

Songs of Sundrie Natures (1589): William Byrd Workshop. Saturday 25th April at Hoole Community Centre. Tutor Dr Philip Taylor, with Roger (Wilkes)

Hoole was more than usually buzzing as we arrived, but ignoring the traffic jams outside we enjoyed being introduced to these little-known songs by Byrd; apparently only recently made available in “performance friendly” format, to be down-loaded from the inevitable website. The selection from which we sang contained “selected extracts” from forty seven items composed for 3:4:5 or 6 “voices”. Most of the “voices” originally conceived as instrumental but in this edition arranged with word underlay for the various parts.

Dr Taylor pointed out that Byrd had phrased the music to follow the formal structure of the poetry (eg Some songs clearly originated as

sonnets, with the familiar division into two parts reflected in the change of mood.)

There was some speculation as to the source of the texts. Most of the words survive only with the music and are anonymous, as it was infrequent for poets to go into print at that time. They largely cover themes of love (unrequited of course!); morality; and pastoral scenes; and could have been verses extant in court circles of the time. It is known that approximately one third of the songs fall into this category, although some were written especially for Byrd's publication; some also for voice and consort. One had been a verse anthem *Christ Rising Again*; and some purported to be "humorous" eg. *Who made thee Hob forsake the plough?*- thus excluding them from the category "motet" as it was understood at that time!

So, how did we do? Well there were nineteen people including Roger. We had one bass recorder with one bass viol and two tenor viols. Some of the singers doubled on an instrument occasionally, eg. tenor recorder. The singers divided themselves between the usual four voices, but we were glad of Dr Taylor's contribution as a tenor, to counter-balance the three basses, and the usual surfeit of female voices. The superius and counter tenor parts were very similar, and the problem for the women was reaching the depths rather than the heights!

Dr Taylor selected for us:

Is love a boy?; Wounded I am; When I was otherwise than now I am!!; Of Gold all Burnished (this very beautiful and richly textured - possibly an adapted Italian sonnet); *From Citheron the war-like Boy is Fled; O Lord my God; Weeping full sore* - which made reference to Lady Rich, sister of Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex. She was a renowned beauty and heart-breaker, beloved of Sir Philip Sydney. And *Penelope that longed for the sight-* of Ulysses, It was suggested that these words could have originated with Sir Philip Sydney who was love-lorn for the inaccessible Lady Rich.

So, we enjoyed the music making and discovery which will be pursued at the next session on May 16 when unfortunately I shall be elsewhere, thus giving someone else the privilege of correcting all my errors.

Rhoda Bramhall