Random Reflections: a correspondence

The March 1990 issue of *Notes and Queries: For readers and writers, collectors and librarians*, includes Edward Wilson's 'Literary and Antiquarian Allusions in John Meade Falkner's *The Nebuly Coat*'. A copy was sent some time later to the musicologist, Harold Watkins Shaw, who was inspired to produce the following *Random Reflections* on the novel.

I was intrigued by the scrupulous investigation in *Notes & Queries* of the subscription list to Boyce's Cathedral Music, and the deduction therefrom. I suppose familiarity breeds contempt, for that would otherwise never have crossed my mind. I simply regarded Cullerne Minster's subscription as an unconsidered exaggeration, made without close comparison with that list, and hence without intent to convey an encoded meaning. I hardly think JMF examined the list for this purpose, else he would not have written 'copies' for 'sets'. What was significant to me in this reference to Boyce was something quite different - its slant upon the personality of Sharnall the organist, who loved 'the great' Boyce - i.e., the 1st as distinct from the 2nd edition, which latter, though printed from the same plates, was much less handsome in format and appearance. So in spite of his bitterness and dissolute life, he is revealed as a man who loved the best from the days of old. But why his love of 'the old-world' clefs should be singled out, and why they should be thus sentimentally characterised, is not clear. Any cultivated musician of his day would be entirely at home with them, and they were still in everyday use, as, e.g., Wesley's 'Twelve Anthems' of 1854. Perhaps, as a lover of old ways, he disliked a slight tendency towards their disuse then just creeping in.

As to the musical status of Cullerne Minster, the author gives explicit information about its scope (if not its enthusiasm): an organist, 3 clerks (i.e., ordained men), 10 singingmen, and 16 choristers. As post-Dissolution provision, this is remarkable. Among the post-Dissolution cathedral foundations 10 choristers was the maximum (Durham, Canterbury, Winchester, Worcester, plus Westminster Abbey). Otherwise eight was the norm, with poor little Carlisle having only six. As to men's voices, the comparison is not on all-fours, because in the cathedrals this part of the choir was heavily weighted by minor canons who in those days sang with the lay clerks. But if we take singingmen only, 10 was a good number. With minor canons and laymen together, Carlisle, Rochester, Bristol,

Gloucester, and Chester had no more than 12, Ely 13, Norwich 14. It was Durham, Canterbury, and Winchester (the great ones) together with Worcester which scored 18-24. And some minor canons held livings in the cities, so they might not all sing every day. My point is that I hardly think JMF was carefully considering contemporary practice when he put down 16 choristers, but (just as with the subscription list to Boyce) merely making a picturesque feature. How much he knew of all this in 1903 one cannot say. It may not have been until A. Hamilton Thompson contributed his informative introduction to Falkner's own edition of the Statutes of Durham Cathedral (1929) that it came to his notice.

Then there is the question of the organist's stipend - £200 before the depredations of the unspeakable Canon Parkyn, that is to say presumably as it stood in (perhaps) 1820. Of course this cannot be the original amount yielded under the endowment of Richard Vinnicomb, which would probably have been only £10, and must therefore have been subject to some exceptional and unparalleled accrual. In 1843 the organist of Hereford Cathedral got £100 (less £25 paid to his predecessor); at Chester in 1840 the stipend was £60 plus a variable gratuity. It was considered altogether exceptional in 1841 when S. S. Wesley was tempted to Leeds Parish Church by £200 a year guaranteed for two years. But that was an abnormal case because of the backing of some wealthy and enthusiastic industrialists. Here again, I don't think JMF intended to convey anything historically based.

And what about Statutes? Clerk Janaway gives details ostensibly laid down therein about the bowing and scraping on the attendance of Lord Blandamer at the Minster. But a tolerably extensive acquaintance with late 16th- and early 17th-century statutes makes me feel it in the last degree improbable that any statutes would prescribe for such a matter. And what Statutes, pray? Cullerne Minster was a parish church, and a parish church does not have statutes. Any deed of endowment of the choir by Richard Vinnicomb would hardly deal with such a thing; and in any event the Blandamer peerage (Jacobean) antedates that endowment.

None of this is historically based, but acceptable as pleasurably fanciful with a faint historical tincture - like Sharnall's having won the Gibbons Prize at Oxford for his Service in D flat. By the date of the novel (c.1860 as I make out) he must have been at least 50 (we read of his 'shaky old hand'), and so up at Oxford not later than c. 1830. Even had there been any musical prize then (which

there wasn't), he would certainly not have composed a Service in that key, nor would he have done so in 1860.

