

Chester Workshop – Byrd Gradualia I

For many reasons, I have had enormous difficulty in getting to NWEMF workshops of late. There has been a remarkable run of bad luck with clashing dates and then of course, there's work... I was therefore very pleased to be able to attend the first of Roger's workshops looking at works from William Byrd's setting of texts from the *Gradualia*.

I realise that many NWEMF members are expert musicologists, but for those who are less musicologically endowed, a few words of explanation may help. As singers, we are used to singing

settings of the Mass. In these, composers usually set the texts for the 'ordinary' of the Mass. The 'ordinary' means those texts, which are 'ordinary', i.e. occur all the time. These are the familiar *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Benedictus*, and the *Agnus Dei*. For the Divine Office, the most familiar texts are the *Te Deum, Magnificat*, and *Nunc Dimittis*.

There are other texts. These are the 'Proper' i.e. those texts which are particular to the specific day or feast. For example, the texts required for the Feast of the Annunciation, the Feast of St. John the Baptist, Easter Sunday, etc. The texts for these are scattered through several books, including the *Liber Usualis* and the *Graduale Romanum*. The obvious reason that composers generally eschew these texts is that they can only be used once a year in most cases (apart from the Commons, but that's another story).

Byrd set himself the mammoth task of writing music for the entire corpus of texts for the Propers, what we call "Byrd's *Gradualia*".

We arrived to find a very unusual set of circumstances: competition from David Hill meant that the number of tenors outnumbered the combined alto and soprano count! We also had competition for a very alternative therapy group. More of that later.

Byrd's music for the *Gradualia* is very varied: from simple settings of Office hymns, to very complex settings of antiphons for the major feasts. Roger warmed us up in the morning session with work on a setting of the 'Litany of the Saints'. In the modern Rite this is used to call on the support of the various saints at events such as Ordination to the Priesthood etc. The setting by Byrd is simple and repetitive, in line with the nature of the Litany, which after all is a long list.

We looked at four other works during the course of the day. We had two motets from the *Gradualia*: "*Quem Terra, Pontus*" and,

"*Beati Mundo Corde*". *Quem Terra, Pontus* is slightly unusual in being scored for three voices throughout (STB). *Beati Mundo Corde* (a setting of the Beatitudes) is altogether more complex, being scored for SSATB: a challenge given our resources! Byrd experiments with his forces: opening as SSA, bringing the men in at '*Beati pacifici*', but dropping the S1, so resulting in four parts. It's not until 'blessed are the persecuted' that all five parts are heard for the first time. Thereafter, it is five parts all the way to the end.

The other two works were both settings of antiphons from the Marian Feast of the Purification of BVM (Blessed Virgin Mary): "*Hodie Beata Virgo Maria*" and "*Senex puerum portabat*". These were both in four parts.

During the day, Roger asked if anyone fancied having a go at reading from facsimile. Some of us rashly volunteered to have a go. I have tried this before. Facsimile is a different experience since you only have your part to read. The notes are not an issue: at least it was bass clef and not something bizarre like an F3 (baritone) clef). The rests are tough, as these are notated differently. One big advantage of facsimile is that there are no bar lines. This means that you get a much better feel for the flow of the musical line, without the artificial emphases at the start of the bar. This was fun, but made easier from having first sung through on modern staff notation (or I'd never have got those rests).

During the day we were interrupted by "noises off". This was the alternative therapy group indulging in strange practices. I would have thought listening to us sing Byrd, was a very good way to relax.... The strangest encounter was the "bell wash immersion therapy session." We discovered what this was when there was the repeated crashing sound of a tam tam being given the J Arthur Rank treatment.

All in all a very satisfying day. Byrd is highly enjoyable music, even when simply set, as in the Litany. A word about Roger's editions. We are so fortunate to be living in a time when it is possible to have easy access to good printed copies, such as those edited and produced by Roger. Hopefully, it won't be quite so long before my next chance to participate.

Ron Kelley