

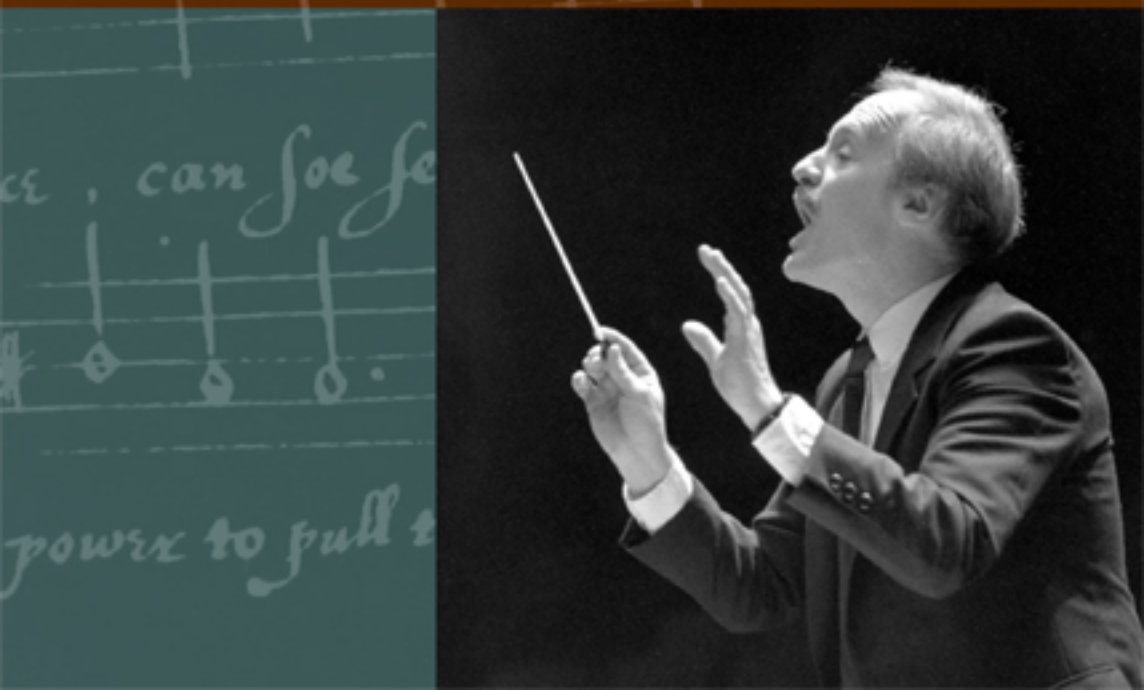
William Byrd and His Contemporaries

Essays and a Monograph

© 2006 UC Regents
Buy this book

PHILIP BRETT

EDITED BY JOSEPH KERMAN AND DAVITT MORONEY



University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

© 2007 by The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brett, Philip.

William Byrd and his contemporaries : essays and a monograph / Philip Brett ; edited by Joseph Kerman and Davitt Moroney.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-520-24758-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-520-24758-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Byrd, William, 1542 or 3–1623. 2. Composers—England. 3. Music—England—16th century—History and criticism. I. Kerman, Joseph, 1924–. II. Moroney, Davitt. III. Title.

ML410.B996B74 2007

780.92—dc22 2006007433

Manufactured in the United States of America

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on New Leaf EcoBook 50, a 100% recycled fiber of which 50% is de-inked post-consumer waste, processed chlorine-free. EcoBook 50 is acid-free and meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/ASTM D5634-01 (*Permanence of Paper*).

CHAPTER ONE

William Byrd: Traditionalist and Innovator

Sixteenth-century Europe produced a number of composers who possessed enormous technical facility and breath of vision. They are on the whole, however, a rather distant lot—especially those of the religious tradition represented by Gombert, Clemens, Palestrina and Lassus. This may explain why the early music movement has made a greater fuss over the more personal and intimate music of the subsequent century and a half, inaugurated most notably by Claudio Monteverdi, a character almost as colorful as his operatic music.

William Byrd (1540–1623) is clearly different from the European giants—even Victoria, who, though he also came from a country on the fringe of the Continent, was fully assimilated into the international scene in Rome. Bred up in a musical culture that had been isolated from that of the Continent during the late fifteenth century, Byrd completely assimilated Continental techniques, but he also strove to preserve various advantageous elements of insularity—particularly the rhapsodic sense of melody cultivated by his predecessors. Another notable difference of Byrd as a composer is that he

Notes for a concert of music by Byrd in November 1993, the 450th anniversary of his birth, given at the University of California at Riverside and Pomona College; published as “Traditionalist and Innovator: Aspects of William Byrd,” *Southern California Early Music News* 18, no. 3 (November 1993): 1–15.

wrote fluently in several genres. He is arguably the most ambitious and accomplished composer of purely instrumental music of his age, as well as the creator of a highly individual style of vocal polyphony out of an imaginative amalgam of English and Continental traditions.

