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William Byrd – Catholic Masses for three voices, four voices, and five voices in Protestant England

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Abstract: *The Catholic Masses of William Byrd are a problematic entity in the context of Protestant England. Byrd's affiliation with the underground Catholic movement during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I is evident through his compositional approach, and his hosting of Catholic Mass. The three masses are conceived for such a secret meeting of the faithful Catholics. The Masses are originally designed for one-to-a-part singing, due to the limited number of musicians available at the meetings. The compositional style is that of the previous generation of English Catholic composers, and the contemporary Continental practices of setting the Ordinary of the Mass.*

Key-words: *William Byrd, Catholic Masses, English Catholic Composers*

1. Introduction

William Byrd's compositional output is not only impressive by number, but intriguing in terms of political and religious influence. His settings of the Ordinary of the Mass are of particular interest because of the historical context they were published, the compositional techniques used, and their association with what was fashionable on the Continent. The Mass settings for three, four, and five voices are also the only three existing settings in this genre by Byrd. They represent the first attempt in a while of composing the Ordinary of the Mass in England since the time of Taverner. Considering his position in the musical life of the Court – musician to the Queen's Chapel Royal – his decision to compose Catholic Mass in a reformed religious context is by no means extraordinary. The three Masses were composed and published between the years 1592 and 1599 (Kerman 1981, 189).

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2. Life and compositional context

Byrd was born in 1540, the previous know date for his birth, 1543, being proven as wrong by Joseph Kerman (Kerman, 1998-2008, 76). He grew up in London, with his brothers musically trained at the St. Paul's Cathedral. The omission of William's name in the church's documentation makes believe that he was trained at court (Kerman, 1998-2008, 76). The presence at the Chapel Royal under Thomas Tallis is, unmistakably, where young William received his formal training. The close mentor-student relationship would remain strong until the death of Tallis (Kerman 1998-2008, 76). There is also another strong piece of evidence that Byrd was present at the Chapel Royal during his teens, as a motet for the Easter service was co-written with Sheppard and Mundy during Queen Mary's reign (Kerman, 1998-2008, 77). In 1563 Byrd is appointed as organist and choirmaster at Lincoln Cathedral, a handsome contract, through the help of Tallis. It did not take long until his Catholic ideals would get in him in trouble here. A formal complaint of his style in organ playing was given against Byrd in 1596, as his musical tastes were more Catholic (or popish) than Anglican. His salary was suspended for a little while (Kerman, Grove Music Online). This particular observation is important, such as it describes Byrd's attraction and dedication to the Catholic faith rather than the Anglican. A conclusion can be drawn therefore: since the beginning of his career, he was more Catholic than Anglican. The dispute was resolved in Byrd's favor and after ten years spent there he took up the post at the Chapel Royal in London, as a better paying job and more influential (Kerman, Grove Music Online).

His move back to London placed Byrd at the center of the English music life. Together with Tallis, his close mentor, he published a collection of Latin motets dedicated to Queen Elizabeth. The title of the 1575 collection is *Cantiones Sacrae*, and the most two important aspects of this collection is that it was dedicated to an Anglican monarch, and the cover inscription thanks the Queen for allowing the two composers complete monopoly over music publishing (Kerman 1998-2008, 77). The patent for printing music and lined paper was given to the composers by the Queen on January 22, 1574/5. The contract stated that Tallis and Byrd were the only two people allowed to print, import, and sell music, all others being subject to punishment by law. If music was sold, or distributed by someone else, Tallis and Byrd had to right to confiscate the music and a fine of forty shillings was applied (Harley, 1997, 55). The collection of Latin motets in the *Cantiones Sacrae* was therefore an obvious token of appreciation for the Queen by the two musicians. The dedication on the cover of the publication indicates the thanks to the monarch for giving the printing monopoly over to the composers (Harley 1997, 56). What the two composers did not anticipate was how expensive the printing business would be, regardless of the monopoly given by royal decree. With Tallis' death in 1585, the printing monopoly was given completely to Byrd and his son (Harley 1997, 57).

