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WILLIAM BYRD
MASSES
for 3, 4 and 5 voices

with introduction by
Kerry McCarthy

 DAMM
facsimiles

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The Masses of William Byrd: A Short Introduction

Kerry McCarthy

William Byrd (c. 1540–1623) wrote three settings of the Latin mass, one each for three, four, and five voices. He published them discreetly as small pamphlets, with none of the elaborate prefatory materials found in his other books. There are no title pages, no dedications, and no dates: the only identifying mark is the name *W. Byrd* printed at the top of each page. The dates of publication were finally sorted out with some admirable detective work by Peter Clulow in the mid-twentieth century. Byrd's printer Thomas East created ornate initial letters with reusable blocks of wood, which were carved in crisp detail and wore out gradually over the years. By studying East's other publications with the same wood-block initials, we can arrive at an approximate chronology for the three masses. The four-voice mass was printed first, in 1592–93, followed by the three-voice mass in 1593–94 and the five-voice mass in 1594–95. (They seem to have enjoyed considerable popularity: East had already produced second editions of the two smaller masses by 1600.) This was the last music Byrd published before leaving the familiar surroundings of the royal court and retiring to rural Essex to live out the final decades of his career.

When Byrd set the mass to music in the early 1590s, he was doing something no English composer had done for thirty years. Given the political and cultural risks involved, it is surprising that he managed to do it at all. The 1559 Act of Uniformity strictly forbade the celebration of the old Catholic liturgy in England. Those who went on cultivating it could be punished with fines, imprisonment, or, in exceptional cases, even death. What had taken place daily at every pre-Reformation altar, from the humblest parish church to the greatest cathedral, was now a rare and dangerous luxury. William Allen, an Elizabethan cleric living in exile in Rome, saw the absence of the mass as the greatest difficulty facing his fellow Catholics back in England: 'the universal lack of the sovereign Sacrifice and Sacraments catholicly ministered, without which the soul of man dieth, as the body doth without corporal food'. The small group of Catholic priests who worked secretly in Elizabethan England did their best to provide regular masses for their flock. These were clandestine and closely guarded events. Altar furnishings were designed to masquerade as secular household goods, and hiding spaces were built to conceal the priest and his assistants in the

event of a raid. An unexpected knock on the door could put everyone's life at risk. The circumstances were, to say the least, not ideal for complex polyphony.

In every other musical genre Byrd cultivated—keyboard and string music, courtly songs, vernacular church music, even Latin motets—he could draw some direct inspiration from his English contemporaries. He did not have that option with his three masses. When he sat down to write them in isolation, he set himself a task faced by no other Renaissance composer. Whatever precedents he may have known, he did not follow them very closely. By the time he started writing masses, he was a fifty-year-old composer who had already developed a mature Latin polyphonic style of his own. He seems not to have been in great need of outside help. John Taverner's early-sixteenth-century *Mean Mass*, with its lucid counterpoint and graceful melodic lines, was (as Philip Brett has shown) apparently the most promising model he could find. He composed his four-part Sanctus around a substantial quotation from it, which was the closest he ever came to the traditional Renaissance technique of the parody mass. Otherwise he was on his own.

It is clear from the rest of Byrd's music (not least from the purely secular and instrumental pieces) that he enjoyed working multiple times through a single musical problem. Here he took the full Ordinary of the Mass, the unchanging group of texts prescribed by the Roman liturgy, and set it to music three times. In some places the result sounds uncannily like the same mass written three times over; in other places the differences from one mass to the next, the shifts in technique and atmosphere, can be almost shocking. Byrd appears to have undertaken the composition of his masses as a deliberate and limited series of experiments. He wrote almost 100 five-part songs and nearly as many five-part motets, but only one five-part mass. Once he had used each particular set of voices, he never came back to it. Some of his more eccentric scoring decisions in the masses (like those in his *Gradualia* a decade later) may even have been inspired by the talents and vocal ranges of particular singers in his community.

His three-voice mass was, by its very nature, the most experimental. Nobody else in the late Renaissance was writing whole masses for three voices. Composers certainly included trio sections in larger works, and textless three-part music was in considerable demand, but Byrd's three-part mass was unique. He may well have been responding to the practical needs of Elizabethan Catholic worship—there must have been occasions when just a few singers were available. He was also setting himself a purely musical challenge. When only three voices are in play, not a single note can go to waste, and some sleight of hand is needed to create a convincingly full texture. Byrd seems to have developed a new interest in serious three-part writing during the late 1580s and early 1590s. His elegant and concise three-part string fantasias are projects in a similar vein, and some of the three-part penitential psalms in his *Songs of Sundry Natures* can be heard as sketches for the large-scale project he would take on in the three-voice mass.

