

William Byrd

(c.1540-1623)

Voices, choirs, and faith

John Lees

Since singing is so good a thing, I wish all men would learn to sing.

The artless simplicity of this couplet from the Preface to his 1588 *Psalmes, Sonets and songs of sadnes and pietie* belies the complex variety and genius of William Byrd's music for voices. Human beings are inevitably conditioned by the times they inhabit, and Byrd embodies in a unique way the divisions and tensions of the Reformation through which his formative years were lived, and whose effects were to colour the remainder of his life as musician, courtier, family man, and gentleman. His music never entirely disappeared from singers' lives and repertoire, particularly in cathedrals, but a gradual revival since the 1840s has shown Byrd to be one of the most significant figures in English music, and of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the greatest of all.

William Byrd's birth date is based on a 1598 legal document where the composer himself claims that he is aged '58 years or thereabouts'. It seems likely he was a chorister at St Paul's, or possibly Westminster Abbey or Windsor; and as a young man, was probably taught by Thomas Tallis (c.1505-85). In the 1560s, under the relative stability of Elizabeth I's reign, Byrd became Organist of Lincoln Cathedral. In 1572 he returned to London as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, a sought-after and prestigious Court position with extremely generous remuneration



Image 1 | Etching of Byrd (undated) by Gerard Vandergucht (after Nicola Francesco Haym), British Museum

and working conditions, the highest musical standards in England, and national, even international renown in the musical world and beyond. He retained his Chapel Royal connection until his death over 50 years later; and so the new, Reformed, ecclesiastical establishment was Byrd's lifelong paymaster.

Byrd's early religious affiliations are unknown. He married in Lincoln in 1568, and along with Julian, his wife, became a committed Roman Catholic, which inevitably meant investigation and indictment for recusancy. The couple were fined on several occasions for not attending Church of England services. But William at least seems to have avoided the

full force of persecution endured by many of his co-religionists; he was well-connected at court, and, as the most prominent musician in the land, enjoyed more than a little royal favour. Yet by the early 1590s the tension between personal faith and professional career brought about a degree of withdrawal from public life.

Byrd's tenure at Lincoln Cathedral was the catalyst for compositions for the new English liturgies. After leaving Lincoln, until the early 1580s, he was paid an annual retainer to provide 'songs and divine services well set to music' for them. Condensing the elaborate Latin daily Offices into Prayer Book Mattins and Evensong required a



Image 3 | Staircase with a priest hole in Harvington Hall, Worcestershire

completely new musical style and repertoire; the Lincoln Cathedral Injunctions of 1548 prescribed singing in English, 'setting there unto a plain and distinct note, for every syllable one'. Byrd's *Short Service*, not entirely constrained by this austere ideal, provides canticles for the whole day; it appears in many contemporary manuscripts and was clearly popular. The *Second Service*, Magnificat and Nunc dimittis only, has solo 'verse' passages and organ accompaniment, a derivation from the already-popular secular consort song for voice and viols. The anthem *O Lord, make thy servant Elizabeth our Queen* has simple, stepwise melodies in a mainly chordal texture that only twice breaks into restrained counterpoint; more recently, it was of course widely sung during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. *Prevent us, O Lord* sets a Book of Common Prayer collect but its 'plain and distinct note' takes occasional wing in imitative passages, suggesting a more relaxed attitude to text-setting and maybe a later date of composition.

The good standing of Byrd (and Thomas Tallis) with Queen Elizabeth is confirmed by her 1575 grant to them (both Gentlemen of her Chapel) of 21 years' monopoly in music printing. This venture was, however, not a great success; its only product made a loss. The elegant motets of the *Cantiones Sacrae* ('Sacred Songs') of 1575, dedicated to the Queen herself, comprise the first Latin-texted music collection printed in England, both Tallis and Byrd providing seventeen pieces, one for each year of Elizabeth's reign thus far. Historians continue to suggest the royal monopoly and dedication indicate performance in the Chapel Royal, but there is no evidence that Latin music was ever used there – and, in any case, the Catholic teaching of the texts used would have been completely unacceptable to the new Reformed establishment. Byrd's contributions focus on the

