

## "Secret Byrd"

Death of Classical  
Greenwood Cemetery  
*BROOKLYN*

**IN HONOR OF THE FOUR-HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY** of the death of English composer William Byrd, Death of Classical presented a program entitled *Secret Byrd* in the Catacombs of Brooklyn's Greenwood Cemetery (seen June 9). The interactive program was designed and directed by Bill Barclay, artistic director of both Concert Theatre Works and Music Before 1800, and featured the National Cathedral's Cathedra vocal ensemble and New York City's own Abendmusik, a period-instrument string ensemble.

Byrd's adult years were a time of terrible sectarian violence in England, specifically directed against Catholics. A devout Catholic himself, Byrd managed not only to stay alive, but also to retain his position as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, for whom he composed much music for the Church of England. Meanwhile, on the sly, he wrote three complete Mass settings – one each for three, four and five voices—for underground Catholics, settings designed for use at clandestine services. In this program, the five-voice setting was sung, along with the *Agnus Dei* from the four-voice setting. The various sections of these vocal works were interspersed with Abendmusik performing several of Byrd's Fantasias plus instrumental dance music for viol ensemble. Also sung were "Ye Sacred Muses," which Byrd wrote as an elegy for his late friend and mentor Thomas Tallis; "Infelix ego" (I Am Unhappy), a setting of the words of Italian Catholic activist Girolamo Savonarola; and as a finale, *Haec Dies*, in which the vocal and instrumental ensembles finally performed together.

The catacombs were set up to represent a secret meeting of Catholics to perform the Mass ceremony. The singers were dressed in period attire, and the center of the room was occupied by a banquet table laden with food. Some of the rooms had materials relevant to the period and to immediate goings on, and audience members were encouraged to wander freely throughout the performance. Barclay served the role of priest, at various points during the instrumental interludes going around offering blessings and at one point confessing two of the other actors. A moment of high drama was struck when the five-voice *Agnus Dei* was interrupted by terrible pounding on the door, depicting the arrival of English soldiers. The priest went off to face his martyrdom, as the congregation members attempted to hide *in situ*.

The singers and instrumentalists all gave excellent performances. It is a real treat to hear five-part polyphony sung one to a part (and well sung) at such close proximity. The ensembles played very well in tune with each other in music that is not always so easy. This was an effective and compelling dramatic presentation, as well as a reminder of our hope for a world in which people's differences of belief are tolerated and respected. —*Arlo McKinnon*