

The Origin of the Music Degree System in British Universities

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Abstract

With the establishment of Oxford and Cambridge Universities, the degree system was gradually set up in the later period of Middle Ages. As an important part of "Seven Artes Liberales", music was a compulsory course offered by British Universities and a necessary condition for obtaining degrees. The emergence of the music degree system in British Universities was closely related to the single discipline degrees awarding in the "Seven Artes Liberales" general education, and stemmed from the need for the development of religious music in Universities. In 1464, Cambridge University awarded Henry Abingdon a doctorate of music, which is the first recorded doctorate of music in the world. Early music degree had the character of honorary degree, and it was no need for the degree applicants to live in the Universities or have thesis defense. The earliest statutes of Cambridge laid down the requirements for a master's degree in grammar, but there was no requirement for a music degree. With the development of religious music, Cambridge intended to further encourage those outstanding religious musicians. Meanwhile, some lesser-known musicians began to aspire to the degree of music and apply to the Universities. In the early 16th century, Oxford and Cambridge made specific requirements for music degree applicants, requiring them to compose hymns or mass. These requirements were originally based on the need for religious ceremonies or large events, and later became a test of degree applicants' music abilities.

Keywords

British Universities, Music degree system, Origin.

1. Introduction

The degree system of modern Universities originated from Medieval Universities and even the titles of bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctor's degree, as well as the etiquette of some degree celebrations, were directly inherited from Medieval Universities in Europe. The doctorate degree of Law was borned at the University of Bologna in the first half of the 12th century, and the first doctorate in theology was awarded at the Sorbonne around 11501. The

1 Sun Yi. Degrees in the Medieval Universities [J].Peking: Tsinghua University Education Research,2003:85.

degree system spread all over Europe Universities began to award degrees in theology, law, medicine, literature and other subjects. In the 13th century, the curriculum of medieval Universities tended to be unified in which learning the "Seven Artes Liberales", including grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, became the first step of Medieval Universities study and the basis for studying advanced disciplines include Theology, Law, Medicine and Philosophy. In the Middle Ages, after a candidate for academical honours had prepared his mind by the studies of the Trivium and Quadrivium, and had received the Mastership in Arts, he was allowed to commence his studies for the Bachelorship and Doctorship of Theology (afterwards called Divinity), Law, or Medicine ; and for this a further period of time was prescribed, in addition to the seven years spent in acquiring the Mastership of Arts.² As an important part of "Seven Artes Liberales", music was a basic compulsory course in Medieval Universities. The emphasis on music education was one of the characteristics of the British University system in the Middle Ages and the music was required to obtain a degree from the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. In 1464, the first doctorate of music was awarded by Cambridge University, and then the higher music education degree system was developed. Therefore, it can be inferred that the emergence of music degree system in British Universities was closely related to the awarding of single disciplines degrees in the "Seven Artes Liberales" general education and stemmed from the need of the development of religious music in universities. In early times degrees were given at Oxford in the single liberal arts, such as grammar, rhetoric, poetry, and music.³ The emphasis of Cambridge and Oxford Universities on music education was mainly due to the development of church music in this period and the leading position of Britain in this respect in Europe.⁴

2. Music course in "Seven Artes Liberales" in Universities

In the Middle ages, the music course in "Seven Artes Liberales" of Oxford and Cambridge Universities was a music speculativa study based on numbers, harmonica, proportion and ratio,etc. The book of *De institutione musica* written by Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (about 480—524) who was an ancient Roman philosopher, mathematician and musician. Boethius inherited the viewpoint of Pythagoras, Plato and other people's speculative music theory, believing that music was a branch of mathematics, the harmony of music depended on the relationship of mathematical ratios, and the construction of music must follow the principle of rationality and reflect the essence of harmony represented by ratios and proportions. The

2 C.F. Abdy Williams. *Degrees in Oxford and Cambridge*[M].London: Novello. Ewer and Co,2009:11

3 C.F. Abdy Williams. *Degrees in Oxford and Cambridge*[M]. London: Novello. Ewer and Co,2009:13

4 Rashdall. H, *Denglei traslate. The Universities Of Europe In the Middle Ages(III)*[M]. Chongqing: Chongqing UniversityPress, 2011: 101.

book of *De institutione musica* consists of five volumes, which discuss the fragmentary writing of the music theory in ancient Greece, including chord method, melody, mode, interval ratio and ratio, as well as music philosophy etc.. Boethius' speculative theory is no connection with the music practice and from the perspective of Boethius, the ideologist who conducts music theoretical research and understands music philosophy as well as is educated and rational can be called a musician. The musicians are philosophers who are critical of musical instruments and songs, while those who perform music are the servants of music. The book of *De institutione musica* was defined as a required music textbook in Universities as early as the 12th century, and remained part of the liberal Art curriculum until after the 18th century, especially at Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

Boethius's music theory is an abstract mathematical conjecture and music *speculativa* study based on numbers, harmonica, mixes Platonic idea of celestial music, which has little practical value to a composer or performer. Boethius keep a distance with practical music. However, the University is not the only place studying Boethius's speculative music but his music theory almost formed the basis of all music "reasoning" in Medieval Europe and Britain.

