

Stoddard Lincoln
John Eccles: The last of a tradition

1963 unpublished diss., Oxford University.

Franklin Zimmerman

The value of the work appearing recently under this somewhat romantically subtitled caption can best be summed up by saying that it fills a long-felt need for a study in depth of an important composer of the post-Purcellian school. Moreover, it fills the need through expert handling of an enormous amount of detail, much of which is the result of original research and analysis. Its total worth is such that it is certain to be an important item in the bibliographies of future scholars of English music of the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

Placing Eccles in the as-yet-seldom-researched hiatus between the periods of Purcell and Handel in the history of English music, Mr. Lincoln first sorts out a few genealogical problems, then sets to work on his main task: to discover Eccles' significance in native musical developments in London during the post-Purcellian twilight and to diagnose the ills which brought these developments to nothing. Reflecting upon the aesthetic interworkings of earlier English musical and poetical traditions, he formulates and substantiates the notion that it has been the awkwardness of the English language when sung which has imposed upon musician and lyric poet their most difficult problems. For the music dramatist with classical ideals these problems have been virtually insurmountable.

Comparing the achievements and methods of Henry Lawes to those of Lully, Mr. Lincoln then traces the development of the rhetorical style of the Lawes brothers, following it up to the late 1670's when Pietro Reggio appeared in England to introduce Italianate melismas, both structural and illustrative. (While it is true that Purcell did first begin to use vocal melismas about this time, I wonder if it can be maintained that such were then new in England. The works of Coperario, Lanière, and Walter Porter, to name only a few of the composers figuring chiefly in Vincent Duckles' massive research into the history of florid song in England, certainly *seem* to prove otherwise.) These investigations lead naturally to the main theme of the thesis, that is, the origins and development of that strange aesthetic creature, the English dramatic opera, which found its stride only with Purcell and his contemporaries and lost it with their passing. Its companion form, the English play with incidental music, also comes in for full and detailed investigation, so that the stage is well set for the arrival of

Eccles on the scene in the spring of 1693.

The remainder of the dissertation traces his adventures in this strange demi-world of the London theatres, leaving unturned no stone, unanalyzed no plot, song, or masque which might yield any clue as to the source of the difficulties under which dramatic composers and poets labored with less and less success at each turning of the way. Eccles and Congreve, Motteux and D'Urfey, even the actors Betterton and Mrs. Bracegirdle at last gave way before the nemesis which had undone Purcell and was soon to give Handel good cause to try his giant's strength. The dissertation ends with a study of *Semele*, Eccles and Congreve's joint handiwork, which *could* have saved the English tradition and even *might* have. But far be it from me to divulge the fatal flaw or expose the villain of the piece, thus spoiling the prospective reader's fun in following the thorough, enormously detailed sleuthing Mr. Lincoln has done to find his conclusions.

For originality of research, musical analysis, and historical insight, Mr. Lincoln can hardly be faulted, for it is a superb dissertation. His readers might have been a little more careful in criticizing matters of prose style, and there are moments—sometimes rather long ones—when the "thetic line" disappears in the underbrush. But the author very clearly can see the forest as well as the trees and should be given every encouragement to publish a somewhat emmended, but nevertheless definitive, monograph on Eccles as soon as possible. Such a publication would fill a real need and fill it well.

FRANKLIN ZIMMERMAN received his Ph.D. at U.S.C. and is presently Professor of Music, Dartmouth College. He is the author of *Henry Purcell: An Analytical Catalogue of His Music*.