The scoring of the four-voice mass may appear more normal at first glance, but it has rather little in common with the standard four-part arrangement cultivated by other late-Renaissance composers. The voices have vast and substantially overlapping ranges, some covering almost two octaves. Byrd's four-part ensemble was not the same as Victoria's or Palestrina's. Modern editions have done their best to solve the problem with various mixtures of transposition, voice-swapping, and editorial disclaimer. There is some evidence that the whole thing should in fact be taken down a fourth and sung by a group of low voices. Byrd tried out yet another experimental sonority in the five-part mass, the last of the set to be published. Instead of creating a five-part texture by adding a second countertenor line (as so much Elizabethan cathedral music did), or using a terraced scoring with five different ranges (the traditional English solution to which he returned in much of the *Gradualia*), he wrote two tenor parts. It was a rather Italianate way to compose for five voices. If he studied the masses of his Counter-Reformation contemporaries, he may well have picked up the idea from them.

The handful of Byrd's English admirers who copied or catalogued his masses generally called them 'Kyries', if only to avoid the taboo word 'mass'. Byrd was in fact the first Tudor composer to include the Kyrie consistently in his polyphonic masses. The Sarum rite, which had been followed in most of pre-Reformation England, used special chanted settings of the Kyrie with interpolated texts which changed from day to day. Sixteenth-century English composers avoided the obvious complications by starting with the Gloria, and the native tradition of the four-movement polyphonic mass went on until the Sarum rite was abolished for the last time in 1559. When Byrd chose the Roman five-movement form, he revealed something about his own attitude. His masses were clearly not intended as works of nostalgia for a lost English past. They were his distinctive contribution to what he recognized as an international musical tradition. They were also intended for use in real acts of underground Catholic worship, most likely presided over by English Jesuits, who were militantly Roman in both their politics and their rubrics.

More than four centuries after they appeared as a handful of unmarked pamphlets, Byrd's three masses have become his best-known works, standard fare for church choirs and recordings of Tudor music. They occupy an honourable but slightly odd place in the canon of Renaissance polyphony. They have few real precedents and no real successors. Byrd never even gave them names—or, if he did, the names have been long lost. It is hard to imagine him producing half a dozen more freely-composed masses, as his friend and colleague Philippe de Monte (who himself spent some time in England) did in his own career. It is all but impossible to imagine him writing a parody mass on *Ne irascaris*, or *Haec dies*, or *Though Amaryllis dance in green*, or on whatever Italian trifle may have been in fashion during the early 1590s.

Byrd's masses were cut off from the European tradition by an accident of geography, and from the English tradition by an accident of politics. Despite his isolated situation, he still appears to have been trying his hand at concise imitative polyphony in the best Counter-Reformation style. He picked the most continental of mid-Tudor mass settings as his initial model. Although his masses seem never to have found their way into any European libraries, he went to some trouble to make them sound cosmopolitan and up-to-date. As the singer will soon notice, there are absolutely no dissonant progressions of the 'English cadence' type (with simultaneous or narrowly avoided false relations) that had been so common in his Latin motets. It was not just a matter of maturing style: the mannerism returned in the early-seventeenth-century *Gradualia*, where there are dozens of prominent false-relation cadences. Their characteristic sound was not so much provincial as old-fashioned. It was beloved in continental Europe by the generation of Gombert and Clemens, but avoided by the more disciplined Counter-Reformation composers of the late sixteenth century. When Palestrina wrote a parody mass on an older Franco-Flemish motet (Jean Lhéritier's *Nigra sum*) featuring numerous cadential false relations, he carefully bowdlerized them all. Byrd did exactly the same with his own polyphonic style in the course of writing his masses.

He did something else new by deciding to write for such small vocal groups. He had not composed any Latin-texted music for three or four voices since the utilitarian experiments of his late teens. His masses seem to have been a deliberate exercise in musical asceticism, in accomplishing as much as possible with limited resources. It is a long journey from the opulent sounds of the six-part *Cantiones* to the tense precision of the four-part Kyrie, but these pieces were separated by no more than a few years. Byrd was preparing to enter a different cultural world in middle age, and the transition can be heard in his music. He had spent almost two decades in the most luxurious situation any Elizabethan composer could have hoped for, surrounded by hand-picked musicians, fluent copyists, and eager audiences. English court circles were full of skilled amateur performers, along with a steady stream of young professionals who found their way to London to sing for a living. These were people who could put on an expert performance of a harrowing twelve-minute motet as after-dinner entertainment. Byrd was about to leave that milieu behind and begin a new life among devout rural Catholics for whom sacred music in Latin meant something very different (and, in many cases, something more dangerous). That is the real paradox of his masses: they reveal both a broadening and a narrowing of musical horizons.

There is little evidence of how Byrd's masses were put to practical use: secret celebrations of the mass were, for obvious reasons, not often documented in writing. This music was probably sung by small groups rather than large choirs, and some sort of instrumental participation seems likely. Organs and viols were ubiquitous in Catholic households, and we are told that the resourceful widow


Lady Magdalen Montague presided over a domestic chapel where ‘on solemn feasts the sacrifice of the mass was celebrated with singing and musical instruments’. At least some recusant household choirs appear to have been of mixed gender, which is not at all surprising given the important role played by women in Elizabethan domestic music-making. William Weston’s account of a week-long musical gathering held in 1586 to welcome his Jesuit colleagues Henry Garnet and Robert Southwell—an event at which Byrd himself was present—refers matter-of-factly to ‘singers, male and female’.