3. Religious Music Practice in Universities

In the Medieval Europe, all social formations took religion as the core and early Universities were closely related to religion. Many Medieval Universities were developed from religious schools and monasteries. Music was an important part of religious rites, and the practice of music was indispensable in religious life. According to the relevant regulations of the Catholicism, almost all religious services required music. Attending religious activities in music was a daily life of University education in medieval Britain, and churches or chapels became the important places for music practice. The practice of religious music in University was carried out outside the course of "Seven Artes Liberales" speculative music.

Religious music education mainly includes the practices of music such as singing, playing and composing in religious ceremonies, and music has strong religious function. The monks gained the monopoly of education, thus education itself was permeated with the nature of theology. The University choir performed daily music services in matins and evening prayer, singing hymns and anthems. And the mass cycles, specific scriptures or other forms of music would be performed at religious festivals or large religious events.

Since the late Middle ages, church musicians in England have been generally respected and considered outstanding figures. Universities expected to preserve and encourage the religious services of outstanding musicians, and the award of a musician's degree was considered the best incentive for these outstanding musicians.

4. The Emergency of the Musical Degree

In the late Middle Ages, music emerged as an independent major in Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and music degrees were explicitly awarded in British Universities, while before that, they had not been awarded in other Universities. The reason why the music degree first appeared in British Universities is that the Britain was at a very advanced stage of music development. Compared to continent of Europe, the British music was in the leading position during this period. The music degree was awarded by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and stemmed from the practice of a single degree in the study of the seven general education programs, which has some validity. Because a music degree was similar to a grammar degree, it did not require a residence in a university, and there was no full membership of a university for degree applicants. And, the University intended to preserve and encourage the religious services of prominent musicians.

In 1464, Henry Abingdon (1418-1497), conductor of the royal St. Edward IV's Royal boys' choir, got a doctorate in music from Cambridge University, which was the first recorded music degree in the world. We may reasonably infer that Henry Abingdon had passed through the ordinary University course, and taken the M.A.degree before becoming a Doctor of Music. He might proceed to the Doctorate on condition of his residing in Cambridge one year, but whether he did so, does not appear.He is said to have been pre-eminent as a singer and organist.⁵ But in fact, in the history of western music, Henry Abingdon was not an influential musician, he didn't even leave any works or traces, except for the fact that he got a music degree from Cambridge University. In the same year, the priest of Edward IV, Thomas St Just, was also awarded a doctorate of music from Cambridge University. It is reasonable to assume that he first passed the University's normal courses and obtained a Master of Arts degree before becoming a doctor of music.⁶ Not long after, John Hamboys of King's college, Cambridge University, also received a music doctorate. He was very active in the 1570s and was very well known on music, "for his emotionally authentic, highly skilled music."⁷ He was also highly accomplished in some other areas, particularly Latin and Mathematics. He had taken the "Seven Artes Liberales" course before obtaining his music degree. What's more, he got the degree of master in literature.

Other music scholars who received a music degree from Cambridge in the 15th century included: in 1470, Lessy, a member of the duke of York church choir, received a music degree from Cambridge. Baker received his music degree from Cambridge in 1489. Humfrey Frevill received a bachelor's degree in music and a doctorate from Cambridge in 1496 and 1504

5 See Graces in Appendix—C, E, F, G, H, I,J,&c. C.F. Abdy Williams. Degrees in Oxford and Cambridge [M].

London: Novello. Ewer and Co,2009:15.

6 C.F. Abdy Williams. Degrees in Oxford and Cambridge [M].London: Novello. Ewer and Co,2009:12.

7 Frida Knight. Cambridge music [M].New York city: the Oleander Press,1980:11.

respectively. In 1502, John Parker studied at Cambridge University for three and a half years, got a bachelor degree in music etc. Robert Fairfax, or Fayrfax, or Ferfax, was the first Oxford Doctor in Music of whom there is any record, having incorporated there in 1511, 8 though here is nothing to show that Oxford never made Doctors of Music previously to this.

It was vague about the 15th century scholars who earned their music degrees at British Universities, and they didn't leave too much traces for us to explore except for the fact we just mentioned.

