HISTORY

WILLIAM BYRD (c.1540-1623), *Brittanicæ Musicæ Parens*

BY PETER SEIBERT

In the 400th anniversary year of the death of Byrd, who is called by some the "father of British music," Seibert takes a look at the late Renaissance composer's life and music.

Peter Seibert started to play recorder with his parents over 70 years ago, and that led to a career in music. He has degrees in music from Amherst College, and Harvard, and Rutgers universities and he taught music history at Rutgers before settling in Seattle, WA, in 1965.

He was music director of the Seattle Recorder Society (1970-2015) and served on the ARS Board (1976-1984), for which he was architect of the ARS Personal Study Program. In 2012, he received the ARS Presidential Special Honor Award.

Since 1968, he has been on workshop faculties in the U.S., Canada and England, and he taught recorder at the University of Washington School of Music for two decades, and music at The Lakeside School (1965-93).

Seibert is an active composer and conductor. His recorder and viol works have now appeared on five continents. He has also written music for chorus, orchestra, jazz ensemble and Off-Broadway theater. His setting of Deep Blue Sea was the 2007 Play-the-Recorder Month special selection.

He founded the Northwest Chamber Chorus in 1968, the Port Townsend Early Music Workshop in 1983, and the Recorder Orchestra of Puget Sound in 2006.

In the **Winter 2021 American Recorder**, Seibert wrote a 500th anniversary article about Josquin, with accompanying music examples and playing editions.

William Byrd was born into the tumultuous world of English secular and religious politics of the 16th century. Although his birth year is unknown, he apparently came into the world around 1540 during the last decade of the rule of Henry VIII, a world that saw the English church torn from that of Rome. This year, we observe the 400th anniversary of his death.

During his lifetime there were five English monarchs, as well as 14 different popes. Over 80 years of age at the time of his death, Byrd was born before—and outlived—such artistic luminaries as El Greco, Anthony Holborne, Thomas Morley, Giovanni Gabrieli, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare and Caravaggio.

> "He was always doing something unexpected."

When Byrd was a small boy, the Anglican Church became fully established under Edward VI (ruled 1547-53), but there was a harsh reversal to Roman Catholicism during Byrd's teenage years under the rule of Mary I (ruled 1553-58). Once Elizabeth I ascended the throne in 1558, the pendulum again swung toward (Protestant) Anglicanism. By about 1577, Roman Catholics needed to worship privately in secret or risk punishment.

Such was the religious and political environment in which William Byrd, who would remain Roman Catholic throughout his life, became the greatest and most prolific English composer of his era.

Byrd and his music

Byrd had many contemporary admirers. Henry Peacham, in *The Compleat Gentleman* (1634) says, "For motets and music of piety and devotion as well for the honor of our nation as the merit of the man, I prefer above all other our phoenix, Mr. William Byrd, whom in that kind I know not whether any may equal." Another period source describes him as "a Father of Musick"; and to yet another he was "Brittanicæ Musicæ Parens."

Twenty-first century conductors and scholars speak effusively about the music of Byrd.

Markdavin Obenza, music director of the touring Byrd Ensemble of Seattle, WA, writes, "For me, Byrd's versatility is what makes him a genius." He adds, "By the end of Byrd's life, we are left with a beautifully varied oeuvre filled with masterpieces. No other composer writes as well for the voice. The phrases are manageable, not too long, but incredibly effective. Each line seems to come out of the texture naturally."

Richard Marlow, Trinity College Cambridge in the UK, and faculty of the annual Byrd Festival in Portland, OR, writes: "As the conductor…, I feel not only a sense of privilege and delight but also a sense of awe and humility. Byrd is a composer of such immense stature. The more one gets to know his music—be it motet, consort song or keyboard fantasia—the more one is astounded by his versatility and imagination, his sheer technical skill, his ability to color, project, move."

For musicologist Joseph Kerman, Byrd "belonged to the pioneer generation that built Elizabethan culture. In music Byrd did this alone, for, unlike Tallis before him and Morley after, he had no immediate contemporaries of any stature."

"He was always doing something unexpected. He is probably to be regarded as one of the more intellectual of composers." And in commenting on specific forms, Kerman adds, "With his motets, first of all, he achieved nothing less than the naturalization of the high Renaissance church style. The true power and expressiveness of imitative counterpoint had never been channeled in native composition before his motets of the 1575 *Cantiones*."

Early years and church music

Byrd's early life is a mystery. His family lived in London, and his two older brothers were boy choristers at St. Paul's Cathedral (the Gothic structure that was destroyed in the great London fire of 1666). There is no record of William having sung there, but some sources have conjectured that he must also have done so.

