



# To sing like a Byrd

William Byrd not only survived a perilous period of history as a church composer, but his music is still regularly sung today, 400 years after his death, as Henrietta Bredin reports

*Since singing is so good a thing,  
I wish all men would learne to sing.*

**A**ND women too, of course. William Byrd, the 400th anniversary of whose death is being marked this year with outpourings of his music up and down the land, must have been a good thing to have produced this little couplet. In fact, he was so keen to ‘perswade every one to learne to sing’ that he produced a list of reasons, published in the preface to his volume *Psalmes, Sonets and Songs of Sadnes and Pietie*, including: ‘The exercise of singing is delightfull to Nature, & good to preserve the health of Man. It doth strengthen all the parts of the brest, & doth open the pipes. It is a singular good remedie for a stutting & stammering in the speech.’

It was extraordinary that Byrd survived and flourished in the times he lived through, born in 1540 in London, and dying in his own bed, a wealthy man, at the age of 83. Accounts of his early life are sketchy, but he was a boy chorister, almost certainly a member of the Chapel Royal, and a pupil of the composer Thomas Tallis, going on to become his assistant after his voice had broken. He cut his teeth on Anglican church music during the reign of Edward VI until, under the reign of Mary Tudor, the Catholic rite and musical settings of Latin were restored.

*Facing page:* **Byrd in the Musicians’ Church, the Anglican St Sepulchre, London EC1.**

*Right:* **Remembered at Lincoln Cathedral**

For an 18-year-old musician and budding church composer, the year of 1558, when Elizabeth I came to the throne, must have been immensely confusing. Before the death of Henry VIII, there had been an unbroken tradition of music for nearly 1,000 years; now, all that was swept away and everyone was required to attend Church of England services, with the new Book of Common Prayer. Fortunately for Byrd, Elizabeth I was a Protestant in name who, nonetheless, had a great love of rites and ceremonial. She had crucifixes and candlesticks in her private chapel; during her half-sister Mary’s reign, she had attended Mass despite discreetly signalling that she did not share her beliefs; and she loved music. Byrd, a Catholic, was, therefore, obliged to tread a very careful line, writing music for Anglican services—his first job, in his early twenties, was as organist and choir master at Lincoln Cathedral—as well as covertly composing for the Roman liturgy. He was also known, and was extremely popular, for his secular works, madrigals and dances.

Returning to London from Lincoln, he was named a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, an appointment that put him at the very centre of English musical life and was, in addition,

well paid. Byrd remained there for nearly two decades, during which time he made an exceptionally shrewd move, together with Tallis: applying for and obtaining a printing licence from the Queen. This enabled them to publish and make money from collections of their motets, psalm settings and songs. After Tallis’s death, Byrd continued to compose and publish and, with the Chapel

Royal choir at his disposal, wrote numerous works, including the wonderful 10-voice Great Service.

The strain of appearing to espouse one form of belief at the same time as cherishing another must have been considerable. This was a time of religious and political volatility. Disloyalty to the established religion would have been seen as disloyalty to the state, the outward practice of worship a sign of inward loyalty. What was interesting

about Byrd was that he was, indeed, a Catholic, but, first of all, he was an Englishman. When the Catholic forces of Spain under Philip II posed an immediate and dangerous threat in the shape of the Spanish Armada, only narrowly averted, Byrd wrote an anthem celebrating the English victory. In the same year, 1588, he was putting together and publishing a collection of Latin motets, by no means in the tradition of English church music. The contradiction was potentially perilous.

The Elizabethan authorities stressed that heresy was not punishable by death, but treason most certainly was and the punishment was appalling. Hanging was literally too good for those accused of treason—they were dragged on hurdles to Tyburn, where, in public view, they were hanged, taken down before expiring, disembowelled and their genitals were chopped off.