To an age like ours, fascinated with alienation and marginalization, Byrd also presents an intriguing dilemma. Revered by his contemporaries and honored by his chief employer, Queen Elizabeth, he appears in some lights as the perfect royal musician, writing on order for the newly established Church of England as well as clothing courtiers' duties in substantial if often rather sober musical garb. The other, darker side of his life is represented by his stubbornly persistent Roman Catholicism. Clinging to his faith, he refused to conform and stayed away from his parish church in defiance of the law as long as he lived. His religious music, most of it in Latin, and some of it written expressly for the proscribed services of the Roman Catholic rite, has an intensity that appears to stem directly from his religious and political predicament as an outsider on the inside of Elizabethan society.

This anniversary concert program is divided into two sections, representing the earlier and later periods of Byrd's life. The separation occurs at the point around 1593 when Byrd appears to have retired from active life at court and to have moved from Harlington in Middlesex (near the present Heathrow Airport) to a house at Stondon Massey deep in the Essex countryside. There he lived a mere eleven miles from Ingatestone, the secluded home of the Petres, a Roman Catholic family of immense wealth (Lawrence Stone calls them "landed magnates") who protected his interests. Despite this umbrella, he continued to be cited as a recusant (one who would not attend Anglican services) at each quarter sessions of the local county court for the rest of his life, though it is likely he was excused the exorbitant fines and other penalties attached to such behavior.

Byrd had to face not only the persecution of his religion but also the Puritan suspicion of music, which affected even liberal thinkers like Roger Ascham, who in his *Toxiphilus* (1545) argued that instrumental music was effeminate and that while the young might learn singing,

shooting was better. No wonder that Byrd in his first songbook, the much reprinted *Psalmes, Sonets & Songs of sadnes and pietie* of 1588, included a list of reasons “to persuade every one to learn to sing.” These reasons carefully emphasize the spiritual and the physical; “it doth strengthen all parts of the breast, and doth open the pipes” is a fair example. The Oxford don John Case, in his *Praise of Musicke* (1586), was prepared to go much further in asserting that “the chief end of music is to delight.” No doubt delighted by Case’s defense, Byrd wrote a six-part song in his praise to words by Thomas Watson, a classically trained and musically involved poet who was a friend of Spenser (he is Amyntas in “Colin Clout’s Come Home Again”). The piece was published as a broadside and only three of the six voice parts have survived; fortunately the survivors are the bass and the two sopranos, allowing the present writer to make a fairly convincing attempt at reconstruction.

Byrd’s earlier secular vocal music gives a strong idea of his association with the more forward-looking literary people of his time. The 1588 songbook includes a beautiful setting of a rather plain-style poem by Sir Philip Sidney, “O Lord, how vain,” along with “Constant Penelope,” an awkward but lovable experiment in English hexameters, in which Byrd matches long and short syllables with long and short notes, in the manner of the contemporary French *vers mesuré*. The effect is to bring out the hexameter rhythm at the expense of the usual accentual emphasis, and this in turn reveals what Handel and Stravinsky knew but few native composers other than Byrd, Dowland, Purcell and Britten ever realized—that “speech rhythm” is not the only stable principle on which to base the intelligent setting of English poetry or prose.

It is ironic to find Byrd in the company of the literary avant-garde of the day, for he was a rather stubborn traditionalist in the matter of verse and voice. He preferred the English—and essentially medieval—tradition of setting the *form* of the verse rather than the new-fangled manner of reflecting its imagery and syntax, so conspicuous in the imported

madrigal style that fascinated his younger contemporaries Thomas Morley, Thomas Weelkes and John Wilbye. Imbued with a strong sense of heritage and tradition, Byrd seems closer in spirit to the poet Edmund Spenser—whose verse, like that of Shakespeare, he never set.

Byrd's music for viols also reflects this traditionalism. He anxiously reworks the *In Nomine* tradition adopted by midcentury English composers from a mass setting of their preeminent forerunner John Taverner, and he plies himself at several other plainsong settings that tested his skill. The four-part work that we perform, *In nomine* no. 2, takes its point of reference from the work of the older composer Robert Parsons. But the climax of Byrd's earlier music occurs in the two sets of *Cantiones sacrae* published in 1589 and 1591. This serial publication, an unprecedented gesture in English music, was aided by Byrd's having secured a monopoly over the printing of music in his midthirties. The two collections contain a variety of Latin texts (very few of them drawn from the Catholic liturgy) which, though innocuous enough in themselves, taken together emphasize so heavily such symbolic matters as the Second Coming and the Babylonian Captivity that it seems clear they were intended to convey a political as well as a musical message.