Among other things, many of those boys were taught to play the viol as part of their training. In addition, the boys acted in plays to entertain the aristocracy. Was William part of this?

▲ William Byrd, in an 18th-century posthumous engraving by Gerard Vandergucht, after Niccolò Haym. www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1927-1008-351

Other sources have him instead as a chorister in the Chapel Royal, in which the names of the boy choristers were not recorded. An argument for this point of view is that Thomas Tallis, with whom Byrd is known to have studied, was organist for the Chapel Royal, and that perhaps Byrd could have remained there after his voice broke as an assistant to Tallis. But, again, Byrd's activities as a boy cannot be verified.

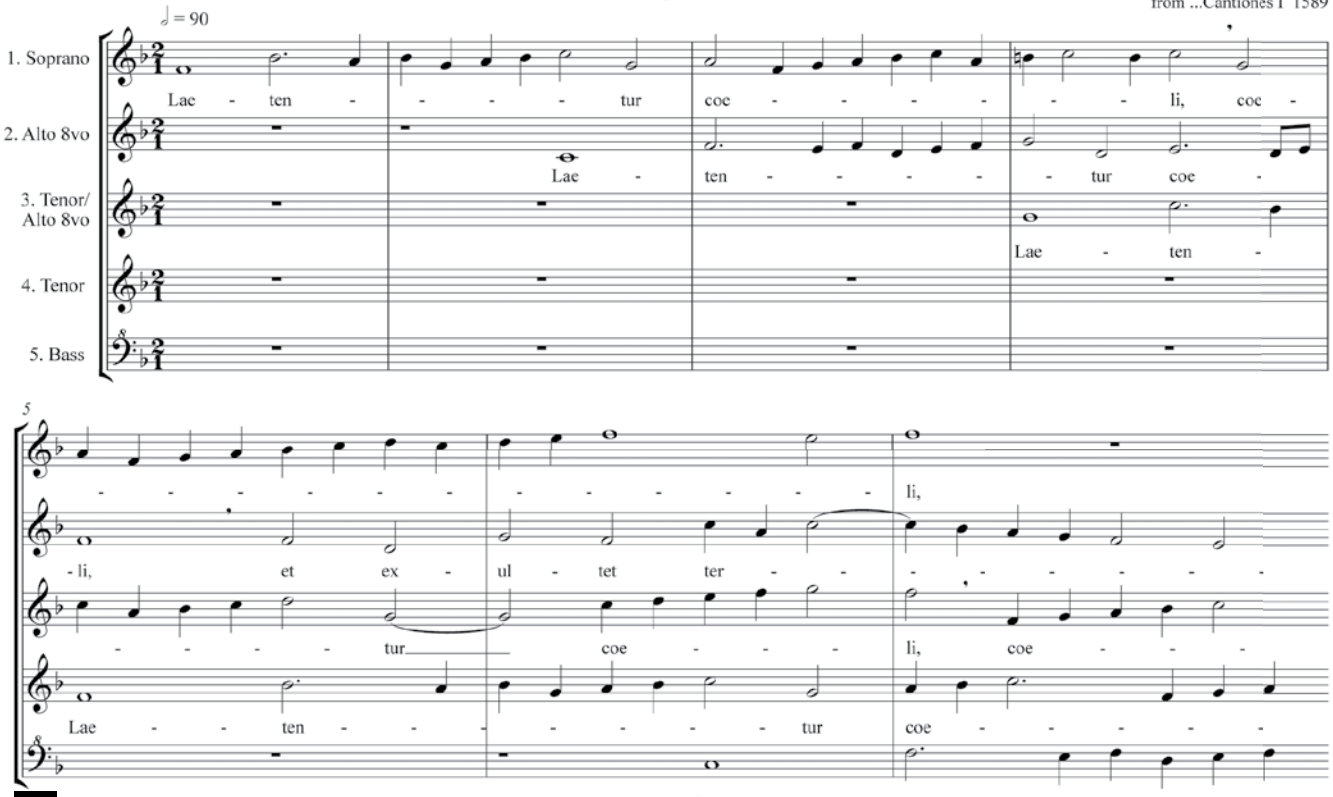
What is known is that in 1563 he obtained the important post of Organist and Master of the Choristers at Lincoln Cathedral, where he flourished—until he was offered the even more lucrative and prestigious position as Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1572, both singing and sharing the organ duties with Tallis. Significantly, Lincoln Cathedral still kept him on a monthly stipend to provide new music for some years after he was with the Chapel Royal. (Rather than a specific building, the Chapel Royal was a performing institution that traveled with the court. It had a dean, priests and singers, but had no edifice.)