Byrd grew up in the times of Henry VIII, which separated England from Rome but kept it Catholic, then through the transformation to Protestantism. Once with Queen Mary's reign (1553-1558), the church returned to Catholicism once again. With the beginning of Queen Elizabeth's reign in 1558 most church musicians converted to the Church of England, and composed in the Anglican style. Byrd was not one that conformed to the protestant religion, and became sort of a "Catholic activist" (Harley, 1997, 77). The way he could survive being a Catholic in a Reformed England was through his strong position he found himself in; also by entering the graces of the Queen. A strong evidence of his connection with the Catholic faith is through the many personal letters stating he was tutoring young noblemen in music, one being the earl of Worcester, the Queen herself naming him a 'stiff papist' (Harley, 1997, 78).

Perhaps a more comprehensive explanation on Byrd's identification with the Catholic Church is needed. William and his wife were the only known Catholics in the family. The fact that Byrd was still working in a Protestant environment during the 1570's and 1580's might indicate that there was a still some tolerance between sides. Having the Queen on his side also would have helped (Harley, 1997, 67). The close association of Byrd to the Catholic vicar John Reason during his stay in Lincoln could be one of the first indicating factors in William's strong Catholic tendencies. If he was not fully committed to the faith by that time, it would have been there that Byrd accepted it (Harley, 1997, 68). Once he moved to Harlington, the most obvious it was clear that Byrd was fully active in the Catholic community. During the period of 1580 to 1587 there are numerous accounts of written charges against him (Harley, 1997, 73). Not only are there accusations against Byrd as a practicing Catholic, but also evidence of him holding Catholic rites in his house and hiding Jesuit missionaries, such as Robert Parsons and Edmund Champion. Champion was later captured, tortured and executed in 1581. A contemporary poet, Henry Walpole was present at the event and it was him that wrote the *Why do I use my paper, ink, and pen* poem, later set to music by Byrd (Kerman 1998-2008, 79). Could it be that the composer was present at the murder site also? Harley certainly believes so in his text (Harley 1997, 78). The presence of another Catholic priest, William Weston, and his association to Byrd is noted on 15-23 July 1586, where the composer's music might have been performed (Harley 1997, 80). Such accusations and problems did not stop Byrd from continuing his work activities at the Chapel Royal. Beginning with the early 1590s Byrd's affiliation with the post he held for the longest time in the history of the chapel, his collaboration started to fade. A new organist, John Bull, was appointed in 1593, indicating the possibility of Byrd's slow withdrawal from the post he held (Harley, 1997, 106). The reasoning of his withdrawal from the duties of the Chapel Royal might correspond to the extra effort Byrd put in publishing his music. Between the years 1590 to about 1594, the composer establishes himself as the best composer in England, by printing English songbooks, two new motet books, anthologies of Italian madrigals translated in English (including some madrigals by Byrd himself). Another important composition of the time is *Psalms, Sonets, and Songs of Sadness and Piety*, a clear Protestant publication, but also loved by the Catholics. It was not until his *Gradualia* publication that he clearly wrote a specifically Catholic publication. Byrd is simply showcasing his compositional powers to the whole world, not just England, as both a Protestant and Catholic (Kerman 1998-2008, 81). Despite all the run-inns with the Protestant laws of the times, Byrd never was accused of not honoring his Queen and country, on the contrary. The Queen repaid the composer's loyalty by offering him a gift of lease of Stondon Place in 1595 (Kerman 1998-2008, 77).