piety of Lent, Passiontide, and the Cross, and prayer for the departed. The simplicity of *Emendemus in melius* contrasts with the immense scale of the three-section *Tribue Domine*, while *Peccantem me quotidie* deals with sin, penitence, and death in dark five-part textures, expressive semitone intervals, and false relations. These are pieces originating in the old religion, but in some cases clearly modified for a new purpose – the expression of Catholic sentiments, removed from the context of worship, offered as supreme examples of their composers' art. If you were still of the old faith, here were resonances of comfort and familiarity, lament for things lost, and maybe the beginnings of your beleaguered minority's voice of protest. In performance terms, the 1575 book is chamber music, not for choirs but for consorts, one voice to a part – and so too with all of Byrd's subsequent collections.

The religious and political temperature was soon raised further. The beginning of a Jesuit mission to England saw its first martyr, Edmund Campion, in 1581. Treason was in the air, with fears of invasion and conspiracies to assassinate the Queen; some Protestants thought Elizabeth might contract an unsuitable (Catholic) marriage. The execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, and the Spanish Armada contributed to a climate where Catholics were under greater pressure and facing harsher penalties. Byrd was himself investigated, and in 1585 and 1586 search warrants were issued for his home. He had become more involved with recusant culture and nobility; the priest William Weston wrote of a Catholic gathering near Marlow in 1586 at which Byrd 'the very famous English musician and organist' was present.

Into this volatile environment came two more volumes of Byrd's *Cantiones Sacrae* in 1589 and 1591. Both were dedicated to Catholic patrons with influence at court, and their texts are decidedly

