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Quire Cleveland: music historian Kerry McCarthy talks about "England's Phoenix," William Byrd

by Daniel Hathaway

This weekend, Ross W. Duffin will lead the professional singers of Quire Cleveland in two concerts celebrating the sacred music of English Renaissance composer William Byrd (1540-1623). The programs — on Saturday, May 21 at 7:30 pm in St. Bernard's Church in Akron, and on Sunday, May 22 at 4:00 pm in Historic St. Peter's Church in downtown Cleveland — will include a selection of Byrd's English and Latin motets interspersed between movements of his *Mass for Five Voices.*

Byrd has always puzzled historians. Considered by many to be the greatest English composer of his era, he skillfully navigated the troubled religious currents of the time, remaining staunchly Roman Catholic during the several waves of the Protestant Reformation. Others lost their heads while Byrd survived — and thrived, first as organist of Lincoln Cathedral, then as a member of the Chapel Royal, where he enjoyed close connections with the Protestant courts of both Elizabeth I and James I while clandestinely writing Latin music for private households and chapels.

Quire's audiences will enjoy the opportunity to learn more about the composer — named "England's Phoenix" by one of his contemporaries — in pre-concert lectures by music historian Kerry McCarthy, author of the recent Oxford University Press book, *Byrd.* McCarthy will also give a special talk, "William Byrd and the Age of Exploration," at the Hermit Club in PlayHouse Square on Thursday, May 19 at 7:30 pm, co-sponsored by the club, the English-Speaking Union, and Quire Cleveland.

McCarthy has long been involved with Byrd's music both as a singer and a musicologist. During her graduate studies at Stanford, she directed a choir that sang all the Latin motets of the composer's *Gradualia* in their liturgical order over the course of a year, and she wrote her doctoral dissertation on that subject. After teaching at Duke for 11 years, she moved back to her native Portland, Oregon, where she participates every

August in the William Byrd Festival. We reached her by phone in Portland to talk about one of her favorite subjects.

Daniel Hathaway: Unlike the liturgical music Byrd wrote for official use, the Gradualia *were intended for use in private households and chapels during a period when public celebrations of Latin masses were forbidden. What did you learn about Byrd through what I would imagine was the intense experience of singing through the* Gradualia *from end to end?*

Kerry McCarthy: That was an extremely audacious thing for a graduate student to do 16 years ago. There are 109 pieces in the collection with subsections. It convinced me that Byrd had specific singers in mind for this music, because the range of the voice parts are not normal for Renaissance music — there's a particularly low alto part that fits me very well, and I like to imagine that Byrd, who was an alto, wrote that for himself. As you go through the whole year, there are certain voice parts that appear, then disappear. There are more voice parts in the summer and fewer in the winter, and that may have had to do with how muddy the roads got in winter. So Byrd had specific human beings in mind when he wrote these pieces. I just wish I knew who they were!

DH: How does Quire's program reflect the legacy of William Byrd's music?

KMC: What we're performing is really only part of Byrd's legacy — substantial as it is. The concert includes only his sacred music, but he wasn't just working from the church. He wrote a lot of secular songs, love songs, and songs on classical themes. He also wrote tons of instrumental music. In some ways, his keyboard music is the most important of all. This is over-simplifying, but before Byrd, keyboard music was either played for dancing, or used in church to elaborate on chant melodies and fill in space during ceremonies. Byrd really made keyboard music into an art form in its own right both with his huge fantasias — some of which are really complicated and desperately hard to play — and with other pieces that are beautifully simple. He ran the gamut, but unlike other composers, his music is on a human scale, and you can see so much of his personality there. You can almost feel his hands on the keyboard.

He also wrote quite a lot of music for viols, but surprisingly, nothing for the lute, which was the other huge English Renaissance instrument.

DH: How did you decide to talk about "Byrd and the Age of Exploration" for your Thursday evening lecture?

KMC: A couple of years ago, when I was working at a Renaissance music festival in the Pacific Northwest, I wondered what a composer like William Byrd would think if he

knew we were out here on the edge of the Western world, 6,000 miles from England, singing and playing his music. It turns out that there are a lot more connections between Byrd and the New World than one would have thought.

This all got started because we were singing from the very first English songbook, *Psalms, Sonnets, and Songs* of 1558*,* which bears the coat of arms of his patron Sir Christopher Hatton that includes a golden deer. That's a reference to the Golden Hind, Sir Francis Drake's famous ship that sailed around the world, and the same patron financed both Drake's voyage and Byrd's songbook.

Then I looked at Byrd's second songbook of 1611, and the person who paid for that was Sir Henry Carey, who also financed the second English voyage around the world by Thomas Cavendish. Carey realized that the New World was the way to get rich, and he didn't want to leave that to the Spanish. So if you wanted to make your mark in Renaissance England, the two things you paid for were high-class music and world exploration.

I started exploring a bit of genealogy to see how Byrd got connected with these guys, and it turns out that he was from a family that included merchants as well as instrument builders. His brother John had a fleet of ships that went everywhere, including Cuba and Africa — he also got into piracy, and there was a huge scandal about pirated casks of wine. When you look at Byrd's own songs, he uses a lot of travel metaphors, and although he never seems to have stepped off the Island himself, he owned a book that was the equivalent of Rick Steves' travel guides to Europe.

DH: You spend some time in your book writing about Byrd's library — or at least the part of it that survives.

KMC: The single biggest surprise I discovered in my research was Byrd's collection of books. I would have expected him to own music theory books, maybe a couple of devotional books, maybe some Shakespeare if we're really lucky. I would never have guessed that almost all the books that have survived are really nasty political rants. They're anti-Catholic, anti-foreign, subjects that go completely against what we know of his beliefs. In addition to the travel book, there's a sort of do-it-yourself legal book — which makes sense because he was always suing people. But mostly, it's this crazy political stuff with grotesque pictures of the Pope. I kept thinking, if he lived in the 21st century, he'd be one of those guys who are always reading political websites he doesn't agree with and getting himself all worked up. It's such a different side of him.

DH: I understand that you're now working on a book about Thomas Tallis, Byrd's mentor.

KMC: In some ways it's strangely liberating to write about a composer about whom we know next to nothing. With Byrd, the structure of the book almost wrote itself. We have these stages of his life and the books that he published, and we have all this background. With Tallis you have more freedom, but the dangerous thing is that he lived in such interesting times. He covered almost the whole of the sixteenth century in his really long life, and the context is so great. What I don't want to do is to create a wonderful tapestry of context and have this composer-shaped hole in the middle. There's a lot to be said about his music that I think hasn't been said yet.

One of the things I'm going to focus on is the sources, the manuscripts that people were using, and — when he finally got around to publishing his music — the printed collections. I want to focus on how people were actually using his music and what was the point of contact for these performers. Often the best way to do that is to go back and look at the manuscripts. One of those contains essentially all his Latin music for four voices. If that were lost, we wouldn't know about any of that repertoire. One of the chapters will be just about that little manuscript. It's tiny. You can pick it up with one hand and sing out of it. This was probably put together for a parish church, probably in London, and I want to speculate about who the people were who would have used it and what their lives were like. Who would have copied it? Who would have repaired it when pages started falling out? And when Tallis started publishing, who bought his books?

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