers, and John Hilton's *Catch that Catch Can*, a book of rounds and catches that supplied materials for later Playford publications. In the same year he also issued the first edition of *Musick's Recreation on the Lyra Viol*, a work which was constantly re-issued until 1690.

In the following year (1653) he published another *Select Musicale Ayres and Dialogues* and in the same year *Ayres and Dialogues*, by Henry Lawes. Afterwards these 'select ayres' were reissued as *The Treasury of Musick*. Playford now began to publish in earnest all classes of music. He appears to have been friendly with the composers of his time, and as there was no one but himself to publish music they naturally turned to him to bring their work into public notice.

In 1654 he published the first edition of his *Introduction to the Skill of Music*, under the title *A Breefe Introduction to The Skill of Music, for song and violl, by J.P.* This first edition is probably unique. In 1655 a second edition was published, and at a few years interval edition after edition followed until it closed with the nineteenth edition in 1730. The editions vary in contents. Dr. Thomas Campion and Henry Purcell contributed to the work.

In 1653 Playford republished from the original copper plates, Michael East's set of *Fantazes for Two Trebles and a Bass*, originally issued in 1638, and some other early works either re-issued or sold as 'remainders,' including Orlando Gibbon's *Madrigals and Fantazes*, also Welby's *Madrigals*.

F. KIDSON.

(To be concluded)