

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 23 March 2023
7.30pm

Byrd: Psalmes, Songs and Sonnets (1611)

Harry Christophers conductor

Noel Byrne narrator

Fretwork

Emily Ashton viol
Reiko Ichise viol
Richard Boothby viol
Jonathan Rees viol
Sam Stadlen viol
Joanna Levine viol

The Sixteen

Julie Cooper soprano
Katy Hill soprano
Alexandra Kidgell soprano
Charlotte Mobbs soprano
Daniel Collins alto

Elisabeth Paul alto
Jeremy Budd tenor
Mark Dobell tenor
Ben Davies bass
Jimmy Holliday bass

William Byrd (c.1540-1623)

Retire my soul
The eagle's force
This sweet and merry month of May a4
Let not the sluggish sleep
Ah silly soul
Wedded to will is witless
A feigned friend
Fantasia a6
Crowned with flowers I saw fair Amaryllis
Fantasia a6
O God that guides the cheerful sun

Interval

Awake mine eyes
Come jolly swains
Praise our Lord, all ye Gentiles
How vain the toils
Come woeful Orpheus
Fantasia a4
Arise Lord into thy rest
Pavan and Galliard
In winter cold/Whereat an ant
Make ye joy to God
What is life
Turn our captivity, O Lord
Have mercy upon me O God

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To all true lovers of Musicke, W. Byrd wisheth all true happinesse both temporall and eternall.

Being exited by your kind acceptance of my former travailles in Musicke. I am thereby much incouraged to commend to you these my last labours, for my vltimum vale. Wherein I hope you shall finde Musicke to content every humour: either melancholy, merry, or mixt of both.

Onely this I desire; that you will be but as careful to heare them well expressed, as I have beene both in the Composing and correcting of them. Otherwise the best Song that ever was made will seeme harsh and unpleasant, for that the well expressing of them, either by Voices, or Instruments, is the life of our labours, which is seldom or never well performed at the first singing or playing. Besides a song that is well and artificially made cannot be well perceived not understood at the first hearing, but the oftner you shall heare it, the better cause of liking you will discover: and commonly that Song is best esteemed with which our eares are most acquainted. As I have done my best endeavour to give you content, so I beseech you satisfied my desire in hearing them well expressed: and then I doubt not, for Art and Ayre both of skilful and ignorant they will deserve liking. Vale.

Thine W. Byrd

It's really quite unusual for a concert programme to be almost completely taken from one publication. But then, **Byrd's** ultimate collection is no ordinary book of music. *Psalmes, Songs and Sonnets* has almost the same title as his earlier publication of 1588, his first without his friend, teacher and collaborator Thomas Tallis - that was called *Psalmes, Sonets and Songs*, and he clearly liked the alliteration. However, the earlier book was exclusively in five parts, comprising mostly consort songs - voice and four viols, re-imagined for five voices. This later volume is much more varied, with music ranging from three to six voices, and composed in many different forms and styles.

As Byrd says on the title-page, it contains *some solemne, others ioyfull, framed to the life of the Words: Fit for Voyces or Viols*. And it is the joyful songs that seem to predominate. The energy and vigour of the music is astonishing, coming from a man in his 70s, at a time when average life expectancy was hardly more than 40 years. And Byrd had another dozen years to live.

Psalmes, Songs and Sonnets does include consort songs, but more elaborate in design than 1588, particularly the joyous New Year celebration, 'O God that guides the cheerful sun', with its opening evocation of sunrise, and the busy, energetic viol parts propelling the music towards a chorus that brings the piece to a satisfyingly joyous conclusion. There are two fantasies for viols alone, one in four and one in six parts - a most unusual thing, when viol consorts were mostly copied in manuscript. We have added another 6-part

fantasy and his glorious *Pavan and Galliard* in six parts - when you have six viols, it makes sense to use them.

But the *solemne* songs are extraordinary in their intensity: 'Turn our captivity, O Lord', setting lines from Psalm 126, moves from effortless, limpid counterpoint to homophonic call and response, and a dance-like triple section expressing the jollity of the words.

While the penitent, supplicatory mood is mostly absent, an exception is the masterpiece that is 'Have mercy upon me O God', an anthem in all but name, which alternates solo verses accompanied by dark and low viols, with full refrains. Byrd said elsewhere that the music would come to him as he read the words he had to set, and here one can almost see the sensuous way in which he sets 'wipe away mine offences' with a smooth slide of notes.

