

ROBERT BIGIO. *Readings in the History of the Flute: Monographs, Essays, Reviews, Letters and Advertisements from 19th Century London*. London: Tony Bingham, 2006. xxxi, 329pp. Illus, musical examples. ISBN 0-946113-07-6 (paperback). Price: £30

Those with an interest in the nineteenth century flute and its performance are increasingly well provided with source material. The recent publication, by Editions Fuzeau, of a seven-volume facsimile set of French flute tutors and related articles from 1800 to 1860,<sup>1</sup> has allowed easy access to a wealth of material previously scattered or difficult to find; whilst Rien de Reede's collection *Die Flöte in der "Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung"*<sup>2</sup> includes numerous German articles and reviews published 1798 -1848. Until now, however, many of the English texts regularly mentioned in histories of the instrument have remained unavailable to all but the most dedicated researcher. Robert Bigio's *Readings in the History of the Flute* brings together a valuable collection of writings on the flute and flute-making in nineteenth century London, allowing readers to immerse themselves in the debate and rivalry surrounding the instrument's development at that crucial period.

Although the flute remains one of the most popular instruments among amateur musicians, it is difficult for us to comprehend a time when one could 'take it for granted that one man out of ten plays the flute' as did *The Athenaeum* in 1829, and when pamphlets on new flute systems were reviewed in *The Times*. With a vast, wealthy market available, flute making was potentially very profitable if players could be convinced that a new design was worthwhile or fashionable.

The *Readings* give an intense flavour of the time, starting with letters documenting, in defamatory detail, the bitter feud between Charles Nicholson and W.N. James. These set the scene for a 'Miscellany', comprising flute-related extracts from periodicals published 1836–1857, ranging from sincere attempts to discuss and inform to blatant propaganda and libellous abuse. The reader is plunged into a maelstrom of rival playing styles and flute systems, each promising unparalleled accuracy and ease, but most requiring the player to learn a different method of fingering and tone production. By the end of the Miscellany, the reader can sympathise wholeheartedly with the plight of flautists at the time, often totally confused by the many different 'perfect' instruments on offer. The eventual triumph of Theobald Boehm's 1847 system was by no means a foregone conclusion, a fact continually brought to mind as one reads the monographs that follow. Those potentially of most interest to Galpin Society members include *The Flute Explained* (1844) by Cornelius Ward, John Clinton's *Treatise Upon the Mechanism and General Principles of the Flute* (1851) and *A Few Practical Hints for Flute Players ... [with] an explanation of The Equisonant Flute* (1855), Richard Carte's *Sketch of the Successive Improvements Made in the Flute* (1851) and Theobald Boehm's *Essay on the Construction of Flutes* (1847) in the edition published by W.S. Broadwood in 1882, which also contains the latter's introduction, relevant letters, and translation of Boehm's paper *On the Method to be adopted in determining the position of the Note-holes of Wind Instruments for every given Pitch* (1868). All the authors claim scientific backing for the improvements they have made, each presenting such persuasive arguments that the reader is tempted to rush out and buy immediately. Instruments today regarded as no more than interesting oddities in museums are brought to life, years of experimentation having resulted in a flute the maker was convinced would conquer the world. Although Boehm, with his detailed descriptions of painstaking acoustical experiments, stands out from the others in his never-ending search for perfection, one senses that perhaps his and Carte's eventual success was also in part due to their superior business acumen.

Two more essays give further breadth to the collection: *A Few Words on the Flute* (1843) by William Annand includes many (often amusing) comments on teaching and amateur music-making that still ring true today; whilst Thomas Clotworthy Skeffington ("*The Flute*" in its

*Transition State* [1862]) would have had no time for the Galpin Society, refusing to believe that ‘it could be of any interest to know that in the days of Apollo the Flute had six finger holes, one mouth-piece and an unconquerable aversion to being played in tune’.

The book is not intended to be an exhaustive guide to the nineteenth century flute (Bigio makes it clear that no tutors are included, leaving only scattered references to Siccama and Pratten flutes), but even if it comprised only the texts listed above it would still be an important addition to the available literature. However, its value is further enhanced by the editor’s introduction, giving a clear overview of the many flute systems in nineteenth century Britain and reasons for their success or demise, whilst warning of ‘examples of approaches to reality that are at best creative and are sometimes simply mendacious’. A description of each main author (and where possible a contemporary illustration) puts the writers in context and explains the many quarrels between them. Bigio himself is not slow to voice his own opinion where he feels criticism is justified, supported by his long-term research of the wider subject area.

The complete texts have all been newly typeset, a wise decision allowing ease of reading except where a few wrongly transcribed digits make nonsense of one of Boehm’s calculations. Readers looking for a particular player or subject might wish that an index had been appended, but these are minor quibbles when compared to the overall quality and significance of the book.

It should be stressed that this publication is not merely for flute players and makers. Those researching the history of other instruments will find much of relevance (including passing reference to Boehm’s contribution to piano string manufacture), together with detailed discussion of acoustics. For students of nineteenth century London life, a hobby indulged in by ten percent of the male population must surely be worth serious consideration, and much evidence of contemporary business practices can be gleaned from the text. For those of us who do have a keen interest in the flute, the book is a vital and welcome addition to the library.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Méthodes & Traités, Série II: France 1800-1860: Flûte traversière*. 7 vols. Realised by Arlette Biget and Michel Giboureau. Courlay: Editions J.M. Fuzeau. 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Rien de Reede (ed.) *Die Flöte in der “Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung”* (1798–1848). Amsterdam: Broekmans en Van Poppel B.V., 1997.

EDWINA SMITH

*The Galpin Society Journal* LX (April 2007) pp. 246–247.