

DIRECTOR'S NOTE:

What is belief?

For Byrd400 I wanted to explore the feature of Byrd I found most compelling: his open activism at risk of the most heinous consequences. Byrd was a known Catholic at a time when they were systematically being tortured and killed, their lands seized and their families ruined. Yet at the height of his fame, he composed three masses to worship the old Latin rite, defiantly at odds with Protestant law, all but daring those in power to make an example of him. Why?

Biographers don't suspect Byrd was a Catholic fanatic. He composed hours of soaring music for the Anglican service and dutifully served Elizabeth and the Church of England. Like his mentor Thomas Tallis, he was a musical survivor, changing his styles to fit the political needs of the moment. But the record infers that he was stubborn and just. The grotesque elimination of good people upset his faith in society, and he had the political cover to act.

We artistic types tend to look at the world and vainly wonder how we could improve it. Why not look to Byrd, for just an hour or so, and consider what he is still saying today. If his message wasn't squarely to restore Catholicism, it was to live and let live, allowing people to believe what they wish. Are they harming you?

Belief is a tool to organise the confounding chaos of the world in order to stabilise our place in it. Today our balkanised media ecosystems shout across a widening gulf, calcifying our tribal identities. The more news we consume, the more frenetic our awareness becomes. In the face of an increasingly secular society, beliefs have paradoxically become more entrenched. Belief therefore correlates not with religion, nor inversely with scientific advancement, but with chaos.

To truly take Byrd's example I must encounter my own beliefs: how have I chosen to organise my faith in the world given my lived experience? I'm sure you share my belief in universal human rights, but Byrd whispers something beyond belief. When we as a society learn to stop trying to convince people they're wrong – about values, politics, and preferences of all kinds – only then can we experience the next stage of our evolution: working together to protect a world where we each get to choose our fate.

We ask you to help bring this brave new world into being. 400 years on, and not a moment too late.

– BILL BARCLAY

Religious Persecution Today

Byrd brings to our attention the parallel between the plight of Catholics in Protestant England and Jews in Egypt and Babylon. His 1589 *Cantiones Sacrae* contain numerous references to stories of religious persecution from the Old Testament, offering solace and hope to the Catholic community. The abuse of Catholics in Elizabethan England, and the Jews in Spain in the same period, are just two examples of a much larger phenomenon recurring throughout human history. It is sobering to contemplate that even today, members of religious minorities in 75% of the world's countries lack religious freedom¹.

“Marginal social attitudes never go away. They’re something like a latent virus that becomes activated under certain conditions.” (Tom Stoppard, *NY Times*, November 2022). Anti-Semitism in the west and Middle East today, 80 years on from the Holocaust, is being fueled by far-right ideologies and white nationalism. As a result, Jewish stereotypes are once again being normalised and hate-crimes have increased. Christians also suffer from religious intolerance. In 2020, one in eight Christians worldwide were facing significant discrimination on account of their faith². Muslims face religious restrictions in around 140 countries, and the plight of both the Rohingya people in Myanmar and the Uyghur population in Xinjiang and are extreme cases of mass-imprisonment and extermination. It is clear that the human propensity toward religious marginalisation is not merely a relic of our past³.

Cracking down on religious minorities has long been a means of trying to preserve a power structure. Elizabeth I persecuted Catholics to guard against the threat from Catholic rivals, to protect her own power and banish dissent. In autocratic regimes, religious persecution is a power play and a persistent thorn in the side of human existence. Through the pain and suffering nobly conveyed in Byrd's Catholic music, he speaks to all minority religions who have been persecuted throughout history, and to believers who continue to suffer for their faith today.

– LILLY VADANEUX & BILL BARCLAY

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¹International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief

²Pew Research Center, Nov 10, 2020 ³Forbes, Jan 13, 2021

William Byrd 1540 – 1623

William Byrd was a Catholic at the pinnacle of the musical world of Protestant England. Through his diplomacy, talent and hard work, Byrd managed to lead a double life, maintaining the favour of Queen Elizabeth I while acting as the musical figurehead of the Catholic community. His career spanned almost 60 years and more than 500 of his works have survived. Having most likely been a chorister in youth, Byrd was appointed as Organist and Master of the Choristers at Lincoln Cathedral in 1563. Here, he experimented with composing in a variety of styles while developing his unique musical voice. The composer Thomas Tallis was a strong influence on Byrd's style from his early years, as were Christopher Tye and William Mundy, and later, composers from further afield such as Alfonso Ferrabosco.

In 1572, Byrd took up the position of Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in London, where he became joint organist with Tallis. Three years later, the two composers were granted a 21-year monopoly on music printing in England, and shortly thereafter jointly published a collection of *Cantiones Sacrae* (sacred songs). Byrd's position at the Chapel Royal enabled him to make connections with powerful Elizabethan noblemen who would become his patrons. Among these were Lord Thomas Paget, Edward Somerset (Earl of Worcester), and the Petre family, all of whom had Catholic leanings. Byrd also enjoyed the support of Queen Elizabeth I, who protected him and his family, particularly during the 1580s. This decade of harsh anti-Catholic persecution was a particularly fruitful time for Byrd as a composer.

After 1590, Byrd embarked on a project to provide music specifically for clandestine Catholic services. He left the Chapel Royal in early 1595, directly after the publication of his *Mass for Five Voices*, and moved his family to the Essex countryside, near Ingatestone, the home of his most important patron, Sir John Petre. Having withdrawn from his duties providing music for Anglican church services, Byrd joined a community of Catholic recusants, where he lived until his death at the age of 83.