Exurge, Domine is a typically vigorous appeal to God for action: "Arise, O Lord! Why sleepest thou? . . . Wherefore hidest thou thy face and forgettest our misery and trouble?" Byrd's repetitions of the opening words at the end, as a *da capo*, indicates the license he allows himself with his biblical texts as well as the urgent polemics of his settings. Like many of these motets, it is couched in music as demonstrative as any madrigal, exuberant in style and vivid in imagery. It is hard to escape the conclusion that it was written, like the rest of the contents of the *Cantiones*, to voice the outrage and despair of the English Roman Catholic community.

In this earlier period there is sometimes a roughness and vigor to Byrd's music that brings to mind Beethoven. Byrd, too, enjoyed a "late period" in which his music, increasingly cut off from its cultural surroundings

(owing not to deafness, so far as we know, but to the religious enclave to which he belonged), took on a completely personal, visionary quality unmatched by any other composer of the age. To the new generation of court composers it would have sounded hopelessly old-fashioned. Few alive in Europe in 1611—the date of Byrd's last publication, the *Psalmes, Songs and Sonnets*—would have had any appreciation of its subtlety. Even Byrd seems a little self-conscious about it, issuing a solemn and unusual warning to the purchasers:

Only this I desire; that you will be but carefull to heare them well expressed, as I have been in both the Composing and correcting of them. Otherwise the best Song that was ever made will seeme harsh and unpleasant, for that the well expressing of them, either by Voices, or Instruments, is the life of our labours, which is seldome or never well performed at the first singing or playing.

Byrd, we can imagine, would not have appreciated the modern myth that every educated Elizabethan could sit down and sing a madrigal at sight. He evidently liked to rehearse!

The music of this last publication is secular or domestic in function, even though almost half of its texts come from the Bible. Its style is more flexible and idiosyncratic than that of the early songbooks—particularly in its rhythmic vitality and sense of harmonic drive. It is matched by the subtlety of the later keyboard music: dance pairs such as the pavans and galliards named for the Earl of Salisbury and the mysterious “Ph. Tr.,” and variations on popular tunes such as “O mistress mine”—the choice for our program—and “John come kiss me now” (“O mistress mine” is not Shakespeare's, but another text). A powerful number in the 1611 songbook, “Arise, Lord, into Thy Rest,” is similar in message and intent to the earlier *Exurge, Domine*, but what a different musical world it inhabits! In place of the supremely energetic but slightly diffuse musical rhetoric of the Latin work, the English work has chiseled phrases, and a magnificent rising sequence near the end that sounds very much a part of seventeenth-century musical language.

If the 1611 collection is, as Byrd puts it, a swan song, the crowning achievement of his later period is the two-volume collection entitled *Gradualia*, first published in 1605 and 1607, which incorporates music for the chief festivals of the Roman Catholic rite. There are over a hundred items, most for the mass but also some for private devotions, as we have recently come to understand. Byrd is specific about its purpose in his prefaces, and it appears that copies of the first volume, published in the year of the Gunpowder Plot, may have been confiscated or withheld—both volumes were reissued in 1610 when the political climate had improved.

From the *Gradualia* we select music for one of the chief festivals of the church year, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Belief in the assumption of Mary was one of the dogmas that separated Roman Catholics from Anglicans, and Byrd pours the greatest intensity into his setting of these texts. At the same time he obeys a traditional law of decorum, which makes him refrain from making this music as flamboyant and demonstrative as the earlier motets. Its function after all is to be part of but not dominate the important actions of the liturgy.

In a famous personal statement in one of the *Gradualia* prefaces, Byrd speaks of the sacred words that he sets to music:

In the very sentences (as I have learned from experience) there is such hidden and concealed power that to a man thinking about divine things and turning them over attentively and earnestly in his mind, the most appropriate measures come, I know not how, as if by their own free will, and freely offer themselves to his mind if it is neither idle nor inert.

He describes a process that we may mistake for inspiration but which he regards clearly as an *afflatus* from without. The Holy Spirit prompts one who ponders things divine with the right musical “measures,” which appear as if unaided.

Byrd would have thought of Lassus in particular, perhaps, as having had access to such a source. But in the grand gestures of that great composer we can surely hear the lofty universality of a European Catholicism

only slightly shaken in its conviction about its historical mission. In the more complicated, even tortured strains of the English master we can sense the kind of commitment that stops at nothing, even persecution and death, in pursuit of a faith that can never be taken for granted. This music retains its poignancy nearly four hundred years later.