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Abstract

Because of the persecution and religious oppression William Byrd faced, his compositional process was forced to be more intricate, innovative, and creative. Consequently, he penned some of the greatest music England has ever seen. Elizabethan England's history shows how the tenor of Byrd's relationship with Elizabeth I is deeply ironic, as Elizabeth protected Byrd from the persecution that she afflicted upon him. Even though many of Byrd's works appear docilely Anglican upon first glance, a deeper analysis reveals many hidden allusions to his Catholic beliefs, developing a masterful level of complexity to his compositions. Many of his motets had double meanings inherent in their composition. Byrd's most exquisite music achieved that status because of his underlying expression of his non-compliant beliefs and spiritual character of musical inspiration.

Keywords

Byrd, Elizabeth I, Catholic, Anglican, motets, persecution, oppression, political music, inspiration

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Deliver Us from Obscurity: How Persecution Shaped William Byrd into One of England's Finest Composers

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England's finest often calls to mind figures such as Winston Churchill, William Shakespeare, Elizabeth I, and Jane Austen, persons whose lives deeply impacted the entire world. However, William Byrd, an English composer living in the late Renaissance, is a somewhat obscure name not often found in the common man's vocabulary. Living from 1540-1623, Byrd wrote a prolific number of compositions during his long life spanning a vast variety of genres, everything from madrigals to motets, songs and services, keyboard and vocal music alike, and masses.¹ The subject of his texts often centered around cries for deliverance, pleas for justice, and consolation for the suffering. Elizabeth I greatly adored Byrd's compositions and employed him in her Chapel Royal, where she kept her best and brightest musicians close to the court. What was the source of Byrd's genius and talent as a musician and composer? Some argue for Byrd's educational and musical training as a boy; others, that his ambition and desire for a career caused his inspirational compositions. In recent research, however, more evidence surrounding Byrd's life as a Catholic has surfaced, showing another explanation for his musical and compositional choices. Because of the persecution and religious oppression William Byrd faced, his compositional process was forced to be more intricate, innovative, and creative. Consequently, he penned some of the greatest music England has ever seen.

The tenor of Byrd's close relationship with Elizabeth I is deeply ironic, as Elizabeth essentially protected Byrd from the

¹ Kerman, *Masses and Motets*, 350.

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persecution she threatened to afflict upon him. Before Elizabeth I ascended to the throne of England, the country withstood a great period of religious turmoil during the reign of King Edward VI, who continued to press the country toward Protestantism following the ways of his father, Henry VIII. This was followed by the short but incredibly scarring reign of Mary, later known as Bloody Mary due to her fierce resolve to martyr Protestants for their beliefs. Elizabeth's coronation left many citizens of England wondering what direction the kingdom would take regarding religious freedom. Aware of the tenuous position she assumed, Elizabeth "followed the principle of expediency and avoided any extremes by pursuing a 'middle-of-the-road' course," effectively trying to please all parties in a way that allowed her to remain relatively undisturbed.² While this was a success in terms of establishing her as Queen, it still left her in a very precarious position. Eventually, her desire to succeed politically guided her to ban English Roman Catholics from attending Catholic services. Unfortunately for English Roman Catholics such as Byrd, the pope forbade Roman Catholics to observe the Church of England's services in 1570, essentially forcing them to choose between their political loyalty to their Queen and their religious beliefs.³ Henry Shires comments, "henceforth, in the case of all Romanists in England, political and religious issues were inextricably joined...all Romanists in England were made at least political traitors. No way was left open to distinguish between treason and religion."⁴

Byrd was faced with a seemingly impossible choice: honor the pope's wishes or swear allegiance to the Queen. For many, politics trumped piety, and the Anglican Church received many prior Catholics. However, there were still devout Catholics living in England that refused to compromise their beliefs for an easier political life. These people would not attend the services of the Church of England, defiance that earned them the title of recusants. As a result, legal action began to pursue them. The 1559

² Shires, 222.

³ Shires, 225.

⁴ Shires, 226.