A 70-year-old Byrd must have realised that his publishing days were over with this last collection. Yet what a career it had been, starting as a young man in his 30s in 1575. He and Tallis had been granted by the Queen a 20-year monopoly in the printing of part-music and music manuscript paper. Even with the monopoly, the 1575 *Cantiones* was not a commercial success, and in 1588 Byrd, alone this time, tried again with *Psalmes, Sonets and Songs*, a more heterogenous collection. This was more like it, and it sold out, with two reprints.

He was back the following year with more: *Songs of Sundrie Natures*, which had a similar make up to the previous volume. But 1589 also saw another publication from him, *Cantiones sacrae*, a collection of motets that had been circulating for over a decade in manuscript form. In the 1590s his attention was focussed on providing Mass settings for private Catholic worship, and he published settings in 3, 4 and 5 parts - he must have been very sure of the support of the Queen to get away with such overt Catholic material.

Even more provocative was the *Gradualia* published in 1605 and 1607, which provided complete Mass Propers for the major feasts of the church year, Marian feast and Marian votive Masses. After the Gunpowder plot of 1605, Byrd withdrew the publication, before re-issuing both volumes in 1610.

The elderly composer had retired from London to Essex, close to his patron, Lord Petre, who as a fellow Catholic could provide a safe haven, though he was still regularly cited for recusancy. His final years were spent as much in litigation and legal disputes as with music. He contributed four sacred songs to William Leighton's *Teares or Lamentacions of a Sorrowfull Soule* in 1614, and died 400 years ago in 1623. 'Brittanicae Musicae Parens', the father of British music, as one admirer put it; the Chapel Royal Cheque Book, where he had worked for so much of his life, recorded his death and described him as 'a Father of Musick'.

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William Byrd (c.1540-1623)

Retire my soul

Anonymous

Retire my soul, consider thine estate,
And justly sum thy lavish sin's account.
Time's dear expense, and costly pleasures rate,
How follies grow, how vanities amount.
Write all these down, in pale Death's reckoning tables,
Thy days will seem but dreams, thy hopes but fables.

The eagle's force

Thomas Churchyard

The Eagle's Force subdues each Bird that flies:
What metal may resist the flaming fire?
Doth not the Sunne dazell the clearest eyes?
And melt the yse and make the frost retire?
Who can withstand a puissant King's desire?
The stiffest stones are pierced through with tooles:
The wisest are with Princes made but fooles.

This sweet and merry month of May a4

attr. Thomas Watson

This sweet and merry month of May,
While Nature wantons in her prime,
And birds do sing and beasts do play
For pleasure of the joyful time,
I choose the first for holiday,
And greet Eliza with a rhyme:
O beauteous Queen of second Troy,
Take well in worth a simple toy.

Let not the sluggish sleep

Anonymous

Let not the sluggish sleep,
Close up thy waking eye,
Until with judgment deep
Thy daily deeds thou try.
He that one sin in conscience keeps
When he to quiet goes,
More ventrous is than he that sleeps
With twenty mortal foes.

Ah silly soul

Anonymous

Ah silly soul, how are thy thoughts confounded
Betwixt two loves, that far unlikely are?
Lust's love is blind, and by no reason bounded.
Heaven's love is clear, and fair beyond compare.
No wonder though this love light not thy mind,
Whilst looking through false love thine eyes are blind

Wedded to will is witless

Anonymous

Wedded to will is witless,
And seldom he is skilful,
That bears the name of wise, and yet is wilful.
To govern he is fitless,
That deals not by election,
But by his fond affection.
O that it might be treason,
For men to rule by will, and not by reason.

A feigned friend

Anonymous

A feigned friend by proof I find
To be greater foe,
Than he that with a spiteful mind,
Doth seek my overthrow:
For of the one I can beware,
With craft the other breeds my care.

Such men are like the hidden Rocks,
Which in the Seas doe lie:
Against the which each Ship that knocks,
Is drowned sodainly.
No greater fraud, nor more unjust,
Then false deceit hid under trust.

