

## WILLIAM BYRD (1542-43—1623)

“Father of Musicke”

**I**N England the musicians are making preparations for a celebration of the birth of William Byrd, the great English composer of the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The month and the day when he made his first appearance are not known, but it must have been in December, 1542, or January, 1543. Where he was born is a matter of conjecture; probably in Lincolnshire, where the name is found in the church registers of some of the parishes. He was organist of Lincoln Cathedral and remained there some six or seven years before being appointed co-organist with Tallis at the Chapel Royal.

Perhaps the reason why we know so little of his music in this country is that our choirmasters have preferred the well-known oratorios and requiems of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composers. In England the local choirs—

not only those of the church, but also those secular organizations, which have held so nobly to the tradition of Tudor music—have been responsible for presenting to the people the works of the precursors of Bach and Handel. The English singers who came to this country some years ago introduced us anew to the works of William Byrd, and their success was so startling that many of our musicians took up the study of Byrd's madrigals and Masses. Almost any week one could hear Byrd's music sung at Westminster Abbey or at the Cathedrals of Southwark or St. Paul.

The editors of *Tudor Church Music* place the name of John Dunstable (c.1390–1453) as the first great English composer in the history of polyphonic music.<sup>2</sup> After Dunstable came Robert Fairfax (c.1465–1521). Among other composers of that fruitful period were Hugh Aston (c.1480–1523) and John Redford (c.1486–1540). The first volume of *Tudor Church Music* is devoted to the work of John Taverner (c.1495–1545) "the greatest exponent of the style developed in the post-Fairfax period."<sup>3</sup>

In the *Cheque Book* of the Chapel Royal it is set down that Byrd was accepted as a "father of musicke."<sup>4</sup> Wood, a contemporary, said he was "bred up to musick under Thomas Tallis."<sup>5</sup>

In 1603 Thomas Easte published a work entitled *Medulla Musicke*:<sup>6</sup> *Sucked out of the sappe of two [of] the most famous Musicians that ever were in this land, namely Master Wylliam Byrd . . . and Master Alphonso Ferabosco*<sup>7</sup> . . . either of whom having made 40<sup>th</sup> severall waies (without contention), showing most rare and intricate skill in two partes in one upon the playne song *Miserere*.<sup>8</sup>

Byrd's contemporaries regarded him with the utmost veneration:

Thomas Morley, in his *Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*,<sup>9</sup> speaks of him as "never without reverence to be named of the musicians," and John Baldwin of Windsor closes his Manuscript collection<sup>10</sup> with a poem in which he places Byrd above all the composers of his time, native and foreign alike.<sup>11</sup>

Today Byrd is accepted by many of the best English musicians as the most important of their composers.

His was a busy life and comparable in this respect with that of Bach. He lived for eighty years and worked until the end. His will, dated November 15, 1622, declares him to be "now in the eightieth year of mine age." There was no form of music in that day which Byrd did not attempt.<sup>12</sup> He was considered, with Bull, as the head of the earliest school of keyboard compo-

sition in Europe. A recent writer in *The Times* (London), who seems to be familiar with his various works says: "He developed its technique particularly through the writing of fascinating variations on popular tunes of his day, tunes which we now call folksongs."<sup>13</sup>

This writer, in calling for the four hundredth celebration of his birth, reminds his readers that "musicians have been talking about William Byrd as 'the greatest English composer of all time' for long enough. Now is their chance to prove it."

On the tercentenary of his death in 1923, many commemorative services were given in the English cathedrals and by secular choral societies. Lincoln Cathedral, of which Byrd was organist in his youth, Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral, all held special services of his English church music; Westminster Cathedral fitly represented the Latin church music.<sup>14</sup> A memorial tablet was also erected in the parish church of Stondon Massey, in Essex, where Byrd had leased a farm of some 200 acres about 1593.