Small wonder, then, that Byrd, by now married and with a growing family, decided to leave London and find somewhere quieter to settle. In 1593, the Byrds moved to Essex, →



## Where to hear (and sing) Byrd

**All year, until December 25** Byrd’s *Gradualia* (settings of music for Mass) with his Solemn Memorial Mass performed on the day of Byrd’s death, **July 4**, at Westminster Cathedral, London SW1

**March 18** Byrd and Weelkes: 400 years of music by The William Byrd Singers with the English Cornett and Sackbut Ensemble at The Stoller Hall, Manchester, 7.30pm ([www.stollerhall.com](http://www.stollerhall.com))

**March 25** Cappella in Concert: A Festival

of Byrd and Britten at the Jesmon United Reformed Church, Newcastle upon Tyne, 7.30pm ([www.cappellanewcastle.org.uk](http://www.cappellanewcastle.org.uk))

**April 6** Britten Pears Arts Scratch Choir: learn and sing Byrd’s four-part Mass in a day, at Snape Maltings, Suffolk, 11am ([www.brittenpearsarts.org](http://www.brittenpearsarts.org))

**July 4** William Byrd Anniversary Concert by The Stondon Singers at St Peter and Paul Church, Stondon Massey, Essex, 8pm ([www.stondonsingers.org.uk](http://www.stondonsingers.org.uk))

## Standing the test of time

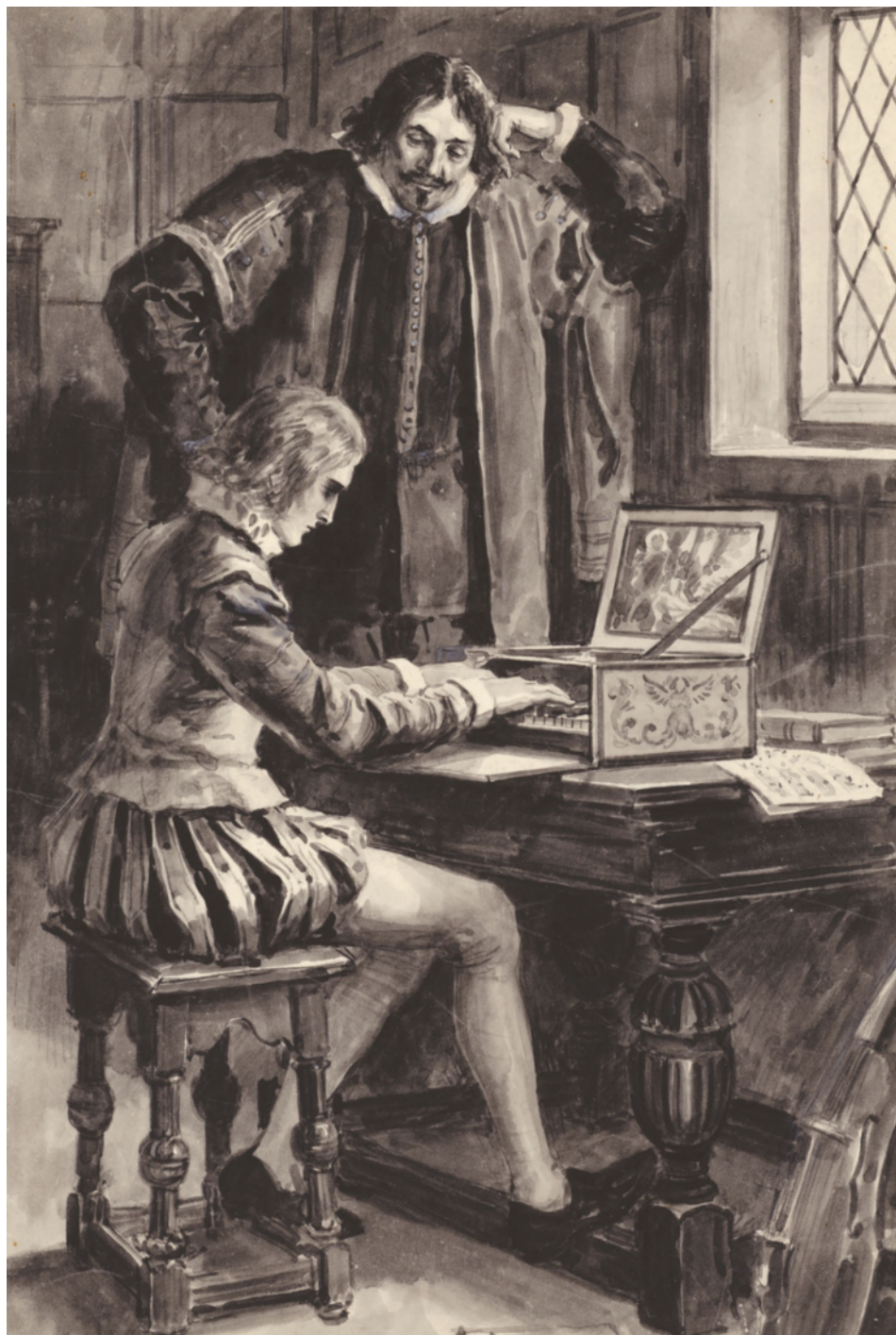
David Benedict belongs to the Pegasus Choir, which recently performed a programme of Byrd, Thomas Weelkes (who shares a 400th anniversary) and settings of texts from Byrd's contemporaries, George Herbert and Thomas Nashe, by Judith Weir, current Master of the King's Music. 'There's more range in Byrd than you might think,' he says. 'It's not hard to sight read, it's not hard to sing—but it is hard to sing well. In a small group of singers, you have to know when you're leading and when you're supporting, constantly keeping a balance and passing the line from section to section.'