Laetentur coeli

Isaiah 49:13 "Ye heavens praise, and earth rejoice..."

Recorder arr. Peter Seibert

William Byrd (ca. 1540-1623)
from ...Cantiones I 1589



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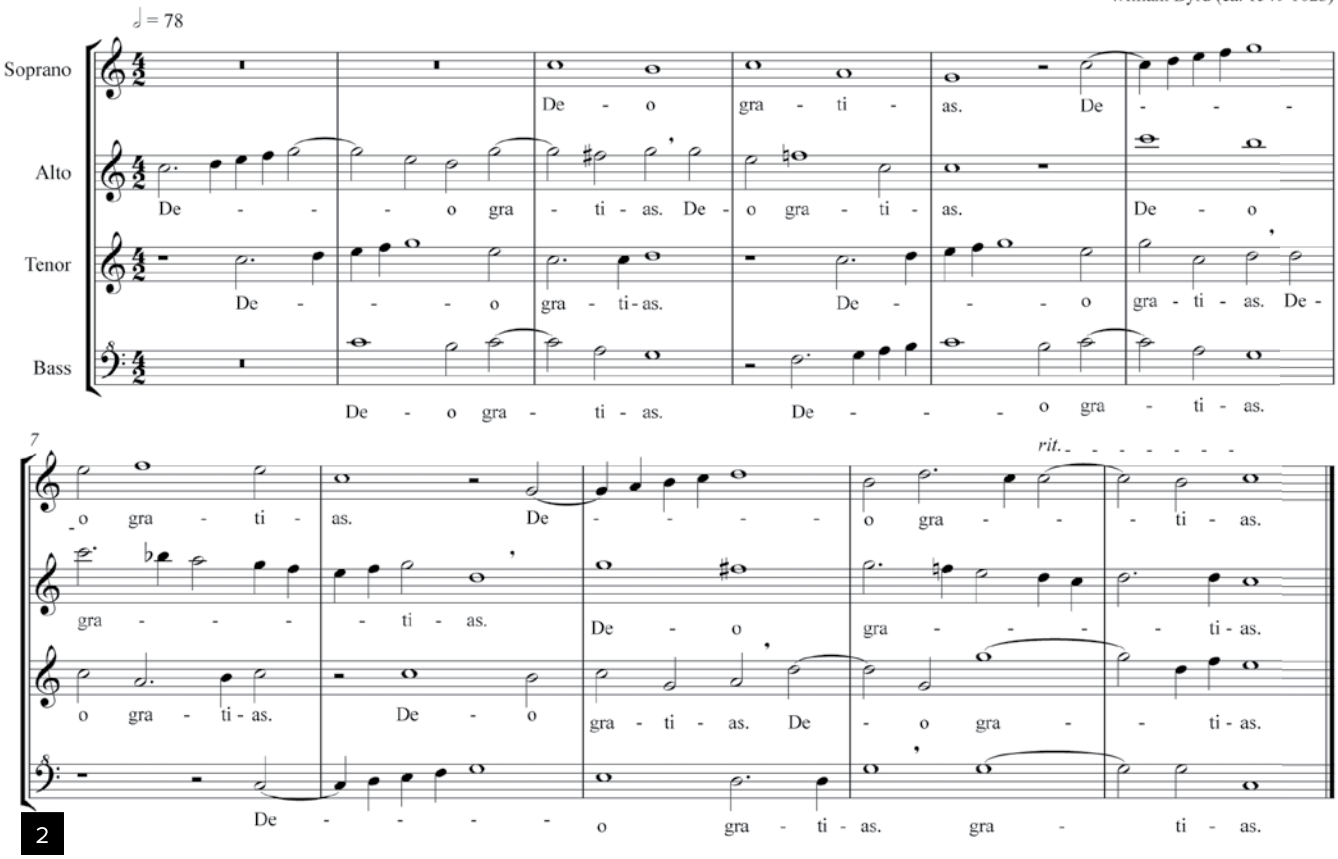
Deo Gratias

(from Gradualia ac cantiones sacrae, Liber 1, 1605)
(Original a 4th lower)

Recorder arr. Peter Seibert

William Byrd (ca. 1540-1623)



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1: Musical example of a melisma. In Lætentur cœli by William Byrd.

2: Deo Gratias. A work from *Gradualia*, William Byrd's musical settings for the Mass Proper.

“A melisma is an extended series of notes on one syllable.... The Roman Catholic service remained in Latin ... and it favored the more abstract beauty of melismatic music.... Protestants, by contrast, preferred syllabic musical writing, which helped clarify the English text....