Byrd made his entrance upon the world's stage in stormy days. He was born a few years after the suppression of the greater abbeys, and lived through the reigns of three monarchs—Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth. Had he sur-

vived but three years longer he would have reached the end of the reign of James I. Shakespeare came and went within Byrd's lifetime. His contemporaries were Bacon, Marlowe, and Ben Jonson; Hooker wrote *Ecclesiastical Polity*, which inspired John Locke; and Edmund Spenser enriched the English tongue with the brilliant fancies of the *Faerie Queene*; while Sir Philip Sidney endowed the poets with the glowing imageries of his genius to be found in his *Arcadia*. There was music in verse and melody in music in the days when Byrd sang to warring Catholics and Protestants. The marvel of it all was how, in years of sectarian and political stress, the creative joys of Byrd and the poets rose happily above the angry tumults of the time.<sup>15</sup>

Those who are interested in fine music may find time, even in this turbulence of everyday life, to turn their minds back to the musicians who bequeathed to us so many of the beauties of sound, and spare, perhaps at Christmas time, a quiet hour in thinking of William Byrd and what he did for our music. Those who seem shy and would rather let their friends sing to them may take from Byrd a hint of what vocal music is worth. In dedicating the songs of sadness to Sir Christopher Hatton, he prefixed the following

quaint reasons to persuade everyone to learn to sing:

First, It is a knowledge easily taught, and quickly learned, wher there is a good Master, and an apt Scoler.

2. The exercise of singing is delightfull to Nature, & good to preserue the health of Man.

3. It doth strengthen all parts of the brest, & doth open the pipes.

4. It is a singular good remedie for a stutting & stamaring in the speech.

5. It is the best meanes to procure a perfect pronounciation, & to make a good Orator.

6. It is the onely way to know where Nature hath bestowed the benefit of a good voyce: which guift is so rare, as there is not one among a thousand, that hath it: and in many, that excellent guift is lost, because they want Art to expresse Nature.

7. There is not any Musicke of Instruments whatsoever, comparable to that which is made of the voyces of Men, where the voyces are good, and the same well sorted and ordered.

8. The better the voyce is, the meeter it is to honour and serue God there-with: and the voyce of Man is chiefly to be employed to that ende,

*Since singing is so good a thing,  
I wish all men would learne to sing.*<sup>16</sup>

## FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> This chapter first appeared as an article in the *Amer. Jour. Econ. Sociol.*, II, No. 2 (Jan., 1943), 274-77.

<sup>2</sup> This series was published for the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. The editorial committee consisted of P. C. Buck, E. H. Fellowes, A. Ramsbotham, R. R. Terry, and S. Townsend Warner; 4 vols. (Oxford University Press; London: Humphrey Milford, 1923), I, xvi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv. "Relatively he sums up all the qualities of his precursors and contemporaries, and expresses their ideals. Where they were bold, he is bolder; where they were skilful, he shows more skill. . . . Absolutely, his mastery of a most intricate idiom and his amazing vitality and virility place him among the world's great composers. . . ."

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, II, xix. See also William Barclay Squire's article on "William Byrd" in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (14th ed.; Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1942), IV, 477.

<sup>5</sup> *Encyclopaedia, loc. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> No copies of this work are known to exist.

<sup>7</sup> Organist of Ely Cathedral, 1662-82.

<sup>8</sup> See *Tudor Church Music*, II, xix.

<sup>9</sup> Ed. 1597, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> In the Royal Music Library at the British Museum.

<sup>11</sup> *Tudor Church Music*, II, xi.

<sup>12</sup> Byrd has often been compared with Palestrina, who was twenty years his senior. Both had long lives and wrote great quantities of music. "Yet it must be allowed that the work of both alike is stamped with a dignity of aim, with a purity and nobility of expression, with a singular fitness for the purpose of Church worship, such as place them in the very highest rank of the world's musicians" (*Tudor Church Music*, II, xii). Byrd wrote Latin church music, English church music, secular vocal music (madrigals and songs with accompaniment), and instrumental music for virginals and viols. His most numerous works were in the field of choral music, but he was one of the first men ever to compose a string quartet, and his music for the virginal opened new horizons in keyboard style.

<sup>13</sup> *The Times* (London), July 10, 1942, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Although a member of the Chapel Royal, Byrd claims to have been a member of the Holy Catholic Church all his life. He was regularly presented before the archidiaconal court of Essex as a Catholic.

<sup>15</sup> When I was a boy, William Bretton, once suborganist of Canterbury Cathedral, gave me lessons on the organ at the Presbyterian Church in Liverpool, at which my parents worshiped twice every Sunday. I little knew, when my teacher spoke to me of Byrd and Tallis, that in the years