3. The Catholic Masses

Once Byrd ended his duties with the Chapel Royal and retired, he did not stop from writing for the Catholic services, but increased his number of compositions for the rite. The move of residence from Harlington to Stondon Massey in 1593 corresponds with Byrd's increased interest and involvement in the Catholic community, placing him at the right time of the settings of the Ordinary of the Mass. These part-books were published without a title-page, publisher name, or date, but Byrd's name appears at the top of the page. Dating the compositional years of the Masses was resolved in 1966 by Peter Clulow. A detailed examination of the original publications of the part-books came to the conclusion that the printer Thomas East only owned one set of woodblocks for the ornamental letters. The deterioration of the blocks helped date the Masses within the chronological publications of East's publications (Kerman 1981, 188). Thus Clulow sets Byrd's settings of the Ordinary of the Mass for three, four, and five voices during the period of 1592-1595. The four voices Mass was the first to be published in 1592-93, and then the three voices Mass in 1593-94, and finally the five voice Mass in 1594-95 (Harley 1997, 308). The Masses were composed for use at clandestine Catholic gatherings, probably for a small group of singers; possibly one to a part. The importance of these three Mass settings is enormous because of the thirty or so years passed since the last publication in England of the genre (Harley 1997, 309).

Because of the long period of lack of Mass compositions in England, the question of where Byrd had his inspiration to write these compositions arises. One possible answer could be that the style of the Masses is a concise gathering of the composer's own experiences, precisely because of the lack of Continental compositions available in England around 1592 (Kerman 1981, 190). All the possible publications by composers of the Continent such as Palestrina's *Missarum liber quintus,* or Victoria's Masses, were to be available in England around1600, a long while after Byrd's compositions (Kerman, 1981, 191). The probability of the matured composer needing inspiration or models to base his own Mass settings on could be groundless. However, his interest in the traditions of Catholic faith is strongly based on the continuation of the style of the past. Byrd turned to his friend John Baldwin for a collection of Tudor Masses which comprised, among other composers, works by Taverner and Tallis. The Taverner setting of the Sanctus movement in the *Mean Mass* became the model for Byrd's setting of the four voices Mass (Kerman 1981, 192). Even if this particular Taverner setting is for five voices the Sanctus is set for only four voices, thus becoming the head-motif material in Byrd's movements of the first Mass (the four-part setting) (Kerman 1981, 192).

3.1. Mass for four voices

Fig. 1. *The head-motif of the Byrd's Mass*

The motif can further be divided into two parts, with the opening of the first Kyrie as the "A motif" and the continuation of what looks like measures 5 to 7 in Fig. 1, as the "B motif." This is important to note because the rest of the Mass movements are based on those two exact motifs. The setting of the Kyrie in the four part Mass is extremely imitative, a technique used extensively on the Continent. Once all four voices present the opening Kyrie motif in one measure distance of points of imitation, the section comes to a close. The Christe section of the Mass is based on a shorter motif, vaguely based on a combination of the opening material, still in strict imitation. The return of the Kyrie is presented in paired imitation between the Cantus and Tenor, and Altus and Bassus. There is no variance on the strict imitation between voices in this movement. Kerman calls this Kyrie "most consistently imitative of all Byrd's Mass movements" (Kerman 1981, 192).

The Gloria movement of the four voice Mass is not divided according to the customary places of sectionalizing the text (at the Qui tollis section of the text), but a phrase earlier, at the Domine Deus section.

The opening text of *Et in terra pax*, is set for a duet between the two upper voices, with the "A motif" presentation in the lower voice. The *Laudamus te* section is homo rhythmic, set in a "vertical" manner, with voice paring between the upper and lower voices, only at the Glorificamus te section, all four voices sing polyphonically. *Gratias agimus tibi,* is also set in a very homo rhythmic way, a technique picked up from the Anglican Anthems most likely. The beginning of the next section is marked clearly by the reduction of voices down to three. As mentioned earlier, this section of the Gloria begins with the Domine Deus text, the shape of the melody recalling some of the return of the Kyrie thematic material, in a strict imitation manner. The Qui tollis section keeps the three voice texture, and the imitation material is an inversion of the previous statement of the Domine Deus. The choice of voicing is Cantus, Altus, Bassus for the first half, then Cantus, Tenor, Bassus for the second section. The pairing of the lower voices with only one top voice, possibly points to the gravity of the text "Qui tollis." Kerman interprets this as an impressive cadence. Interesting to note is that in the whole of the Gloria setting of the four voice Mass, the Qui tollis section is the only repeated text, making this section a three-part prayer for a three voice part setting (Kerman 1981, 196). The Gloria movement ends with a powerful inversion of the "B motif" on the final Amen, unifying everything up to this point in a complete circle.