In 1575, not long after Byrd's affiliation with the Chapel Royal, he and Tallis obtained a joint license from Queen Elizabeth to print music for 21 years, and they published several volumes of sacred music and secular music. Their first publication was the *Cantiones* mentioned above.

By this time, Anglicanism was in full bloom at English cathedrals—and with it came the expectation that music be sung in English. Gone were the days when large ecclesiastical congregations could experience the glorious melismatic Latin polyphony that enriched Roman Catholic worship in cathedrals and churches. (*See example 1.*)

A melisma is an extended series of notes on one syllable. The motet *Lætentur cœli* opens with a splendid and beautiful example of melismatic writing, in which all of the voices have extended melismas on the second syllable of *lætentur*. With the exception of part 2, the first syllable of *cœli* is also melismatic. In contrast, the word *exultet* in part 2 (bars 5-6) is an example of syllabic writing.

The Roman Catholic service remained in Latin, which was understood by very few, and it favored the more abstract beauty of melismatic music. Protestants, by contrast, preferred syllabic musical writing, which helped clarify the English text and enhanced the congregation's understanding of the gospel or whatever other sacred text was set to music. However, some graceful melismas did continue to appear in Anglican music.

Byrd was to excel at writing music for both Anglican and Catholic worship, no matter the compositional restrictions. Unfortunately, the large volume of later works that he composed for Catholic worship was performed and heard by only small numbers in secret gatherings for worship, due to the danger of practicing Catholicism in Elizabethan England. His florid Latin choral music from the early volumes of *Cantiones* (published in 1575, 1589 and 1591), using Psalm verses as their text, had been accepted at the time they were composed. However, his later Latin works in the volumes of *Gradualia* (1605, 1607)—music for secret Catholic services—were more restrained.

Byrd was also a prolific composer of secular music. He wrote in many forms including polyphonic music for three, four, five and six voices (some now referred to as madrigals); partsongs for solo singer with four viol players; a substantial number of three-to-six part fantasias, *In nomines*, and dances for viol consort; and extensive, seminal works for keyboard—especially for the virginals.

Byrd's ability to move comfortably among these mediums displayed his intellectual flexibility. Kerman comments, “Byrd's musical mind is as hard to characterize in a few words as that of any of the great composers….”

A look at two pieces of church music

Let us look at two examples of “Byrd's musical mind” at work.

Deo Gratias (*example 2*) is from the first volume of *Gradualia*, which is made up entirely of musical settings for the Mass Proper—works for specific feast days in the Catholic calendar. Perhaps because these works were used only in the clandestine services in private homes, the musical settings are concise. (These services could be dismantled quickly, should the authorities arrive suspecting a Catholic service was taking place; a “priest hole” was often available to hide the priest if such a visit occurred.)

The phrase, *Deo gratias*, “Thanks be to God,” is a response usually spoken at the very end of the Mass, and, as well, at certain other places in Catholic and other Christian services. It is so basic that a polyphonic setting hardly seems necessary; it could be chanted or simply spoken. Yet Byrd chose to do so, and his setting displays, in microcosm, how he created imaginative polyphonic settings for even the most slender of text fragments.

The alto introduces the first motive, an ascending scale, and it is immediately imitated by the tenor. This motive then appears in bar 4 in the bass and tenor, in bar 5 in the soprano, in bar 7 in the bass, and in bar 8 in the soprano.

A second motive can be seen clearly in the soprano part in bar 3; in whole notes, it is simply C–B–C–A–G. However, this motive offers several possibilities of elaboration. It appears in bar 6 in the alto with decorative interpolations starting after the third note. And there it is again in the alto (transposed) in bar 9, again decorated.

Now let us look at the bass part in bar 2. There is the motive with a long-short-long-short-long rhythm; this anticipates the “simple” basic statement we saw in the soprano part a bar later. The bass restates the mo-

tive in bar 5 (beat one) as an extension of the first motive.

In *Psallite Domino* (*example 3*), Byrd makes use of high drama. The opening is declamatory with part 1 intoning in Latin, "Sing to the Lord," immediately answered by a throng of the other parts together, an idea that is immediately repeated.

With the text, *qui ascendit super cœlos*…, Byrd uses scales to create the idea of ascending to the heaven of heavens. The clearest use of this text is in the bass part; it starts on a low F (bar 6) and moves all the way up to middle C, an unbroken scale spanning a 12th.