Fantasia a6

Crowned with flowers I saw fair Amaryllis

Anonymous

By Thyrsis sit, hard by a fount of crystal,
And with her hand, more white than snow or lilies,
Blew all her faith and sand away together.
But suddenly a storm of wind and weather
Crowned with flowers I saw fair Amaryllis
On sand she wrote, 'My faith shall be immortal':

Fantasia a6

O God that guides the cheerful sun

Anonymous

O God, that guides the cheerful sun
By motions strange the year to frame,
Which now return'd whence it begun
From heaven extols thy glorious name
This New-Year's season sanctify
With double blessings of thy store
That graces new may multiply
And former follies reign no more.
So shall our hearts with heaven agree,
And both give laud and praise to thee.

Th'old year by course is past and gone
Old Adam Lord from us expel:
New creatures make us every one
New life becomes the New Year well.
As new-born babes from malice keep
New wedding garments O Christ we crave:
That we thy face in heaven may see
With angels bright our souls to save.
So shall our hearts with heaven agree,
And both give laud and praise to thee.
Amen.

Interval

William Byrd (c.1540-1623)

Awake mine eyes

Anonymous

Awake mine eyes, see Phoebus bright arising,
And lesser Lights to shades obscure descending:
Glad Philomela sits tunes of joy devising,
Whilst in sweet notes, from warbling throats,
The Silvan Choir with like desire,
To her are Echoes sending.

Come jolly swains

Anonymous

Come jolly Swains, come let us sit around,
And with blithe Carrols sullen cares confound.
The Shepherd's life
Is void of strife,
No worldly treasures
Distastes our pleasures
With free consenting,
Our minds contenting,
We smiling laugh
While others sigh repenting.

Praise our Lord, all ye Gentiles

Liturgical text

Praise our Lord all ye Gentiles, praise him all ye people,
Because his mercy is confirmed upon us, and his truth
remaineth forever. Amen.

How vain the toils

Anonymous

How vain the toils that mortal men do take
To hoard up gold that time doth turn to dross,
Forgetting him who only for their sake,
His precious blood did shed upon the Cross.
And taught us all in heaven to hoard our treasure,
Where true increase doth grow above all measure.

Come woeful Orpheus

Anonymous

Come woeful Orpheus with thy charming Lyre,
And tune my voice unto thy skilful wire,
Some strange Chromatic Notes do you devise,
That best with mournful accents do sympathise,
Of sourest Sharps and uncouth Flats make choice,
And I'll thereto compassionate my voice.

Fantasia a4

Arise Lord into thy rest

Liturgical text

Arise Lord into thy rest,
Thou, and the Ark of thy sanctification.
Let the Priests be clothed with justice,
And let the Saints rejoice.

Pavan and Galliard

In winter cold/Whereat an ant

Geffrey Whitney

In Winter cold when tree and bush was bare,
And frost had nipped the roots of tender grass,
The Ants with joy did feed upon their fare,
Which they had stored while Summer season was,
To whom for food a Grasshopper did cry,
And said she starved if they did help deny.

Whereat an Ant with long experience wise,
And frost and snow, had many Winters seen,
Inquired what in Summer was her guise.
Quoth she, I sung and hopped in meadows green.
Then quoth the Ant, content thee with thy chance,
For to thy song now art thou like to dance.

Make ye joy to God

Liturgical text

Make ye joy to God all the earth.
Serve ye our Lord in gladness.
Enter ye in before his sight.
In jollity know ye that our Lord he is God,
He made us and not we ourselves.

What is life

Anonymous

What is life, or worldly pleasure?
Seeming shadows quickly sliding.
What is wealth or golden treasure?
Borrowed Fortune never biding.
What is grace or Princes' smiling?
Hoped honour, time beguiling.
What are all in one combined,
Which divided so displease?
Apish toys, and vain delights,
Mind's unrest, and soul's disease

Turn our captivity, O Lord

Liturgical text

Turn our captivity, O Lord, as a brook in the South.
They that sow in tears, shall reap in joyfulness.
Going they went and wept, casting their seeds.
But coming, they shall come with jollity, carrying their
sheaves with them.

Have mercy upon me O God

Liturgical text

Have mercy upon me O God,
After thy great goodness.
And according to the multitude of thy mercies
Wipe away mine offences.
Wash me clean from my wickedness,
And purge me from my sins. Amen.