Act of Uniformity “[imposed] a fine of twelve pence...for every Sunday and festival on which a person willfully absented himself from the prescribed services in his parish church,”⁵ quickly followed by another act in 1562 that “placed the lives and property of the Romanists at the mercy of the government.”⁶ Initially, these acts were not strictly enforced, but the longer Elizabeth reigned, the tighter her strictures grew. The Catholic Record Society reflects, “recusancy was now made an indictable offence; the fine for non-attendance was increased to a ruinous 20 pounds per month of 28 days or 260 pounds a year.”⁷ Catholic priests were even publicly martyred for their faith, a rare but grim occasion.⁸ It was not an easy undertaking to be Catholic in Elizabethan England.

William Byrd, self-proclaimed recusant and Catholic composer, seems to be a person that would have suffered greatly under the hands of this regime. However, after examining his life, the evidence to support this conclusion is remarkably lacking. This is not to say that he escaped the notice of the church wardens completely; on the contrary:

the composer was indicted not three times, as previously thought, but five; on or about 7 October 1586 (for the period 30 June to 1 October of that year), in the following January (1 October 1586 to 1 January 1587), in April 1587 (2 January to 3 April), on or about 4 May 1590 (29 December 1589 to 31 March following) and on 7 April 1592 (20 December 1591 to 31 March following).⁹

This harassment for not attending the Church of England’s services was not relegated to Byrd only, but also affected his

⁵ Mateer, 2.

⁶ Shires, 225.

⁷ Mateer, 3.

⁸ Cichy, 205.

⁹ Mateer, 5.

family, servants, and friends. Ultimately, however, David Mateer points out:

Byrd was unquestionably subject to a measure of governmental harassment, not least when his house was searched, and the numerous distrains levied against him from 1585 onwards must have been a source of considerable irritation; but, compared with the treatment meted out to other prominent Catholics in fines and imprisonment, the recusancy laws cannot be said to have pressed upon Byrd and his family with undue severity.¹⁰

The phrasing of “considerable irritation” seems to be key to understanding the strain of the pressure Byrd underwent from the Elizabethan government. It is undeniable there was persecution and a definite cost to pay for being a recusant; however, the overall quality of his life remained relatively undisturbed. How is it that Byrd, such a high-profile recusant, avoided harsher punishment by the hand of the Queen? In a deeply ironic twist, Elizabeth’s deep-seated political motives and Byrd’s musical ambition and cleverness worked together in a highly elegant dance that protected him from persecution and fostered further musical genius.

One reason that Byrd may have escaped more negative political attention was his occupation as a member of the Chapel Royal. The Chapel Royal consisted of the group of priests and musicians that provided service for the different religious needs of the current monarch and their household.¹¹ It was a prestigious position to be installed in service to the Queen, especially since the musician’s livelihood depended on patronage and sponsorship. Byrd was musically educated in the Chapel Royal and the St. Paul’s choir, providing him with a rich musical training alongside a theological formation that would follow him for the rest of his life.¹² At the age of twenty-three, to the best of historians’

¹⁰ Mateer, 14.

¹¹ Harley, *Gentleman of the Chapel Royal*, 19.

¹² Harley, *Gentleman of the Chapel Royal*, 20–22.

inferences, he assumed the position of Organist and Master of the Choristers at Lincoln Cathedral, a position somewhat isolated from other musicians, except for a few closer colleagues from his first time at the Chapel Royal. At this point in time, the Catholic influences of Mary's Catholic Chapel still clung tightly to the Elizabethan Chapel Royal, allowing a certain amount of "musical continuity" to bridge what otherwise would be a seemingly insurmountable gap.¹³ Therefore, it is not surprising that when Byrd returned to the Chapel Royal, this time as a gentleman, he brought with him a fairly strong sense of Catholic music—no cause for great alarm. This status as a member of the Chapel Royal not only provided him with job security and an inspiring environment in which to compose, but also kept him safe from indictment, "presumably...because he was seen to fulfill his obligations to the state religion in the course of his employment as a member of the Chapel Royal."¹⁴