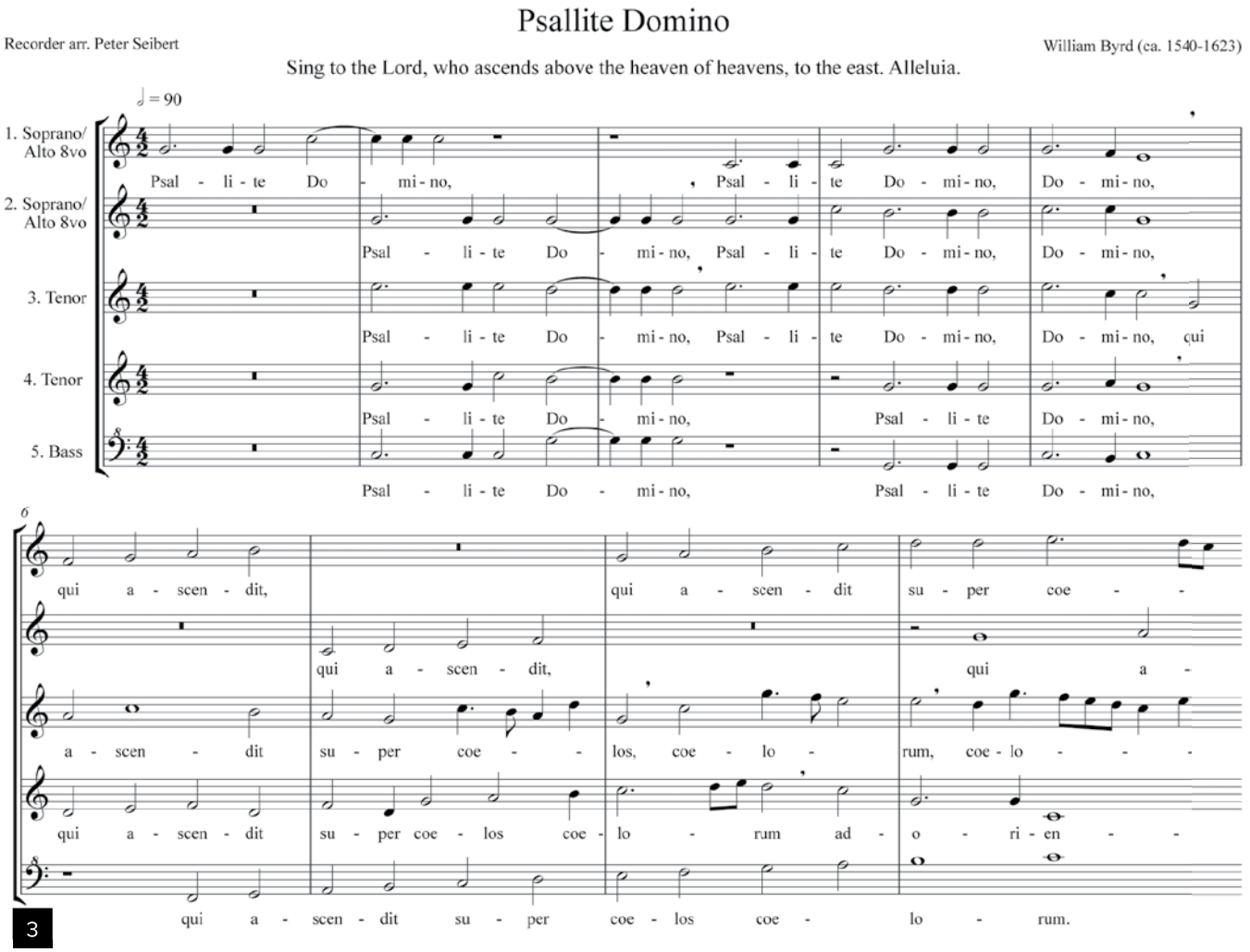
> Sixteenth century polyphony was essentially interchangeable between vocal and instrumental music.

Byrd uses the rising motive to a greater or lesser extent in all the parts. "Word painting" is especially associated with the Italian madrigal, but clearly Byrd draws upon it when he seeks dramatic effect.

To sing, or not to sing

Sixteenth-century polyphony was essentially interchangeable between vocal and instrumental music. Byrd's early part-songs for solo voice and four viols were later reissued with words added to the viol parts. He writes in his 1611 preface to *Psalms, Sonnets, and Songs*, "If thou delight in music of great compass, here are diverse songs, which being originally made for instruments to express the harmony and one voice to pronounce the ditty, are now framed in all parts for voices to sing the same."

Example 4 on page 16, *Farewell false*



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3: Psallite Domino. The ascending motives demonstrate William Byrd's accomplished use of word painting as a device to represent ascending to heaven.

In Elizabethan England it was a challenge to be a Catholic.... The fact that Byrd was able to flourish despite being a Catholic reflects both his reputation as a composer and his adroitness at politics.... The Queen herself appears to have provided for him to live safely.