The Credo opens with the "B motif" in a duet between the top voices. In keeping the same structure as in the beginning of the Gloria, the lower voice parts come in once the first phrase of the Credo text is presented. The way Byrd sectionalizes this movement is a little non-conventional again. The first major shift in texture is on the Qui propter text, Byrd reducing the voicing to three, in strict imitation. The conventional Et incarnatus section of the text is therefore placed secondary to the above mentioned idea. It is not until the Crucifixus part of the Credo that Byrd shifts back to the three voice texture, this time the text is being clearly projected in a homo rhythmic manner. There is no bassus line composed here, therefore text painting the suspension of Christ's body on the cross is clearly audible. Et resurexit text is indeed set in a way that the points of imitation ascend on the Dorian mode, in strict imitation between the four voices. This rising imitative motif continues into the Et ascendit section, even higher in the tessitura. The diminution in the rhythmic elements of the motif also gives a sense of urgency and direction to the text. With the last part of the Credo text remaining, Byrd needs to balance the movement quickly. Moving through sections that seem not important to him, almost hurrying to the last phrase of Et exspecto resurexionem, and setting it on the same motif as the Et ascendit. The final Amen gathers energy into the final cadence by stepwise descending in the middle part of the voice register.

The Sanctus begins with the "B motif" in close imitation between the four parts. Byrd keeps the tradition of setting the word Sanctus three times within each voice part, balancing that with three statements of Dominus Deus ending on a strong cadence. The Pleni text section is reduced to three voice parts, this time the upper three. The style continues to be imitative, with a shape of the "A motif" taking over in the Osanna section. This is a very short setting of the Osanna, with just two statements of the text laid out in four parts imitation. The Benedictus text is set in voice pair imitation, with the upper voices setting up the "A motif" for the lower voice parts to carry over. The return of the Osanna section is not the same as the first statement, but it looks to be more of a drive to the final cadence of the movement with the upper voices being paired against the lower ones.

The Agnus Dei movement is constructed such that an increase in the number of voices signals the beginning of the three text repetitions. The first Agnus Dei starts as a duet between the Cantus and Altus. The “A motif” is used as the material used in this opening section. The three voice part section is set between the Cantus, Tenor, and Bassus. The melodic content of this section is based on the Christe section of the Kyrie, in strict imitation. The third and final section of the Agnus is set such that all four voice parts combine the second Kyrie melodic shape, also in an imitative manner. The interesting thing is that the final repetition of the text, leading into the final cadence of the work, is set on what looks like a true cadential bass line, with leaps of a fourth in the final measures. This concludes the four part Mass setting of Byrd, not only making it a head motif Mass, but also tying the opening movement with the last movement by using the same melodic content as a means of unity.

3.2. Mass for three voices

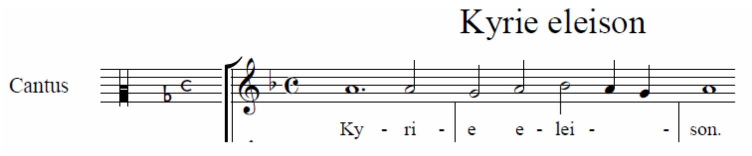

Fig. 2. *Head motif of the Mass for three voices*

The Kyrie movement of the Mass for three voices is by far one of the shortest in the repertoire. A total of eight measures, with only one declamtion of the Kyrie eleison text, a single Christe eleison line, and a return of the Kyrie eleison. The three voices (no altus voice in this Mass) are singing in a homo rhythmic fashion, no imitation. The reason for that is the movement is too short for Byrd to have enough time to develop points of imitation. It is also important to note that the Kyrie motif is carried over to the Christe text, the last Kyrie acting as a cadential figure.