Byrd's return to the Chapel Royal as an employed musician brought an incredible amount of influence and demonstrated power. He assumed "the most prestigious and remunerative position in English music. Byrd's career was on the march."¹⁵ Kerman further elaborates, "Besides putting him at the nerve center of English music, the Chapel Royal provided Byrd with rich perks," namely, a flourishing and inspiring musical culture in which to compose, and protection from persecution.¹⁶ Similar to the way some more public Catholic dissidents, such as the Pagets, a family who hosted secret masses and planned rescue attempts of Mary, Queen of Scots, approached politics, Byrd attempted to "countenance some sort of accommodation with the English government in return for a degree of toleration."¹⁷ Elizabeth herself was a wonderful virginal player, and the music she preferred to play was by her favored employee, William Byrd; this was one reason that "Elizabeth granted Byrd some sort of liability

¹³ Harley, *Gentleman of the Chapel Royal*, 177.

¹⁴ Mateer, 13.

¹⁵ Kerman, "Catholic and Careerist," 13.

¹⁶ Kerman, "Catholic and Careerist," 13.

¹⁷ Holmes quoted in Smith, "Unlawful Song," 504.

from prosecution for recusancy.”¹⁸ Other than keyboard music, Byrd also penned a prolific amount of motets, three brilliant masses, and pioneered the English consort song and madrigal, as well as multiple volumes of sacred and secular songs. He even wrote church music for the Anglican services, continuing to fly under the radar of the church wardens and cementing himself as a fixture of Elizabethan music without notable reason for alarm.

However, even though many of Byrd’s works appear docilely Anglican upon first glance, a deeper analysis reveals many hidden allusions to his Catholic beliefs, developing a masterful level of complexity to his compositions. A fascinating and famous example of this complexity is the 1575 *Cantiones sacrae*, or “sacred songs,” that Byrd and Thomas Tallis wrote in collaboration as a gift to Elizabeth. Appearing relatively early in Byrd’s musical career—the composer was barely 30—the 1575 *Cantiones sacrae* consisted of thirty-four motets, seventeen each by Byrd and Tallis. They quickly became “the most substantial and artistically elevated collection among the few native musical prints in circulation in England,” garnering attention from composers and civilians alike.¹⁹ Not only was it the first type of collection of this sort, the publication of the *Cantiones* also represented a landmark for music publication, as it was one of the first volumes of music to be circulated in England, even though the art of music printing had existed for a few decades.²⁰ Byrd and Tallis together organized the motets by finals in groups of three, cycling from G minor to G major, F major, A minor, a return to F major and G major before a move to Bb, and ultimately ending once again in G minor.²¹ This was one of the first collections of music to organize itself in this manner.

Byrd’s first motet in the collection, *Emendemus in medius*, has stood the test of time as a work of brilliance in the vanguard, “exploring the implications of textual declamation, expressive harmony, and the problems of fusing chordal writing and

¹⁸ Kerman, “Catholic and Careerist,” 15.

¹⁹ Monson, *1575 Cantiones sacrae*, pt. I, 1089.

²⁰ Kerman, “Catholic and Careerist,” 16.

²¹ Monson, 1089.

contrapuntal lines.”²² *Emendemus* is pivotal for understanding the potential religious and political undertones that run like a throughline throughout Byrd’s compositions. Shown in Ex. 1, the motet marks a turning point from Byrd’s early to middle compositional periods and is celebrated as one of his most expressive motets, containing subtle text depiction and stirring ending counterpoint on the words “*libera nos*” (deliver us) that is truly tear-jerking. While *Emendemus* is not the most elaborate or ornate motet in the collection, it clearly showcases the care Byrd took in his craft. At his disposal were the same tools that every composer could access, but Byrd demonstrated innovation and painstaking care in his attempts at text depiction. With his use of a predominantly homophonic texture, “smoothness and roughness are applied selectively for expressive reasons,” as demonstrated in Ex. 1.²³ This represents one of the first times a composer made specific textural arrangements of music to better depict text in the sixteenth century.