Love, is the later version of such a part-song, with the indication in the score of the original solo part labeled the first singing part. (This first singing part was not always the top line.) The four viol parts now have words for singing in Byrd's updated version.

Scholar and conductor Philip Brett points out that Byrd was fussy about what people did with his music. In his 1611 preface, Byrd admonishes: "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." So much for sight-singing or sight-reading; he hoped his music would be rehearsed.

More religious restrictions

As has been noted, in Elizabethan England it was a challenge to be a Catholic.

Following about 1577, attendance at Anglican services eventually became expected of everyone, and those who did not—referred to as "recusants" (from the Latin *recusare*, "to refuse")—were subject to paying a fine for each missed service.

Nonetheless, the fact that Byrd was able to flourish despite being a Catholic reflects both his reputation as a composer and his adroitness at politics. He had influential friends among the aristocracy, some of whom were also Catholic. The Queen herself appears to have provided for him to live safely, despite his continued recusancy, but his wife, Julian, was often cited and fined.

Byrd's music for the Anglican Church has been in constant use over the centuries and serves as a kind of backbone for the evolving world of Anglican music ever since his lifetime. In contrast, aside from some early Latin Psalm settings, the large body of works for Catholic services—his three Mass Ordinary settings and the extensive body of music for the Mass Proper in the two volumes of *Gradualia*—fell into obscurity until the 20th century.

Following the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 (in which a group of Catholics tried to blow up Parliament), there was an anti-Catholic outcry—and when the 1605 volume of Byrd's *Gradualia* came out, it had to be withdrawn. A second edition of it was brought out in 1610, when the climate seemed somewhat less threatening. But after Byrd's lifetime, these Catholic works were simply unknown.

The real revival of this music did not start until there was a movement in the 1950s and 1960s to record all of this splendid music.

Instrumental works by Byrd

As we have seen, the polyphonic language (that is, the linear and vertical relationship of musical elements) was essentially identical between vocal and instrumental ensemble music in Byrd's England. However, there was some difference between the two, simply because vocal music had a text and instrumental music did not. The text mattered first, because of its

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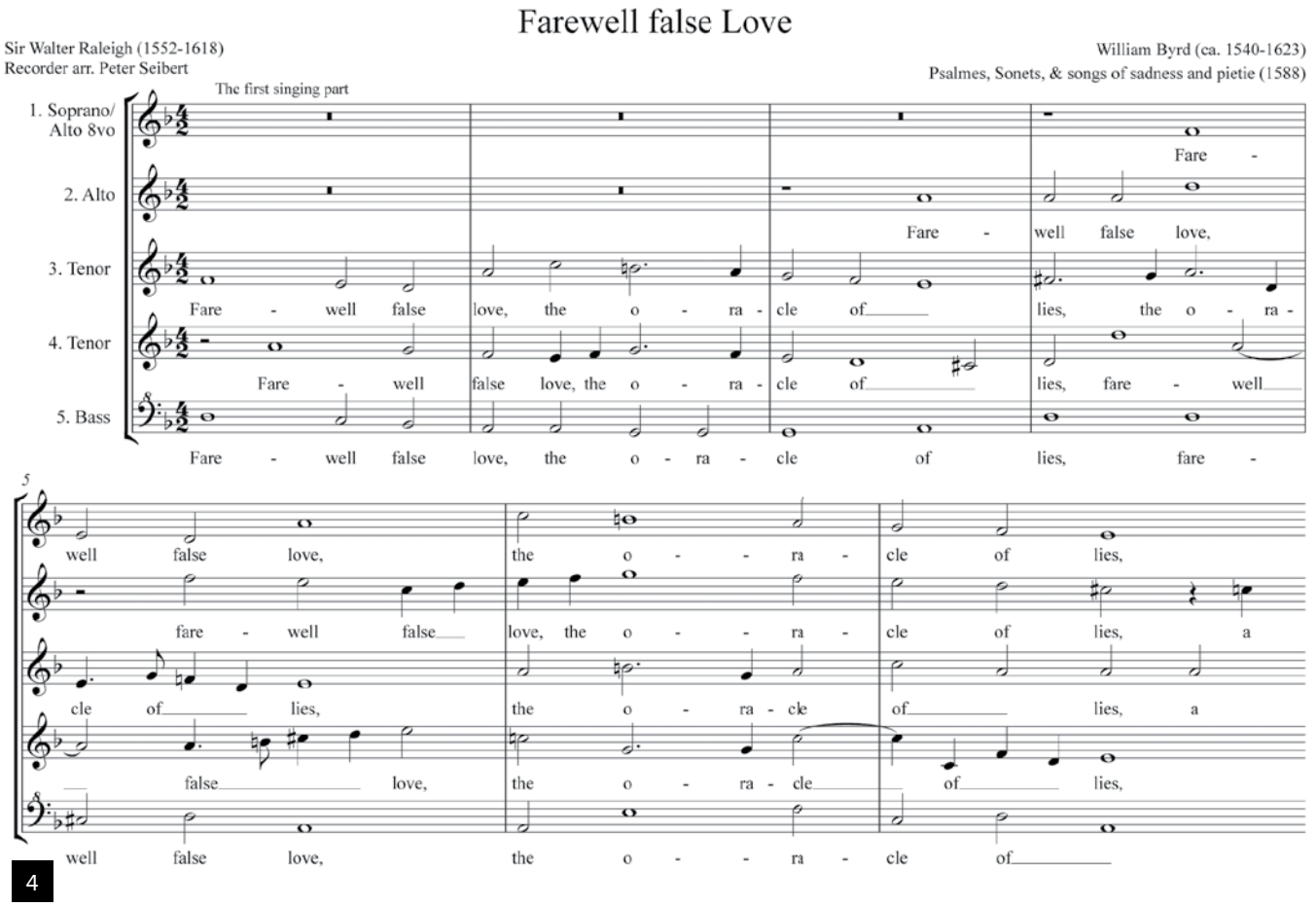
meaning, and second, because each syllable had to be accounted for musically.