The Gloria text is divided into the same two sections based on text, as the Mass for four voices; a phrase earlier than the customary Qui tollis section (Kerman, 1981, 195). The movement begins with the head motif set in the Kyrie, homo rhythmic, and little imitation after the opening phrase. There is no word repeated in the first section of the Gloria, only the cadential figure has the text Jesu Christe, which is presented three times. The motif of in the second Kyrie is also present in the adoramus te section. Kerman believes there is no connection between the movements except for the head motif, where H. K. Andrews thinks there is a close connection of motifs between movements (Andrews 1966, 268). Because of the close overall shape in the structure of the movements, there is a strong possibility that Byrd was thinking of making a stronger connection between them by repeating some of the motifs. Continuing to the next section of the Gloria text, a reduction to two voices begins the Domine Deus agnus dei short phrase. Three vices return on the setting of the Qui tollis text, this time in imitation, with the melodic content different between the sections, but very close in rhythmic content. The final Amen of the Gloria reminds us of the Mass for four voices Amen, but inverted.

The Credo is the first movement that begins in imitation of the head motif among the three voices. Andrews points out the obvious similarity of the second Kyrie section to the Omnia saecula setting in the Credo (Andrews, 1966, 268). Little text repetition is observed again in this movement, Byrd possibly thinking of the short and concise clandestine Catholic service gatherings. In following with the setting of the Mass for four voices, he chooses to start the new section of the Credo text at the Qui propter nos homine, and not at the Crucifixus section. However, a change in the texture of the Et resurrexit text is observed, with longer value notes presenting the subject, still in imitation. Recalling the four voices Mass at this point, the Et ascendit text is set on a rising melodic line, same motif as in the previous Mass, given the opportunity of text-painting. Byrd reduces the voices in the Et in Spiritum Sanctum section to the lowest two parts in close imitation, once again closing this movement on the same ascending pattern on the word Amen.

The Sanctus text has the traditional division of the text in between Benedictus and the return of the Osanna. Byrd delivers the text quickly, in an older style, with the Bassus voice almost acting as a cantus firmus in the opening lines. The beginning of the Benedictus section is the first clear indication of the head motif, up to that point, all the note values being augmented. Three voices are present throughout this movement, and the return of Osanna is not related to the first setting of the text. The same opening motif of the Benedictus is present at the beginning of the Agnus Dei movement. The second Agnus Dei is reduced to a duet between the lowest voice parts, and the final Agnus clearly states the head motif which started the Kyrie, making for a complete cycle of the Mass. Even if the Mass is very short in length, it only makes a stronger case of how skillful and talented Byrd was at setting the entire Mass text in a unified, tasteful manner.

3.1. Mass for five voices

Fig. 3. *Head motif of the Mass for five voices.*

The Kyrie setting of the five voices Mass is the most balanced in terms of harmonic language out of Byrd's three settings of the Ordinary (Kerman 1981, 211). The Kyrie I cadences on a D chord, the Christe section on a G, while the Kyrie II on an A chord. The text is indeed set in a logical fashion also, Kyrie I repeated twice, Christe repeated twice, and the last Kyrie three times, while the polyphony is imitative. Even so, Kerman believes that this setting is a more restricted movement even than the four voices Mass (Kerman 1981, 211).

The Gloria movement begins with reduced voices, a three part writing on the first phrase of the text. It is not until the 'Laudamus te' section that all five voices are present, Byrd pairing the inner three voices against the outer two. Cross voicing is observed at the end of the 'glorificamus te' section, cadencing on a D chord with an F# quickly turning in an F natural at the beginning of the next section. The 'Gratias' section is homo rhythmic, the text and the counterpoint aligning precisely like in an Anglican Anthem. The 'Domine Deus' is reduced to four parts, in close imitation with a motif derived from the opening Kyrie. In keeping with the same text division as in the other two Mass settings, Byrd begins the new section on the 'Domine Deus' in a three voice texture, closely imitative melodic content. The close imitative texture and number of voices remain constant up to the new section of the text on 'Quoniam tu solus sanctus' which returns to the five voices, also back in the Dorian mode. This concludes the Gloria movement.