Ex. 1: Byrd, *Emendemus in melius*, mm. 1-7.

Emendemus in melius 1

Matins responsory for first sunday of Lent William Byrd (c.1540-1623)
Cantiones sacrae (London, 1575)

The musical score for 'Emendemus in melius' by William Byrd, measures 1-7. The score is for five voices: Superius, Discantus, Contratenor, Tenor, and Bassus. The music is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The lyrics are: 'E - men - de - mus in me - li - us quæ i - gno - ran - ter pec - ca -'. The score shows a homophonic texture with all voices moving in parallel motion. A '5' is written above the Superius staff at measure 5, indicating a weak minima beat.

Here, in m. 5, Byrd begins a phrase on a weak *minima* beat after a rest, a typical melodic move for music of the Anglican Church. Composers often employed this technique for the sake of text audibility and understandability; here in *Emendemus*, the singers implore, “the things in which we have sinned in ignorance,” an

²² Monson, 1090.

²³ Kerman, *Masses and Motets*, 121.

important plea (see Ex. 2).²⁴ After this, however, the similarities to the Protestants cease: he moves from G minor to D minor by the end of the second phrase, setting the stage for the harmonic restlessness characterizing the rest of the motet. Such quick harmonic change was unexpected from the consonance and relative simplicity of the Anglican church's music. Byrd's musical lines "also excessively returning to their semifinal starting point," and Byrd sustains harmonic tension by avoiding cadences.²⁵

Emendemus in melius quæ ignoranter peccavimus;
ne subito præoccupati die mortis,
quæramus spatium pœnitentiæ, et invenire non possimus.
Attende, Domine, et miserere; quia peccavimus tibi.

Adjuva nos, Deus salutaris noster,
et propter honorem nominis tui libera nos.

Let us amend for the better in those things in which we have sinned through ignorance;
lest suddenly overtaken by the day of death,
we seek space for repentance, and be not able to find it.
Hearken, O Lord, and have mercy: for we have sinned against thee.

Help us, O God of our salvation,
and for the honour of thy name deliver us.

Ex. 2 : *Emendemus in melius* text translation.

Emendemus again sets a new precedent and marks the beginning of Byrd's middle period of composition because of the way the text was chosen. This motet depicts a plea to the Lord to hear the prayers of a broken and contrite people, for he alone is their help, an innocuous enough message. However, the choice of text is particularly significant because it represents an important personal connection of Byrd to his own work. Kerman comments:

Free choice of this kind is something new in the history of Latin sacred music in Britain. It represents a change from a medieval attitude to one that is basically modern. To make a personal choice of a motet text implies an interest in and respect for the actual quality of the text in itself,

²⁴ Trendell, 34.

²⁵ Trendell, 45.

an attitude which sooner or later is bound to affect the musical setting.²⁶

Byrd's decision to personally select the texts for his motets reflects a level of personal care and investment into his music. His predilection for texts that spoke about deliverance, consolation, and lament speaks to a deeper spiritual desire that reflects to the general plight of Catholics in England; after all, "the Latin motet, a prime ornament of Catholicism in its time of ascendancy, was now being used to voice prayers, exhortations and protests on behalf of Catholics in time of need."²⁷ Byrd excessively devoted himself to text depiction and declamation, much more so than composers preceding him or his contemporaries. The value Byrd ascribed to text choice and the subsequent effect on his composition is best understood from his own explanation in the dedication to his *Gradualia*, Book 1, where he wrote, "[Sacred words have] such a profound and hidden power...that to one thinking upon things divine and diligently and earnestly pondering them, the most suitable of all musical measures occur (I know not how) as of themselves and suggest themselves spontaneously."²⁸ Byrd was driven to musical inspiration by his earnest pondering of and devotion to his religion.

Due to Byrd's self-immersion into the world of text depiction and declamation, his compositional techniques revolving around text expression prepared the way for the English madrigal. While his style of composition boldly waded into uncharted territory, Byrd was ahead of his time and actually introduced England to the madrigalism through his Latin motets before English composers adequately took note of their Italian contemporaries and began composing their own madrigals.²⁹ As seen above in Ex. 2, the text of *Emendemus* begins with "Let us amend what we have transgressed through ignorance, lest, should the day of death suddenly overtake us, we seek time for repentance and cannot find

²⁶ Kerman, *Masses and Motets*, 37.