'Because so much of what Byrd wrote was for private consumption, it's not ideal for performance in concert halls where you're a long way from the audience, so it was wonderful to give this concert in St George's, Bloomsbury,' adds Mr Benedict. 'Singing this music needs to be as much about listening as making a sound: listening to the text, to what the other singers are doing and not getting carried away by thinking "Oh, my line's lovely" and giving it too much emphasis.'

## 'The strain of appearing to espouse one belief, yet cherishing another must have been considerable'

to the village of Stondon Massey, almost certainly to be near the influential and Catholic Petre family. It was possible for Catholics to maintain a safe and sociable existence if they had strong enough links to the Queen and the Court, but, over the course of Elizabeth's reign, Catholics were excluded from political office, both locally and nationally. Families such as the Petres could no longer hold the positions that people of their status would have expected—to be sheriffs or justices of the peace. As a result, perhaps compensating for this exclusion, they became involved in cultural pursuits and in the patronage of artists. As a result, Byrd continued to receive a stipend from the Chapel Royal and also enjoyed the generous protection of the Petres.

As Elizabeth I had no heir, it looked as if the next monarch would be Mary, Queen of Scots and the country would return to Catholicism—until her execution in 1587. As a legacy for



Thomas Tallis and Byrd, teacher and pupil who became successful musical publishers

a future and better time, the Petre family commissioned three Masses from Byrd, written for illegal and secret performance at their home of Ingatestone Hall. The Masses were for three voices, four voices and five voices, designed to be sung by members of the household, not professionals. This meant that women could take part in church music for the first time, taking the higher parts that would formerly have been sung by boys.

Byrd lived on into the reign of James I and emerged unscathed from the anti-Catholic frenzy after the Gunpowder Plot was uncovered

in 1605, although, shortly afterwards, a man was arrested in a London pub in possession of 'certain papistical books written by William Byrd' and thrown into Newgate prison. The composer had by then retired into relative obscurity, but he continued to be well regarded, public opinion being reflected by Henry Peacham in his book *The Compleat Gentleman*, published a few months before the composer's death: 'For motets and music of piety and devotion, as well for the honour of our nation as the merit of the man, I prefer above all our Phoenix, Master William Byrd.' 🦅