In his instrumental pieces, Byrd could just address the relationship of the notes. This led to consideration of rhetoric (shaping phrases, motives and individual notes), unencumbered by the underlying words.

According to conductor Brett, Byrd was "arguably the most ambitious and accomplished composer of purely instrumental music of his age." Evidently, he reworked some of his instrumental pieces over the years; he might have been dissatisfied with what he had written, or perhaps he saw new ways of solving musical problems.



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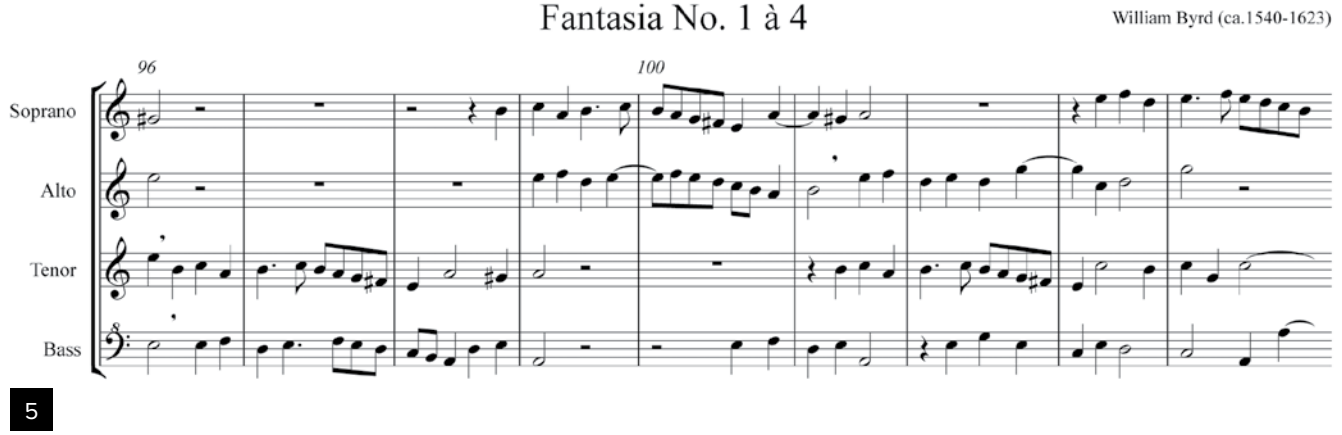

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4: Farewell false Love. A part-song, performed with or without words—but always rehearsed carefully.

5: Fantasia No. 1 à 3, originally for viols.

The body of music that now comes down to us shows facility at increasing musical interest throughout a composition. In his fantasias, he increases rhythmic activity over the course of each piece; notes pile up, building toward a final cadence. He achieves this effect through the use of repetition of melodic elements over and over—sometimes overlapping and interrupting another voice—before bringing the voices together at a cadence point. In example 5, the bass chases the tenor a quarter note behind in tight canonic writing. The effect is repeated between the alto and soprano three bars later, then broadens out in all voices.

A delightful three-part work for viols, the *Fantasia No. 1 à 3*, is an example of his earlier writing for viols, but it also becomes an effective and idiomatic work for recorders. On the ARS website are two versions of this piece, for SAT recorders or in a different key for ATB. The lines flow easily and the work is quite accessible. See the list of resources on page 18 for other pieces available on the ARS website.