As a matter of fact, this particular anachronism is different from the others, being carefully and deliberately devised to serve a very significant feature of the plot - a most interesting piece of considered craftsmanship based on a musical point. No other key, for example E flat or B flat, would relate so convincingly to the mystery of Sharnall's death. This is so evident that I expect it has often been observed. But it does involve the author in an awkward inconsistency about the Minster organ. However, there's an unrelated difficulty connected with the organ about Bach's 'St. Anne' fugue which Sharnall played after the service attended by Blandamer incognito.

[Naturally, Edward Wilson was particularly intrigued by the last paragraph which was not elaborated upon; and, after further corres pondence with Watkins Shaw, elicited the following additional points from the latter.]

It is indeed a fascinating work. Hardly a chapter but there is some detail - architectural, genealogical, musical, and other - drawing on learning, not so much to adorn as to carry on a gradually absorbing plot woven from several strands. ...

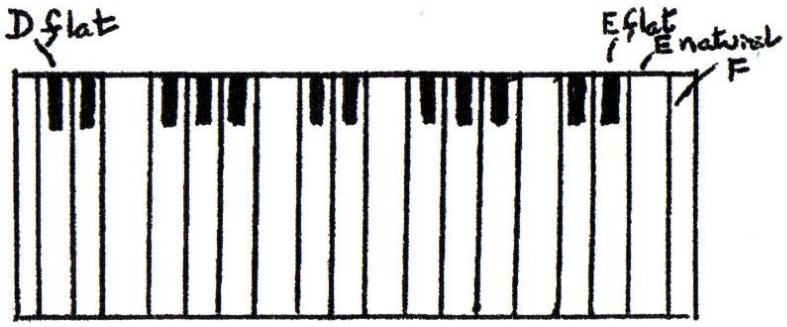
I enclose some remarks on the two points you enquire about. So many good things abound in the book whereby recherché historical facts are put to good service, like the introduction of hydraulic blowing for the organ (how I remember it as a boy!) so that Sharnall can be found alone in the Minster; or the newly-available revolver for Westray to buy (I believe it was in the late 1850s that it came into production).

Even the choice of 'Aldrich in G' for the weekday Evensong is just right: exactly the kind of thing into which the repertory had sunk in those days. Sharnall is made to say that Blandamer was caught tripping in 'the lead' in the Nunc Dimittis Gloria. 'Aldrich in G' is a very penny-plain, straightforward affair; but looking at it just now I see a tenor entry (and Blandamer sang tenor) just before the end which would require a certain confident smartness on the part of someone singing without rehearsal. I wonder whether JMF was simply chancing a very likely bow at a venture, or whether (which is more than possible) he had that very passage in mind in order to afford Sharnall's characteristic remark. But I do wish he had not called Clerk Janaway's wand a 'mace'.

Relevance of choice of key for 'Sharnall in D flat' to cause of Sharnall's death:

For purposes of the novel it has to be acceptably probable that Sharnall's death was occasioned by his falling against the organ pedal-board and striking his head against one of the pedals. *No other pedal than D flat will be convincing for this purpose.*

An organ pedal-board is like a crudely enlarged section of a pianoforte keyboard.



direction of falling body.

The long pedals (corresponding to the white keys) are flush with the framework and could not inflict the necessary sharp blow, which could only be produced by one of the short pedals (corresponding to flats and sharps) which project upwards. Obviously, only one of those at either end of the pedal-board would fit the case. That closest to the left hand end is the bottom D flat. That closest to the right hand end (E flat) is not so near the edge as is the bottom D flat, and would not result in so sharp a blow because the shoulders would interfere. Thus the note which Westray heard, and the pedal on which Sharnall's head was found resting, could only have been D flat.

It is therefore important that Falkner should in advance impress on the minds of his readers (whether they are musical or not) consciousness of **D flat**, and he does this by inventing Sharnall's composition in that key with a 'tonic pedal' in it (i.e., the note D flat forming a long-sustained bass), and having him play this to Westray who can thus recognize its sound on the fatal occasion.

Without giving chapter and verse I can categorically state that no English ecclesiastical composer in Sharnall's lifetime (and for a considerable time later), however progressive, would for one moment have entertained the idea of composing a 'Service' in such an outlandish key, in spite of the practice of contemporary romantic

secular composition. I am certain that Falkner, who was well versed in English cathedral music, knew this without a doubt. And so I take it that because for the reasons given he needed to mention the key of D flat he indulged in a deliberate anachronism which one freely accepts for the sake of the ingenious and organic part it plays in his construction. It serves a far higher purpose than the striking of a clock in Julius Caesar's Rome!

Bach's 'St. Anne' Fugue and the Cullerne Minster organ:

After scrutinizing the text afresh, I find, contrary to what I thought, that there is no anomaly here.