²⁷ Kerman, *Masses and Motets*, 42.

²⁸ Byrd quoted in Kerman, *Masses and Motets*, 54.

²⁹ Kerman, *Masses and Motets* 345.

it,”³⁰ beginning Byrd’s tradition of setting music to texts about consolation, mercy, redemption, and repentance.³¹ Many Catholics used the same illustrations and metaphors comparing their state in England to the Jews in Babylonian captivity or in Egyptian slavery, often voicing their prayers via means of scriptures contemplating similar subjects.³²

Emendemus is one of the first of Byrd’s compositions to feature what scholars, such as David Trendell, have dubbed Byrd’s “affective homophonic style,” defined as “homophonic (or near homophonic) passages often consisting of a series of phrases separated by rests, starting on a weak beat and with surprising harmonic shifts.”³³ This style of composition was in sharp contrast to the works pre-1575 *Cantiones*. Especially in sacred music, the humanistic movement sweeping across the world brought about a shift from contemplation of the mystery from which the music arose to a focus on the kind of affective response the music itself caused within the listener; hence, the term affective homophony refers to homophonic works with a great affective response.³⁴ Musically speaking, this priority change resulted in texts being chosen for vocal music which expressed or elicited particularly strong emotions. After analyzing this affective homophony, it appears Byrd’s goal in utilizing this technique is to create as much harmonic instability as possible, separating phrases, delaying cadences, and disrupting and diverting harmonic progressions.³⁵ This harmonic restlessness perfectly expresses the tension of the motet’s text, as both the words and the music cry out in anguish for deliverance. Using this style quickly became a trademark of Byrd’s compositional style. He himself wrote about his own music, “only this I desire: that you will be as careful to hear [my songs] well express’d, as I have been both in the composing and the correcting of them. Otherwise the best song that ever was

³⁰ Smith, *Unlawful Song*, 502.

³¹ Trendell, 47.

³² Kerman, *Masses and Motets*, 42–43.

³³ Kerman in Trendell, 30.

³⁴ Mahrt, 43.

³⁵ Mahrt, 43–44.

made will seem harsh and unpleasant.”³⁶ Structure and affect were almost one unit for Byrd; they went hand in hand. The texture of his compositions and the forms that held them together were carefully chosen for specific affective reasons, and the choice was as important as any other compositional technique.³⁷ Since composing music with ingrained and intentional affective responses in mind was still a very novice idea in the sixteenth century, this bold move further set Byrd into a category of composer that was celebrated and lauded.

Emendemus illustrates this affective homophonic style in an exemplary fashion, as it is effectively “his first full-scale essay in affective homophony and, at least among the motets, as his first masterpiece.”³⁸ The relative simplicity of the chordal texture with a soaring soprano melody functions as the canvas for a theologically and harmonically rich piece of music. Byrd modeled his motet after Alfonso’s *Qui fundasti terram*, to which there are many similarities; however, it surpasses its ancestor in meaning and expression of meaning. The use of homophony allows for an easier experience for the listener to follow along with the text and listen to the message being conveyed by the music, which ultimately fulfills Byrd’s intent in utilizing this compositional style.

Of course, if this affective homophonic style is so important, what happens when Byrd departs from it? After all, homophony is only interesting for so many bars. Byrd uses another compositional style specifically to better illustrate a concept in the text he sets to music. His desire to authentically portray the text functionally explains what compositional horizons he chooses to broaden. In exploring this phenomenon, Kerman writes, “music could enhance the words; the prayers, exhortations and protests would penetrate the mind more profoundly if they were enhanced by the proper music.”³⁹ For example, *Emendemus* is made up almost entirely of the aforementioned homophony, with one very notable

³⁶ Byrd quoted in Kerman, “Catholic and Careerist,” 19.