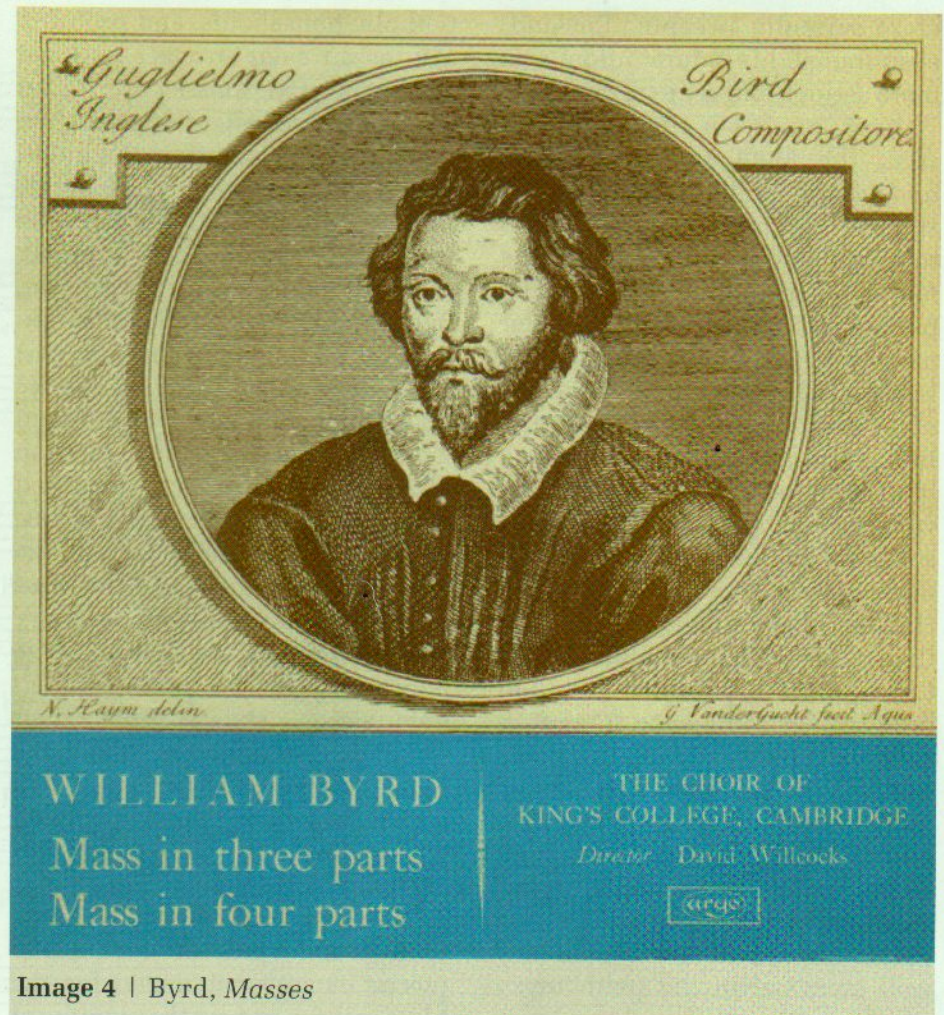


Image 4 | Byrd, *Masses*

political in temper. Joseph Kerman (in *The Masses and Motets of William Byrd* (1981)) identifies as 'Jerusalem' motets those belonging to a world where

God is implored to forgive his people, who have sinned and who lament their affliction in the City made desolate; the hidden reference to the situation of the English Catholics is inescapable when these statements and sentiments are considered in the total context of Byrd's text repertory.

Poignant suspensions, insistent repeated semitones, and harmonic colour in, for example, *Vide, Domine, afflictionem* express intense sorrow, suffering, and longing for deliverance. *Tribulationes civitatum*, dense and sombre, contrasts groups of upper and lower voices and at moments of profound prayer abandons polyphony for

simple, direct chordal entreaties. *Ne irascaris* sounds to twenty-first-century ears as in a major key, its desolate penitential text thrown into relief by simple textures and melodies. The second part, *Civitas sancti tui*, often sung on its own, is a perfect concise expression of the recusants' loss of their Jerusalem, laid waste by reform and persecution – a simple descending melody ('*desolata est*') layering grief upon grief in its repeating drawn-out point of imitation. There are other moods: in 1589, two Advent motets call for watchfulness (*Vigilate*) and the hope and joy of renewal (*Laetentur coeli*); while in the 1591 collection that hope seems fulfilled by *Laudibus in sanctis*, a joyful paraphrase of Psalm 150, and *Haec dies*, for Easter. There is in this last piece a fresh rhythmic flexibility, lightness of touch, and sensitivity to text, suggesting Byrd had his eye on the new madrigal

craze currently sweeping England, even though his natural idiom was more serious and refined.

Very much in that classical vein, the 1588 *Psalmes, Sonets and songs* and 1589 *Songs of sundrie natures* set English religious and secular words, the former including penitential psalms in metrical verse, the latter more restrained and traditionally English than the new madrigal of Morley, Weelkes, Wilbye, and the younger generation. Many of these pieces, now adapted for vocal groups, originated as consort songs for solo voice and viols. The dedications, to Sir Christopher Hatton, Lord Chancellor, and the Lord Chamberlain, Henry Carey, show Byrd cultivating and profiting from influence at court in a decade where Catholics had come under great pressure. This, too, is music for domestic performance and consumption, though the 1589 set contains *Christ rising again*, a setting of the Book of Common Prayer *Easter Anthems* which may well have begun life (with organ accompaniment) as a Lincoln or Chapel Royal anthem.

Almost certainly for the Chapel Royal is the *Great Service*, for ten voices in two five-part choirs used antiphonally and together; a whole day's music, like its *Short* counterpart, but more expansive, its text-setting much less restrained, exemplifying the late-Elizabethan rediscovery of beauty and elaboration in worship which was to blossom in the new century under Archbishop Laud. Certainly its complexity suggests it was written later in Byrd's career, most likely the 1580s or '90s.

The early 1590s mark a change for the composer, by 1595 withdrawn from London to Stondon Massey in Essex, a new home near to fellow Catholics, notably his wealthy patron Sir John Petre of Ingatestone Hall. The music of this period is clearly intended for the worship of the recusant community, clandestine celebrations of Mass in

Catholic households, and probably also as an even stronger political statement. His *Masses* for three, four, and five voices appeared in the early 1590s, printed without title page, dedication, or elaborate preface. In homage to the past, the early 16th-century John Taverner seems to have been an inspiration, in general layout, and there is even a direct quotation in the four-part Mass *Sanctus*. Yet English Catholics now inhabited a new and different world: as the subversive mission of the Jesuit priests espoused uncompromising Roman ideals, so Byrd knew the music of his European colleagues, and the Mass settings are, as his biographer Kerry McCarthy writes, 'concise imitative polyphony in the best Counter-Reformation style'. From their most secret and hidden origins the *Masses* have become perhaps Byrd's best-known and most recorded pieces, and in the repertoires of choirs worldwide.