One unusual clue in Byrd’s printed editions may tell us something about how his masses were sung. Printers and scribes of sixteenth-century polyphony almost invariably used a small sign called a *custos* or ‘direct’ at the end of each line of music, pointing the singer to the next note. The *custos* was also used to smooth the transition between sections of a multi-part motet, or other pieces intended to be sung in immediate sequence. In Byrd’s three-voice and four-voice masses, the end of every movement in almost every voice is marked with a *custos* for the following movement. This is true even between pairs of movements, such as the Gloria and the Credo, which would normally be separated by a good deal of additional music and liturgical action. (The sign is absent a few times in the rather crowded upper parts of the four-voice mass, for what appears to be simple lack of space. Byrd’s five-voice mass, the last to be printed, also uses it between movements, though more sparingly: the transitions between Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus are entrusted only to the soprano, who is the first to sing.) This is an absolutely unique use of the *custos*. No other sixteenth-century polyphonic mass, in print or in manuscript, employs it in this way. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion—however surprising to modern ears—that Byrd may have intended, or at least tolerated, having these works sung straight through during a silent celebration of low mass, much as a French baroque organist would have played steadily as the liturgy took place *sotto voce* in the background. In any case there are very few other Renaissance masses which could stand up as well to such treatment.

As the last of his three masses was going to press, Byrd made the definitive turn away from court and city. In July 1594, he was still signing himself as a resident of Harlington, a western suburb of London not far from Windsor. He sold his property there at some point in 1595. By July 1595, he and his family had moved to the village of Stondon Massey in the Essex countryside, where they were already being noticed as Catholic dissidents who refused to attend services at the local parish church. He seems to have published his masses as a final testament of sorts before he withdrew (at least partially) from the public eye. Given the lack of prefaces and dedications, we may never know what he was thinking as he put them together, but we can be sure that they came at a crucial point of transition. He was taking all the resources available to him as part of the London publishing world—the busy print shop of Thomas East, the musical font and

elegant woodblock initials, the complex political connections—and using them in the service of the underground Catholic diaspora. His three masses were the product of unusual and unrepeatable circumstances in his own life. They also marked a new chapter in his development as a composer.

A note on the facsimile

This facsimile is reproduced directly from the copies (Mus. 489–93) now at Christ Church, Oxford, in which the three masses are bound together with a large collection of other works by Byrd. (The volumes are described in detail in John Milsom’s online catalogue: <http://library.chch.ox.ac.uk/music>). These are all Byrd’s original editions, except for the upper two parts of the three-voice mass, which are taken from the second edition of 1599–1600. We are grateful to the Christ Church library for making their digital studio available to create high-resolution photographic images of these precious partbooks. As with all imaging of rare books, conservation of the binding and the book is a primary consideration in handling, so the gutter edge of a few of the images is very close to the printed area of the page. These copies show Byrd’s usual care for proofreading and can easily be read even by non-specialists. Singers will appreciate the user-friendly rhythmic layout (groups of rests are consistently aligned with the large-scale metrical pulse) and Byrd’s use of a colon to signal a firm cadence in the other voices near the end of a long period of rest. We have included a table of basic note and rest shapes for those less familiar with sixteenth-century printed notation, along with a chart of vocal ranges for all three masses. The only symbol which might cause some confusion to the modern eye is the standard Renaissance *cum opposita proprietate* ligature, a joined pair of rectangles with an upward tail to the left, which is  always sung as a pair of semibreves.

There are only a few printing errors worth mentioning:

1. The Cantus of the three-part Gloria has an incorrect group of rests between *qui tollis peccata mundi* and *miserere nobis*. The pause as printed is too short. It should be a semibreve rest followed by a minim rest, *not* a pair of minim rests.
2. In the Benedictus of the five-part mass, the two silent voices (Tenor Primus and Bassus) are incorrectly given 16 breves of rest before the colons indicating the trio cadence and the transition to the Osanna. In each case this should be only 15.5 breves of rest.

It is also worth noting that the three-part mass is given the time signature ϕ in the first edition and c in the second. This creates a discrepancy in the present facsimile, which draws on both editions, but it should have no effect on the actual performance of the music.

For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with 16th-century notation, we reproduce Thomas Morley’s table of notes and rests as published in his *A plaine and easie introduction to practicall musicke* (London, 1597), page 9. Each note-shape

is followed by the symbol(s) needed to signify an equivalent duration of rest. Reproduced with permission from a copy in private ownership.



Vocal ranges



This introduction has been abridged and adapted from Chapter 10 of my forthcoming *Master Musicians* biography of Byrd. I am grateful to Suzanne Ryan and the editorial staff of Oxford University Press for their kind permission to use the material in this context.

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