– LILLY VADANEUX

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The Mass for Five Voices

In the early 1590s, Byrd published three Latin masses in London before moving to the Essex countryside to join the recusant Catholic community in Stondon Massey. It had been nearly 40 years since the last Latin mass was composed in England. Byrd's masses represent not only a turning point in his career but also in his musical style. His previous settings of Latin texts, a language he used to express his Catholic faith, had been overtly expressive and complex, culminating in the elaborate six-voice motets of his 1591 *Cantiones Sacrae*. The three masses however are concise, with little word repetition, clearly designed for private worship and achievable by amateur singers. Their combination of simplicity, sincerity, and profundity make them the durable works of art they are today, sung regularly around the world.

Byrd's masses were for three, four and five voices, ensuring there would always be a Mass Ordinary for the forces available.¹ The four-voice mass could be sung without women or boys, and the three-voice mass allows for easy adaptation for whomever was available. Evidence suggests that instruments may have joined the singers, as most Catholic families owned viols and organs.

In the *Mass for Five Voices*, the haunting, meandering head-motif (heard at the very start of each movement except the Sanctus) makes use of the expressive semitone step that was a hallmark of Byrd's Latin music. Byrd dramatically employs homophony (the same words sung at the same time) amidst an otherwise polyphonic texture to underline the importance of certain passages. For instance in the Credo, right before the phrase 'Et unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam' (I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church), Byrd has all the voices come to a stop and then powerfully re-enter together, accentuating this core statement of the Catholic rite. Byrd expertly uses dissonance throughout his masses, particularly in the Agnus Dei. We hear both the four and five-voice Agnus Dei tonight, which represent some of his most ravishing music.

– LILLY VADANEUX

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¹The Ordinary denotes standard sections of the mass, while the Mass Proper refers to texts that change daily. Tonight, viols play where Proper sections would occur.

Catholic Recusancy

The glorious reign of Queen Elizabeth I was marred by varying levels of persecution against Catholics. Beginning with the 1559 Act of Uniformity, she tried to restore order and establish The Church of England with concessions to Catholics. However, by the end of the 1580s, England was in an extreme state of political and religious unrest. The hanging of the Jesuit Priest Edmund Campion in 1581 marked the start of a period of brutal torture and executions, further aggravated by various plots to overthrow Elizabeth and replace her with the Catholic Queen Mary. Almost 130 Jesuit priests were executed during Elizabeth's reign. This included Henry Garnet, arrested for his involvement in the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, whom Byrd knew personally.

Catholic recusants were those who refused to attend Church of England services, or who committed more serious crimes such as the holding of a Latin mass or the harbouring of a priest. The former attracted fines or imprisonment, whereas the latter were offences punishable by death. Despite this, Elizabethan Catholics continued to take part in secret masses, putting certain measures in place in the event of a raid. Secret chambers called 'priest holes' were built in Catholic residences and are still being discovered today. Due to both Byrd's privileged position at the Chapel Royal and Elizabeth's leniency, he was not cited for recusancy until 1584. In fact, other than receiving several recusancy fines for not attending church, he and his family never encountered any serious persecution.

Byrd creates a poignant and compelling representation of the suffering of the Catholic community under Elizabeth's increasingly repressive regime in his 1589 *Cantiones Sacrae*, a collection of sixteen five-part motets. Their texts lament the Israelite captivity in Babylon and Egypt, as well as the desolation of Jerusalem, drawing a parallel with the plight of the Catholics in England. Written for performance in private settings, these sacred songs also served to hold the recusant community together and to keep their faith in Catholicism alive.

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Byrd's Instrumental Output

In 1585, Byrd's beloved teacher, friend and predecessor as Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, Thomas Tallis, died. He had been considered the greatest composer in England from the generation before Byrd. With this tragic event, Byrd also lost his colleague and would now be the sole license-holder for music printing in England. That year, Byrd wrote the consort song, *Ye Sacred Muses* as an elegy to Tallis, which ends with the poignant phrase: 'Tallis is dead, and Music dies.' This song, which will be heard tonight in its original form, is performed in many different versions, ranging from solo voice with four viols to a consort of five viols or voices.

Some of Byrd's finest instrumental works are contained in a collection of 42 keyboard works entitled 'My Ladye Nevell's Booke of Virginal Music', compiled in 1591. The dedicatee was Elizabeth Neville, daughter of the Queen's Lord Keeper, Sir Nicholas Bacon. The music in the volume is secular and includes contrapuntal fancies and voluntaries, ten sets of pavans and galliards (the pavan-galliard pair was a popular Elizabethan dance form), ground-bass compositions and variations on folk tunes. Despite being written for keyboard, these works exemplify Byrd's skilful interweaving of parts characteristic of his consort and vocal music; the first pavan was in fact an adaptation of an earlier version for five viols.

For viol consort, Byrd wrote fantasias, dances (pavans and galliards), *In nomines* (constructed around the *Gloria tibi Trinitas* plainchant) and one 'Prelude and Ground'. Byrd often makes reference to popular songs within his instrumental music and has even been likened to Shakespeare in his mixing of 'high' and 'low' forms to create something utterly original. Tonight, we will hear Byrd's 'Fantasia upon Browning' (also known as 'The leaves be green'), in which the folk tune is distinctly passed around each of the instruments in turn. This is the piece the viols play right at curtain time. Byrd's second six-part Fantasia, which the viols play between the Credo and Sanctus, also quotes *Greensleeves*.

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