In the 16th century, the nature and function of music changed from "to entertain God" to "to entertain man". People began to treat music as an art, not just a speculative science or philosophy. Those "cantor peritus et perfectus" have been the real musicians-- they were not only educated but also sang well. 9 The Universities has opened the windows to many who were more concerned with the artistic practice of music than the mathematical proportions of musical scales. The music degree of the Universities retained the concept of "music science" in the Middle Ages in form, but in fact, the qualification of music degree was granted to the composers. The earliest Cambridge statutes laid down the requirements for a master's degree in grammar, but there was no requirement for a music degree. With the development of religious music, the Universities expected to further encourage those outstanding religious musicians. Meanwhile, some lesser-known musicians began to aspire to the degree of music and apply to the Universities.

In addition to the regulations on the length of study of music degree applicants in Universities and the requirements on the research and study of music theory, Cambridge University has begun to put forward specific requirements on the music practical ability of music degree applicants. Degree candidates were no longer just precise music theorists, but were required to submit their original music works, including masses, hymns or carols, and perform at some important University's ceremonies. Those requirements for music degree applicants were not originally intended to test the music ability of degree applicants. For a music bachelor's degree, it seemed that the music knowledge in the early time was no need other than singing and science represented by Boethius. It wasn't until the early 16th century that we heard about music degree applicants being asked to compose music. And it was likely that, even then, the original purpose of the degree was to have a music "performance" at the awarding ceremony, to add to its gravitas. Since the early 16th century, candidates have had to compose mass for the annual commencement. 10 However, the requirements for music degree applicants to create music soon became the basis for judging the music ability of music degree applicants.

8 Foster," Alumni Ox: C.F. Abdy Williams. Degrees in Oxford and Cambridge [M].London: Novello. Ewer and Co, 2009: 16.

9 Thomas Christensen, Ren Damin translate. The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory[M].Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House Co,2011:6

10 Williams.A short Historical Account of the Degrees in Music at Oxford and Cambridge with a chronological list of graduate in that faculty from the year 1463[M].London and New York: Novello. Ewer Co, 1893: 18.

David Sidney Kinner, an expert on early music in Europe believe that there seems to be two types of musicians in Universities, one is a practical musician who combines singing and composing. And the views from Frida Knight who is a research specialist in Cambridge University music education are as follow: Universities need some proof of the degree applicant's professional background, so it is necessary for the candidate to prove that he has studied for a certain number of years and he is required to submit his works (to prove his music level).¹¹ We may take it for granted that music was as common in Universities during this period as anywhere else, at least in Cambridge where music was always being practiced.

The first person to be asked to submit a music works to Cambridge was John Firtun, who was asked to write a mass when applying for a music degree in 1516. In 1608, Cambridge University decreed that the University council or grand commencement should end with a music performance which further promoted the music degree applicants in music creative practice.¹² The first applicant for a music degree at Oxford to be asked to compose music was John Wendon, who in 1509 was asked to write a mass. In 1515 Robert Perrot, another Oxford applicant for a music degree, was required to write a mass and a song. In 1531, a famous composer John Gines applied for a music degree at Oxford University and was asked to write a mass. Eventually Oxford approved his degree without him having to attend mass, but required him to pay for the ceremony. In 1636, an act of music was included in a decree issued by Oxford University that music degree applicants were required six to eight parts of church music works. At the end of the 16th century, Oxford University established music degree regulations, which required applicants to obtain a bachelor's degree before studying for a doctor's degree, and the minimum time between two degrees was five years. But in fact, when the candidate was a very prestigious musician, this condition did not apply, even when two degrees were obtained on the same day. Until 1889, a doctorate in music at Cambridge was not required to earn a bachelor's degree in music.

On the other hand, music scholars developed their music skills outside the Universities, where they worked as organists or music instructors in different churches, and the Universities didn't set up any courses of musical practice for a very long period. Music degree applicants did not need to live on campus or took an examination. They only needed to provide proof of time of spending studying music and submit degree works and perform. To be frank, most people studying for a music degree at Oxford and Cambridge had no connection to either University.¹³ In the 16th and 17th centuries, more and more scholars obtained music degrees from Cambridge University. These musicians all served in the church and they were all outstanding composers and organists of the church music, including a group of renowned music masters in

11 C.F. Abdy Williams. Degrees in Oxford and Cambridge [M].London: Novello.Ewer and Co,2009:1.

12 C.F. Abdy Williams.Degrees in Oxford and Cambridge [M].London:Novello.Ewer and Co,2009:23-28.

13 W.J. Smith.Five centuries of Cambridge Musicians.1464-1964[M]. Cambridge: W. Heffer&Sonns, 1964.

Europe. Among them were Robert Fayrfax (1464—1521), Christopher Tye (1505—1573), Orlando Gibbons (1583—1625), Thomas Tallis (1505—1585), Benjamin Rogers (1614—1698), etc. They created a large number of excellent religious and secular music works, which played a pivotal role in the development history of music in Britain.

Although the early Music Degree system of British Universities was not very clearly, but it is undeniable that the Music Degree system of Modern Universities has been established from it, and gradually improved. The early Music Degree system of British Universities has an very important milestone significance in the history of higher music education.

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