Sharnall three times complains of his short pedal board. Both he and the ridiculous Parkyn had been there 40 years, and I take it for granted that no money would have been spent on the instrument under Parkyn's regime. That takes us back to 1825, at a time when nearly all English organs (including most cathedrals) had only a primitive pedal department of one octave (if they had any pedals at all) on which a performance of this fugue would have been out of the question.

But the key to the matter lies in Sharnall's remark on one occasion (Chapter XII) that 'he couldn't touch *a good deal* of Bach's organ works' (my italics). Following a pioneer application in Westminster Abbey in 1800, a slightly extended pedal department had been introduced in a limited number of instances. This was still unsatisfactory, for two reasons, first because it still did not go low enough to cover Bach's requirements, second because its bottom five notes were of a mongrel variety. But provided the missing low notes came in a sufficiently easy context, a keen player could make shift by playing them (albeit with slightly unmusical effect) an octave higher. (There's an account of how Mendelssohn, on a visit to England, did this brilliantly on one occasion without prior notice).

By no means all Bach's works could be treated thus. But I have read through the 'St. Anne' fugue with this in mind, and see that it could just be managed thus on such a pedal board, and therefore it falls within Sharnall's remark - i.e. he could play some, but not a good deal of Bach.

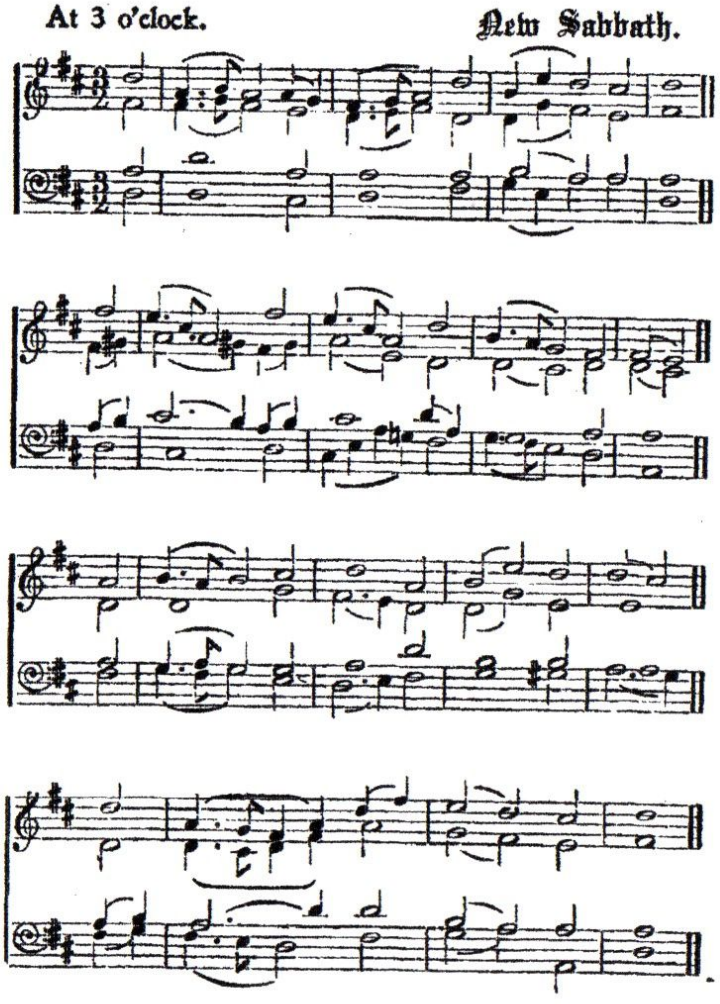
This adds interestingly to your point about the musical status of Cullerne (at least until Parkyn's arrival). Unlike not a few cathedrals, evidently it had installed one of these 'intermediate' pedal departments in the early years of the 19th century. It also adds a

tribute to Sharnall's musicianship in that, even on such a pedal board, he was keen enough to do what Bach he could. John Amott, organist of Gloucester Cathedral 1832-65 (more or less Sharnall's period), kept his organ pedals covered and allowed his choirboys to see them now and again as a treat. When pedals of some sort or another were introduced for the first time at Canterbury Cathedral in 1827, the organist would not use them, and told his assistant 'to show these things off, I never learned to dance'. And in Sharnall's day, even after, say, 1850, interest in Bach was confined to a limited number of discerning enthusiasts.

I feel sure, in view of the words I quote, which he puts into Sharnall's mouth, that JMF must have known about this 'intermediate' type of pedal board. So the incident of Sharnall's playing the fugue for Blandamer's benefit is yet one more instance of his application of fairly recondite information - of which most practising organists would, and still will, be ignorant.

March 1993.

TUNES PLAYED BY THE CHIMES OF
ST. SEPULCHRE'S CHURCH AT CULLERNE.



One of the tunes printed at the end of *The Nebuly Coat*