Splendid examples of increasing activity and tension occur in the *Fantasia No. 2* for six instruments (arranged for recorder sextet on the ARS website.) In this magnificent lengthy fantasia, the two soprano parts duel at several places, leading to points of resolution. Here, Byrd went well beyond the usual fantasia form. The extended opening section comes to full cadences at several places, in effect creating several small movements. But he then introduces a complete three-strain galliard—again with dueling sopranos. The work finishes with a stately coda, in slow duple meter, an ending that exudes grandeur. This work anticipates the fantasy suites that became popular both in England and on the Continent in following decades.

Byrd's final years

From 1593 until his death, Byrd lived in Stondon Massey in Essex, about 25 miles northeast of London. Here he was close to fellow Catholics who had rank and power—in particular, Sir John (later Baron) Petre, whose manors were venues where Catholics could worship, largely undisturbed. Living in this situation, he was able to compose prolifically. It also kept him away from close scrutiny at court.

During these nearly three decades, much of the music he composed for voices comprised settings of Latin texts for Catholic services, and his second volume of *Gradualia* is dedicated to Petre. However, Byrd's last publication was *Psalms, Songs and Sonnets* (1611), which contained English language texts, some of which were sacred and could be used in Anglican services.

> England would not see another composer of Byrd's stature until the last quarter of the 17th century.

When Byrd died in the summer of 1623, it was nearly the end of the Jacobean period (roughly the years 1601-25, defined by the reign of the Protestant King James VI of Scotland, who also inherited the crown of England in 1603 as James I). In Kerman's assessment, "although he composed steadily throughout Elizabeth's reign and well into that of James, he was essentially an early Elizabethan figure." During the Jacobean years, there were a number of gifted English composers, and in the decades following Byrd's death, the English school of madrigal composition flourished, as did a school of viol writing. Both sets of repertoire continue to nourish amateur musicians to this day.

However, well before Byrd's death, changes were in the wind on the Continent. Claudio Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* was produced in 1607, the same year that Byrd's second volume of *Gradualia* was published. The Baroque style with its omnipresent basso continuo was in full swing and slowly made its way across the Channel.

England would not see another composer of Byrd's stature until the last quarter of the 17th century, when the English Baroque came into full bloom in the hands of another musical genius, Henry Purcell.

INFORMATION AND LINKS OF INTEREST:

MUSIC:

In connection with this article, recorder editions (score and parts) of the following works have been arranged by Peter Seibert and posted on the ARS website. To access these, sign in at **https://americanrecorder.org**. Scroll down to Resources, choose Music Libraries—Search and Download and type William Byrd In the Composer/Arranger box.

- Assumpta est Maria (SAATB)
- Ave verum corpus (A/S T/A TB)
- Deo Gratias (SATB)
- Fantasia No. 1 à 3 (SAT or ATB)
- Fantasia No. 1 à 4 (SATB)
- Fantasia No. 2 à 3 (SAT or ATB)
- Fantasia No. 2 à 4 (SATB or ATBgB)
- Fantasia No. 2 à 6 (SSATT B/gB)
- Farewell false Love (S/A ATTB)
- Lætentur cœli (SA T/A TB)
- Look Down, O Lord (S/A S/A TB)
- O quam gloriosum (S/A S/A ATB)
- Psallite Domino (S/A S/A TTB)

There are a number of other arrangements of music by William Byrd on the ARS website, as well as many pieces (some playable on recorders) posted at **https://imslp.org/wiki/Category:Byrd,_William**.

READINGS:

- William Byrd, **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Byrd**.
- Motet, **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motet**.
- Bacon, Ariel Foshay. William Byrd: Political and Recusant Composer. Cedarville University, 2012.
- Brett, Philip, with editors Josepy Kerman and Davitt Moroney. William Byrd and His Contemporaries. University of California Press, 2007.
- Harley, John. The World of William Byrd, Musicians, Merchants, and Magnates. Routledge: London and New York, 2010.
- Kerman, Joseph, revised by Kerry McCarthy. William Byrd. Grove Music Online/Oxford, 2014 (by subscription or via a library), **www.oxfordmusiconline.com**.
- Poetry Foundation, anonymous online article on William Byrd, **www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-byrd**.
- Lectures at the William Byrd Festival, Portland, OR, 1998–2008 (authors include Kerry McCarthy, Philip Brett, Joseph Kerman, William Peter Mahrt, Richard Marlow, David Trendel, Richard Turbet and Mark Williams), **www.byrdfestival.org/pages/lectures.html**