The two 1605 and 1607 books of *Gradualia* provide over a 100 pieces of seasonal music for the Mass, set for use on the significant occasions of the Catholic year; the 1607 set was dedicated to Petre of Ingatestone. Here is assured and inspired text-setting, the atmosphere of each feast-day lovingly and atmospherically evoked. Unlike the large-scale pieces of 1589 and 1591, the polyphony is concise and tightly constructed with not a superfluous note. Perhaps the best known of these pieces, *Ave verum corpus*, is a simple, yet profound meditation on the Blessed Sacrament. It is a kind of Latin reflection of the earliest English anthems of 50 years before: a seemingly simple, four-voice chordal texture, even with the final section repeat (as in Tallis' *If ye love me*), but transformed with subtly shifting accents and mere hints of imitation between the voices. The striking harmonic clash (F# / F \natural) in the very opening phrase we would nowadays term a 'false relation'; but this is not falsehood, but truth, the 'verum corpus', Byrd emphasising

the real presence of Christ's body in the Mass – a central tenet of the old religion with which the Reformers violently disagreed.

Byrd's final printed collection, the 1611 *Psalmes, Songs, and Sonnets*, is 'fit for voices or viols of 3, 4, 5, and 6 parts', and its variety of vocal scorings and voice ranges is extraordinary. It appeared when the madrigal craze had virtually run its course, but contains one of Byrd's few real madrigals, *This sweet and merry month of May*, originally printed in 1590. There are, too, religious pieces, like *Praise our Lord all ye gentiles*, that seem to be Church of England anthems; but their texts are psalm translations from Verstegen's Primer, a recusant prayer book – 'our Lord', rather than 'the Lord' was contemporary Catholic usage, a self-conscious sign of cultural identity.

One last Church of England anthem, *Sing joyfully*, is probably the piece of this title sung at the baptism of Mary, daughter of James I, in the Chapel Royal in May 1605. It is a six-voice setting of Psalm 81 very much in the lineage and mood of the 1591 *Laudibus in sanctis* and *Haec dies*. Energetic, closely imitative textures, and constant cross-rhythms are interrupted by fanfares ('*Blow the trumpet...*') heralding the feast day, rejoicing in the Law of Jacob's God; Jacob, of course, the Latinate version of the new King's name, not just the Old Testament patriarch beloved of the psalmist. Byrd the convinced Catholic set the text in the popular, definitely Protestant, Geneva Bible translation, as if to underline his loyalty to the Crown. That loyalty meant continued connection with the Chapel Royal, and, in turn, the composer remaining on the payroll until his death in 1623. Although in some fashion Byrd kept his Church of England and Catholic worlds separate, his will is clear as to his true convictions: '... and that I may live & die a true and perfect member of his Holy Catholic Church without which I believe there is no salvation for me... '.

AVE VERUM CORPUS

The musical score is written for four voices (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass) in a four-part setting. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The lyrics are in Latin, and the music is characterized by its polyphonic texture, with each voice part having its own melodic line.

First System:

A - ve ve - rum cor - pus, na - tum de Ma - ri - a Vir -

Second System:

- ne: Ve - re pas - sum, im - mo - la - tum in cru - ce

Third System:

ho - mi - ne, Cu - ius la - tus per - fo - ra - tum un - da flu -

Fourth System:

san - gui - ne, san - gui - ne: E - sto no - bis prae - gu - sta - tum in mor -

Fifth System:

