"O Christ who art light and day": Music by Robert White Workshop led by Peter Syrus, Wesley Methodist Church, St John's Street, Chester, 3 June 2006

This sunny summer day's singing was typical of what regular participants in Peter Syrus's workshops have come to expect: well thought-out and full of interest. Peter selected six pieces of Robert White's music: *Magnificat; Lamentations; Christe, qui lux es et dies; Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna; Regina coeli; Lord, who shall dwell in they tabernacle.* In the event, we did not have time to undertake the *Libera me* – hardly surprising, given that the *Magnificat* and *Lamentations* were very substantial works.

Robert White lived a tragically short life, *c.* 1538 to 1574, yet managed to produce a fairly substantial body of works; we can only wonder what might have been had he attained the age of his contemporary, William Byrd. A tribute (in Latin) to White by Robert Dow in the 1580s praises him highly: "Greatest glory of our muses, White: you perish, but your muse remains for ever", yet modern assessments tend to be parsimonious in their adulation, reckoning him to be at best a second-rate composer. Peter's hope for the day was to show that White deserves a better estimation than this: even if he did not perhaps possess the genius of a Byrd or Tallis, he was nonetheless a composer of genius, and of great versatility. He was also one of the few composers of this period that can be definitely associated with Chester, and hence the appropriateness of conducting the workshop here.

The breadth of style in White's work was one of the main things to emerge from the day, apart from an assured vindication of Peter's call for a reassessment of his general quality. The *Lamentations* for five voices must surely rank as one of the finest English settings of this text (on the Continent of course we have some well-known and splendid

settings, such at that by Lassus), showing a remarkable ability to change mood within the piece in a way surpassed only, perhaps, by Byrd; the final "Hierusalem" section, for example, calling upon Jerusalem to turn back to the Lord, shows a masterful interplay between the essentially Phrygian (more "minor", and hence lamentational) tonality in which the piece is written, and the brighter, more optimistic "major" tonality with which it concludes.

The *Regina coeli*, as might be expected, is quite different from the *Lamentations*, being perhaps the most sprightly piece we sang during the day. Peter owned up to being something of an anorak when it comes to *Regina coelis*, and had once brought forty-one different settings along to a workshop. This had at least revealed some unrecognised gems among them, as well as a lot of dross. The White piece luckily was one of the former. It had the distinction of being the only one with a cantus firmus in equal-length notes throughout (semibreves in this edition).

The short piece *Christe, qui lux es et dies* is apparently the only piece of White known to have been used by Byrd. The six-part *Magnificat* was splendid, but again of a distinct musical character. Here, we see White looking back to the great tradition of Taverner, rather than forward to Byrd. It is characterised by passages of greater rhythmical interest, typical of the earlier renaissance composers (the Scottish composer Carver also comes to mind).

White's English work was sampled in *Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle,* an attractive work but one which sticks in the present writer's memory after he ended up among those basses who were delegated to sing the (true) tenor part and stretch to rather impossible heights. This sort of thing always arises in music of this period, of course, though fortunately most of the music proved singable by the range of parts we had on the day.

White's music varies in its difficulty, and some can be very challenging, as Peter noted. The pieces sung today were mainly not specially difficult in terms of notes, other than in a few specific passages, which meant that we were at least able to get through the music with some degree of fluency, if not proficiency, by the end of the day, and were able to appreciate what the music was actually like.

The venue was acoustically good; Peter noted that is seemed to improve through the day, but this may also have had something to do with the singers! Thank goodness we were not sat on the hard and cumbersome pews, however (as has happened here before).

Apart from the actual singing, the day was interspersed with the sort of more academic considerations which (to me) add so much to the enjoyment of Peter's workshops: questions that arose were, for example, the extent of Continental influence on English music at this period, and the unrecognised importance of Alphonso Ferrobosco I in this respect (through whom Lassus may well have become known to English ears), as well as aspects of Byrd, Tallis and Taverner which are found in White's music. As usual, we were presented with a carefully prepared sheet covering White's life, along with a bibliography.

A most enjoyable day, and a good introduction to the music of a composer who deserves to be better known.

Clive Tolley