

The Tallis Scholars: Reflecting Byrd

Byrd: Laetentur coeli

Byrd: Ad dominum cum tribularer

Byrd: O salutaris hostia

Tallis: O salutaris hostia

Tallis: Te Deum 'for meanes'

Byrd: Quomodo cantabimus

Sheppard: Jesu salvator seculi [redemptis]

Tallis: Jesu salvator seculi [verbum Patris]

Tallis: Miserere nostri

Byrd: Miserere mei

Byrd: Tribue domine

'The death of William Byrd in July 1623 at the age of 80 heralded the end of an era for English music. After it came Purcell and choral music accompanied by instruments. Before it, for more than a hundred years, came the a cappella style of the renaissance, which Byrd largely adhered to. One way to show what he achieved is to sing him alongside the best of what surrounded him when he was a younger man – which surely means the music of Tallis and Sheppard.'

So writes Peter Phillips, introducing a programme which celebrates the genius of Byrd by observing in his music reflections of those composers whose styles he absorbed in his youth. Byrd's musical start in life probably came as a treble in either St Paul's Cathedral or the Chapel Royal. It seems he was fortunate enough to fall under the tutelage of one the sixteenth century's greatest English composers, Thomas Tallis.

Fast-forward to 1575, and we find the two composers publishing together as equals, celebrating the granting of a royal monopoly on music printing from their patron, Queen Elizabeth. ***Laetentur caeli*** belongs to this collection, which contained seventeen pieces by each composer, commemorating the monarch's seventeen years on the throne. The words look with joy to the coming of the Lord: in the music, the opening motif rises and proceeds into scales and runs as if bursting with excitement, before being picked up and imitated by the other voices in turn.

With ***Ad Dominum cum tribularer*** we are in a flashback sequence, giving us a snapshot of Byrd's early career. The origin of this piece in the 1560s makes it an early work, perhaps belonging to the composer's time as organist and master of the choristers at Lincoln Cathedral. If this is the case, Lincoln must have been one of the few institutions still offering large-scale psalm-motets in Latin (remember that the Protestant Reformation had by now done its work, and the Latin language had largely been dropped in favour of vernacular liturgy). This ambitious motet is the work of a composer out to prove himself. For one thing, it's in eight parts, and a nearly continuous imitative polyphony.

Byrd was at times partial to strict canonic imitation, as shown in a treatment of the Eucharistic motet ***O salutaris hostia*** which seems almost wilfully bonkers. In this piece, the composer creates a texture which exploits to the full the Tudor fondness for the clashing 'false relation', in which a cadence includes both a sharpened and flattened leading note. The imitation which Byrd sets up leads to constant clashes of this kind, simply as a result of following the canon to the letter, creating an extraordinary sonority. By contrast, the setting by his master Tallis is more conservative in style.

Indeed, its scoring of five voices suggests the bygone era of the Eton Choirbook, though its style marks it out as a work belonging to the latter half of the century.

Tallis' *Te Deum 'for means'* likely belongs to the 1540s – it's conceivable a young Byrd might have sung it as a boy. At this particular point in the turbulent history of English music in the sixteenth century, setting the text in the vernacular was the norm, and a direct, uncluttered mode of expression the aim, strictures to which Tallis' setting of the Matins canticle gracefully adheres. 'For means' in the title refers to the divided inner voice-part – 'mean' was the English variant of *medius*, literally the middle-sounding part.

At several points in his life, Byrd's dogged adherence to 'the old religion' would get him into trouble. As a Catholic in Elizabeth's England, he could face fines, imprisonment, or worse, if caught in a clandestine celebration of the mass or some other expression of 'Popery'. This did not stop him using his music as an expression of the plight of his fellow Catholics. One of the most notable examples of this is found in the motet *Quomodo cantabimus*.

This work is believed to be the Byrd's 'answer' to a piece by the continental composer Philippe de Monte, who in 1583 had sent Byrd his eight-voice *Super flumina Babylonis*. De Monte was setting the initial verses of Psalm 137, a song of the Israelites in captivity. *Quomodo* continues where *Super flumina* leaves off, setting the next four verses: 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' It's a question that Byrd answers by adopting a different style to De Monte's double-choir texture, employing continuous polyphony right up until the last sentence.

John Sheppard was a contemporary of Tallis with an utterly distinctive style, honed during stints of work as *Informator Choristarum* at Magdalen College in Oxford, and later as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal (a position which Tallis and Byrd would also occupy). *Jesu salvator saeculi* is a setting of the Hymn appointed for the First Vespers at the feast of All Saints. It employs Sheppard's favoured device of having one voice sing the plainchant whilst others weave an imitative polyphony around it, though here this part is the lowest-sounding voice. Sheppard's delight in sonority leads to a final *Amen* with some quite remarkable passing dissonances.

Tallis' *Jesu salvator saeculi* is found in the same source as Sheppard's, the 'Baldwin Partbooks', which now reside at Christ Church, Oxford. Despite their identical opening words, this is a different hymn, appointed for Compline during Eastertide, and with an inverted texture: the chant voice is the upper-most part.

In Tallis' *Miserere nostri*, the brief text – a single sentence – is the vehicle for an intricately layered, seven-voice composition comprising several musical canons. That this arcane process produces harmony that is not only functional but quite beautiful seems nothing short of miraculous. Byrd's *Miserere* sets a different text, with what feels like a very different intent. Where Tallis used his *Miserere* as the vehicle for a contrapuntal exercise, Byrd's setting is direct, expressive, and perhaps even personal. We know that many English Catholics in this period recited the *Miserere* on the scaffold before their executions. Is Byrd's setting tacitly expressing support for them?

The 1575 *Cantiones sacrae* publication suggests that, whatever their private sympathies, both composers were adept at playing the game of Tudor politics. Byrd's *Tribue Domine* is one of the most extensive of the motets featured in the collection. Taking a text attributed to the early Church Father, Augustine, Byrd rapidly alternates textures as the words enumerate the virtues of the Trinity. In its use of smaller forces contrasting with rich homophony it evokes the English tradition of the composer's forebears and teachers, a distillation of his musical influences. A fantastically extended Gloria makes a fitting coda, a monument to the splendours of Tudor polyphony.