Credo returns the head motif of the opening Kyrie, in three part setting of the opening text, building in the five voices once a complete imitation of the motif is done. The first section of the Credo cadences on an A chord, half cadence of sorts, quickly shifting to an F tonality in the 'Qui propter' section. The voicing is once again reduced to three parts, and the imitation is strict. On the phrase 'descendit de caelis' Byrd writes a descending melodic line portraying the descent of Christ from heaven to earth. 'Et incarnatus' keep the three part voicing, but the note values are augmented, with the lower parts paired providing the harmonic support for the Superius voice. The 'Crucifixus' section is set homo rhythmically, so that the text is clearly understood, everything in a lower register of the voice. With the introduction of the 'Et resurrexit' text, Byrd returns to five part voicing, the individual lines ascending once again on the phrase 'Et ascendit', but this time he contains the voices in the normal range of the Dorian mode, never beyond it as he did in the other two settings of the Mass (Kerman, 1981, 211). A new section begins with the text 'Et in spiritum' this time on a C tonality, a third higher than the previous cadence. Three voice parts texture is preserved in this section, in close imitation, never really departing from the C tonal center. 'Et unam sanctam' text is strongly proclaimed by all five voices, homo rhythmically in the same key, followed by 'Confitebor' in F, a third lower than the A, eventually ending on the half cadence. The 'Et exspecto' section is back in the D tonal center, with all five voices participating.

Byrd seems to finally decide to use the full five parts with the opening of the Sanctus movement, with a full imitative passage on the text 'Sanctus'. Beginning with the ‘Pleni sunt caeli’ three voice parts are employed, returning to the full use of the five voices in the ‘Osanna’. The homo rhythmic setting of the text here, pares with the ‘Dominus Deus’ section at the end of the ‘Sanctus’ (Kerman 1981, 211). The Benedictus is set for three voices, in close imitation over a short sixteen measures, keeping it in the Dorian coloration. The return of the Osanna is done by using the same polyphonic setting of the first, with a strong declamation of the text in homo rhythmic fashion.

The Agnus Dei movement begins with the head motif of the upper three voices in imitation, passing through an impressive E cadence, within the context of the Dorian territory. The second Agnus is set for four voices, the harmonic language moving toward a G minor cadence. This harmonic plan follows the Kyrie movement, thus Byrd further unifies the Mass by means of tonal and motific content (Kerman, 1981, 211). The final Agnus is set for the five voices, homo rhythmically. The emphasis on the last ‘dona nobis pacem’ is achieved through the continuation of the bass cadential line of ‘peccata mundi’ as the motif for the final section. The quick imitative passage on the ‘dona nobis pacem’ text cadencing on the D without passing through a half cadence portrays the strong finale of a superb setting of the Mass.

William Byrd’s settings of the Ordinary of the Mass for three, four, and five voices represent a special moment in the history of English sacred music. At a time when the Catholic Church was persecuted by the State, Byrd continued to take charge of the tradition and ideologies of his faith. Even if this meant punishment! His 1593 move to Stondon Massey suggests his clear association with the Catholic community possibly encouraging him to compose music in this tradition. The three setting of the Mass are individual monuments of the English style, by means of head motifs, imitation and possibly motific interplay between all three compositions. There is a continuation of the English tradition in Byrd’s settings surely indicated in the Four Voice Mass by quoting Taverner’s *Mean Mass* in the Sanctus. A suggestion that Byrd was imitating what the Continental composers did at that time is therefore invalid. He was loyal to his country and Queen, even it meant continuing a tradition forbidden at the time.

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