flu - xit san - gui - ne: E - sto no - bis prae - gu - sta - tum in mo

Byrd's *Short Service* stayed in cathedral repertoires; it was copied into many contemporary part-books, and printing in Barnard's *First Book of Selected Church Music* (1641) ensured that it came back into use after the Restoration when choral foundations had to be painstakingly rebuilt. Byrd's music was still used at St Paul's in 1696 and the Chapel Royal in 1712. The mid-19th century saw growing interest in his legacy; Edward Rimbault's early editions included the *Mass for five voices*, and Samuel Sebastian Wesley had the 1589 motet *Laetentur coeli* sung as an illustration to his 1844 Liverpool lectures on church music. Richard Terry's revival of Byrd's music at Downside from 1896, and then the newly-founded Westminster Cathedral (1901-24), led the way in Catholic circles, while in December 1909 an English version of the *Mass for five voices* was first sung in the Church of England, at Birmingham Cathedral (St Philip's) under its enlightened Director of Music Edwin Stephenson. After the First World War the preeminent Byrd scholar was E.H. Fellowes of St George's Chapel, Windsor. He rediscovered the manuscript source of the *Great Service*, presided over the first collected edition of Byrd's music (1937-1950), and produced the first significant 'life and works' study of the composer in 1936. A new *Byrd Edition* under Philip Brett was completed in 2004.

Over the past 70 years or so, with Latin texts gradually accepted in Church of England revised liturgies, the three *Masses* and many of Byrd's Latin pieces have

found central and established places in the repertoire, alongside the English church and devotional music. How entirely fitting, then, that earlier this year the Coronation service of King Charles III included two Byrd pieces: one (*Prevent us, O Lord*) clearly written for the infant Church of England, the other (*Gloria* from the *Mass for four voices*) for covert celebrations of a persecuted community (see Editor's Introduction for another comment on this). 400 years after his death, the two strands of William Byrd's life were brought together, even reconciled, as they enhanced and beautified this defining national occasion in Westminster Abbey.

A personal note

My own enthusiasm for Byrd began as a teenager, amidst the madrigals of Morley, Weelkes, and others, when the school choir encountered *Ave verum corpus*. As an undergraduate, the indescribable beauty of the five-part *Mass* in King's College Cambridge was a defining experience. For almost 50 years I have returned over and again to Byrd to sing, and to explore his endlessly fascinating life and music. In that exploration, and especially in this short article, I have been hugely indebted to the writings of Joseph Kerman, Richard Turbet, John Harley, and Kerry McCarthy (listed below) as well as articles and other sources too numerous to mention here.

Further reading

Joseph Kerman | *The Masses and Motets of William Byrd* (Faber, 1982)

John Harley | *William Byrd: Gentleman of the Chapel Royal* (Ashgate, 1997)

Kerry McCarthy | *Byrd* (Oxford UP, 2013)

Richard Turbet | *William Byrd: A Guide to Research* (Routledge, 2012)

Listening

Notable recordings from the LP era include the three *Masses* from King's College Cambridge under David Willcocks (1959, 1963) and the complete Tallis/Byrd *Cantiones Sacrae* on three discs by Michael Howard and Cantores in Ecclesia on the L'Oiseau-Lyre label. In the 1980s and 1990s New College Oxford curated selections of Byrd's 1575 music and the 1589 and 1591 *Cantiones* on CRD. The Tallis Scholars recorded the *Great Service*, as more recently have King's College Cambridge and Westminster Abbey choirs. As to consort groups, the Hilliard Ensemble's 1984 version of the *Masses* is atmospheric; Andrew Carwood and The Cardinall's Musick have recorded all the Latin music, first on ASV Gaudeamus and completed on Hyperion; and Alamire under David Skinner produced a 2-CD set of the complete Tallis/Byrd 1575 music in 2011. As this anniversary approached, three recordings of the 'secular' published sets have appeared, David Skinner and Alamire in the 1588 and 1589 sets and The Sixteen in the 1611 collection. Many other choirs and groups have recorded individual pieces, making Byrd's genius accessible as never before.

John Lees read Music at Selwyn College Cambridge under Andrew Jones, John Rutter, Philip Radcliffe, and Glyn Jenkins. He was Organist of St Botolph's, Cambridge, and sang in the choirs of Birmingham Cathedral (1978-81) and Chichester Cathedral (1983-89) while working in the Civil Service. His singing teachers have included Michael Rippon, Graham Trew, and Berty Rice. After ordination he was Succentor of St Paul's Cathedral (1993-8), a parish priest in Swindon, and finally Precentor of Wakefield Cathedral (2006-09).