³⁷ Kerman, *Masses and Motets*, 350–351.

³⁸ Kerman, *Masses and Motets*, 343.

³⁹ Kerman, *Masses and Motets* 344.

exception. As seen in Ex. 3, the ending musical gesture on the words “*libera nos*” breaks into an exquisite moment of counterpoint, a moment which Kerman describes as “the superb inspiration whereby Byrd conceived of the final prayer for liberation as liberation into polyphony.”⁴⁰ For an interpretation of the emphasis on this lyrics, Jeremy L. Smith argues:

the extraordinary musical emphasis Byrd placed on...that [ending] gesture [of ‘deliver us’], I believe, might well have been meant to help cast Elizabeth not as the subject but rather as the object of a plea, specifically, for freedom in religion. Thus, Byrd and Tallis may have moved by this point from the issue of salvaging a single soul to something larger in scope, if not importance, which was to implore the queen for tolerance or indeed to put before her their best case in support of a full-scale return of their nation to its former religious state.⁴¹

Byrd’s departure from his homophonic recipe for text declamation has a stunning result: it is beautifully moving, appearing, inspirational, and freeing. Even while counterpoint is a type of music often perceived as being cagey and refusing any type of creative liberty, Byrd flips this idea on its head and uses it to illustrate a break into freedom.

⁴⁰ Kerman, *Masses and Motets*, 344.

⁴¹ Smith, 502.

Ex. 3: Byrd, *Emendemus in melius*, mm. 55-60.

55 *li - be - ra nos, li - be - ra nos.* 60

a nos, li - be - ra nos, li - be - ra nos.

a nos, li - be - ra nos, li - be - ra nos.

a nos, li - be - ra nos, li - be - ra nos.

a nos, li - be - ra nos, li - be - ra nos.

Emendemus is a direct invocation of pre-Reformation musical style associated with the Respond, part of the Catholic mass; its Latin text, primarily subtle homophonic with carefully crafted counterpoint, and lack of restful harmony harkens back to the complex, elegant music of the Catholic church.⁴² This was in direct contrast to the new Church of England’s Anglican music that was often found “sadly reduced in quantity and quality from what was wanted and heard and composed a few years before” the Reformation.⁴³ Byrd’s return to older Catholic styles of music, partnered with his own creativity and musical genius, gave birth to music that was complex in its construction, intensely expressive, appealing to the masses, and accessible to the public. In short, his musical fame resulted from his suppression of his beliefs. Kerman reflects:

Byrd was living a double life. And not a few other Elizabethans were walking the same sort of tightrope. And some, like Byrd, were courting trouble by exposing their feelings in books and poems. Byrd found a way of doing this in music. He did it in music with texts, of course, perhaps cautiously Latin texts lamenting the oppression of

⁴² Trendell, 28–29.

⁴³ Kerman, “Catholic and Careerist,” 14.

his fellow recusants, crying out against it, praying for deliverance from it, even evoking specific occasions and specific atrocities.⁴⁴

In this way, even in his early stages of compositions, Byrd used his position as a popular and talented court musician to write music that reflected his own convictions in a way that would be recognizable to other recusants who also longed again for the music of their religion.

An analysis of just one of Byrd's motets reveals that Byrd's compositional process developed to be more exquisite, innovative, and unexpected as a direct result of the persecution and religious oppression he experienced. Byrd explored the far ranges of musical capability in his attempt to best represent the texts he set to music, consequently inventing models of text depiction and declamation other composers would rely upon in later years. In an ironic way, the hardships inflicted upon him by living such a double life played an integral role in the complexity of his music's construction and in the powerful emotion he managed to convey. The levels and layers embedded within Byrd's works, such as *Emendemus in melius*, are numerous and nuanced. England's attempt to stamp out the influence of Catholicism only gave rise to one of their greatest composers, whose legacy is indelibly embedded into the framework of Western music. Byrd's cries for deliverance, while not answered during his lifetime, are fulfilled as his impact lives on to this day.

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⁴⁴ Kerman, "Catholic and Careerist," 15.

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