

Outstanding Elizabethan music manuscript saved for the nation

05 June 2006

My Ladye Nevells Booke, one of the finest music manuscripts of the Elizabethan age, has been acquired by the British Library as a result of a successful fundraising campaign and will go on public display for the first time from 6 June 2006.

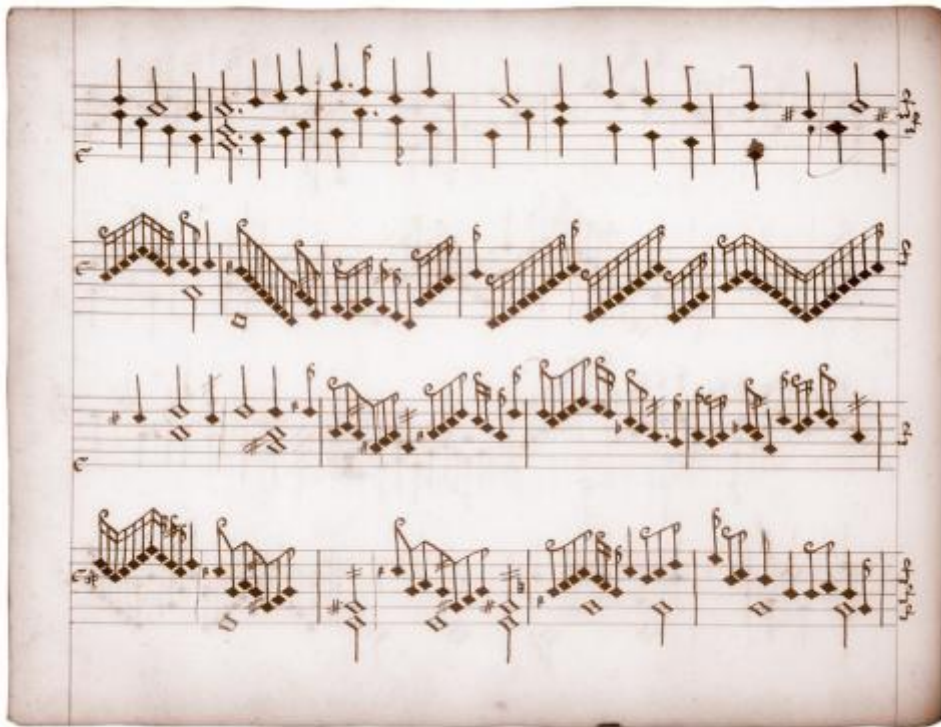
Image



British Library

Cover of *My Ladye Nevells Booke* by William Byrd

Image



Sheet music from *My Ladye Nevells Booke* by William Byrd

The manuscript was accepted by HM Government in lieu of Inheritance Tax via the Acceptance in Lieu scheme managed by MLA and allocated to the British Library with substantial additional funding from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (£322,487), The Art Fund (£24,000) as well as The Golsoncott Foundation, Friends of the British Library, Friends of the National Libraries and many private donors.

My Ladye Nevells Booke contains 42 works by William Byrd (1543-1623), the greatest English composer of the Elizabethan age. It contains some of Byrd's best-known keyboard music including Carman's Whistle and Sellinger's Round, both still popular today.

Completed on 11 September 1591 by John Baldwin, the best known music scribe of the time, it is thought that Baldwin copied the pieces directly under Byrd's direction. The manuscript has been acknowledged as one of the finest Tudor manuscripts and is an object of outstanding calligraphic beauty. It contains a series of corrections thought to be by Byrd himself. Since keyboard music presented difficulties to 16th Century printers, Byrd's output survives almost exclusively in manuscript. There are four manuscripts of cardinal importance of which *My Ladye Nevells Booke* is the earliest. Though the identity of My Ladye Nevell has long been disputed, recent research has uncovered that the dedicatee was Elizabeth, the wife of Sir Henry Nevell of Billingbere (c.1518-93). Following Sir Henry's death in 1593 the manuscript is thought to have passed into the hands of

Elizabeth I.

Chris Banks, Head of Music Collections said: "I am absolutely delighted that *My Ladye Nevells Booke* can be added to the British Library's collection where it can be studied alongside existing related materials. I had read accounts of its outstanding calligraphy and of its fine decorated binding and the volume more than lived up to those descriptions. What becomes clear as one turns through the pages is that it was copied by someone who clearly worshipped Byrd and his music."

Carole Souter, Director of the NHMF, said: "William Byrd stands alone in the history of Elizabethan music. He is considered the most important English composer of his time and we are delighted to have helped save this unique expression of our heritage from leaving these shores."

In addition to being displayed in the British Library's public galleries, *My Ladye Nevells Booke* will be fully digitised and placed on the British Library website with supplementary information about the volume and its history. A series of lectures and workshops aimed at school children, college students and lifelong learners will enhance people's knowledge and understanding of this manuscript and Byrd's seminal position in the development of English keyboard repertoire.

Notes to editors

The British Library

The British Library is the national Library of the United Kingdom. It provides world class information services to the academic, business, research and scientific communities and offers unparalleled access to the world's largest and most comprehensive research collection.

Music Collections The printed and manuscript music in the British Library together forms a national reference collection which is among the foremost and comprehensive in the world for its breadth and richness of coverage. The printed collection numbers about 1.5million items and covers all periods from 1473 to the present day, and from all countries. It is strongest in Western music and is probably unrivalled in its holdings of music printed before 1800. The manuscript collection, numbering over 100.000 items, is of similar breadth and includes manuscript scores, sketches, letters and papers of composers, performers and performing organisations and papers relating to music publishers etc. Some items were acquired with the foundation collections of the British Museum in 1753, and

the collection has been supplemented since by many gifts and bequests, and by numerous purchases. Particularly comprehensive are the manuscripts of British music in general and of 20th century British composers in particular, especially Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Holst, Delius, Britten Tippett, and Maxwell Davies.

The Acceptance in Lieu Scheme

The Acceptance in Lieu Scheme is managed by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and allows those who are liable to Inheritance Tax to pay the tax by transferring an important cultural item into public ownership. The scheme has been in existence for over fifty years and has brought thousands of objects in public collections. In the last five years, items valued at over £140million have been acquired through the scheme and allocated to public collections, including the British Library. The AIL Annual Reports for the years 2000 to 2005 are available on the MLA website at <http://www.mla.gov.uk> and give full details of all the items accepted in this period and where they can be seen by the public. The Report for 2005/6 will be published on 21 July 2006.

The Art Fund

The Art Fund is the UK's leading independent art charity. It offers grants to help UK museums and galleries enrich their collections and campaigns widely on behalf of museums and their visitors. It has 80,000 members. Since its foundation in 1903, The Art Fund has helped UK public collections acquire over 850,000 works of art, ranging from Bronze Age treasures to contemporary works of art.

In 2005 The Art Fund offered over £4.1million to museums and galleries and distributed 12 gifts and bequests. Independent of government, The Art Fund was at the forefront of the campaign for free admission in 2002 and the campaign to save the Macclesfield Psalter in 2005.

In April The Art Fund unveiled one of the most significant projects in its history – a permanent 'Skyspace' at Yorkshire Sculpture Park by James Turrell

The Art Fund has undertaken a groundbreaking survey of UK museum and gallery acquisitions, to build a comprehensive picture of collecting activity in the 21st century. The key findings are available at <http://www.artfund.org/news/428>.

Further information

My Ladye Nevells Booke can be found at:

http://www.bl.uk/collections/music/my_ladye_nevells_booke.html

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