

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 25 June 2024
7.30pm

Byrd and his English successors

Phantasm

Laurence Dreyfus treble viol and director
Emilia Benjamin treble viol
Jonathan Manson tenor viol
Heidi Gröger tenor viol
Markku Luolajan-Mikkola bass viol

William Byrd (c.1540-1623)

In Nomine a5 (IV)
Christe qui Lux es a4 (II)
In Nomine a5 (V)

Gloria from *Missa a4*
Fantasia a4 (III)
Agnus Dei from *Missa a4*
Fantasia a5

Pavan and Galliard a5
Sermone blando a4 (II)
Prelude and Ground a5 'The Queen's Goodnight'

Interval

John Jenkins (1592-1678)

Pavan a5 in G
Fantasia a5 No. 3 in G minor
Fantasia a5 No. 15 in D
Fantasia a5 No. 15 in D

William Lawes (1602-1645)

Consort Sett a5 in C minor
I. Fantazy • II. Aire • III. Paven • IV. Aire

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

Fantasia a4 No. 6 in F Z737 (1680)
Fantasia a4 No. 7 in C minor Z738 (1680)
Fantasia a4 No. 11 in G Z742 (1680)
Fantasia upon one note in F Z745 (c.1680)

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In 'Byrd compared', Phantasm presents the complete consort music of William Byrd (c.1540-1623) in a triptych of programmes heard next to compositions by other singular spirits. Like Byrd, these were composers – such as JS Bach and John Dowland – who sought new approaches to musical expression while remaining true to the highest standards of contrapuntal technique. In this last of the three recitals, we set Byrd next to Jenkins, Lawes and Purcell.

Composed over some 40 years, **Byrd's** consorts embrace a wide range of genres: devotional hymn settings, mystical *In Nomines* – rhapsodies on a snatch of sacred vocal music by John Taverner – freely imagined *Fantasias*, sets of variations on popular tunes and stylised courtly dances such as *Pavans* and *Galliards*. In all these works one recognises a unique personality anxious never to repeat himself.

Byrd's experimental impulse can be felt everywhere. Freed from the written word, his fantasies echo the formulation of Thomas Morley, who noted in 1597 how 'more art may be shown [in these works] than in any other music because the composer is tied to nothing, but may add, diminish, and alter at his pleasure'. Pleasure strikes the right key here, for Byrd shows how the most inventive musical counterpoint embraces sensuous enjoyment without the slightest note of contradiction. As Thomas Hoby pointed out in 1561 (in a translation of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*), 'the music of a set of viols doth no less delight a man, for it is very sweet and artificial'.

In the *Prelude and Ground*, Byrd superimposes upon a repeating bass (called 'The Queen's Goodnight') an assemblage of unruly musical characters: instead of sticking to their proper 'ayre', harmonies in F keep being taunted by their cheeky neighbours in G, and this instability wreaks a Brueghel-like havoc. A similar stylistic mix marks Byrd's *Fantasia a5* ('Two parts in one'), based on a strict canon between the two top parts. Amidst all the clever responses of the first treble, who obsessively copies the second treble at a higher pitch, Byrd dares to insert a rude popular tune into the canonic imitation. Listeners at the time would no doubt have been stunned to hear the opening of 'Sick, sick, and very sick', a song about sea-sickness, interpolated in the elevated milieu of the canonic fantasy.

This is not to pay short shrift to Byrd's deeply serious side. As characterised by Henry Peacham in 1622, the composer's natural disposition leaned toward 'Gravitie and Pietie', and this veneration of the spiritual realm is evoked even when words are missing. Byrd's meditative instrumental hymns – *Sermone blando* and *Christe qui lux es* – are both in this vein as are the *In Nomines*, although the latter typically quicken into swirling visions of religious ecstasy by the end, a feature well suited to instruments. Yet even texted sacred works wouldn't have been foreign to consort players in an age of printed music marketed as 'for voices or viols', and an instrumental rendition has a way of highlighting the spiritual engagement of those musical

invested with special significance. A striking example is the 'Dona nobis pacem' ('Grant us peace') in the *Agnus Dei*. This imploring act of supplication – a succession of thirteen evaded cadences – is no less beautiful without the words, and it's worth pondering the risks attending a clandestine performance of such music in a secret recusant chapel, such as at Ingatestone Hall in Essex where Byrd was a frequent visitor.

Byrd's instrumental music set in motion a tradition of viol consorts that extends throughout the 17th Century. The consorts of **John Jenkins** (1592-1678) recall the euphonious impulse in Byrd, and also delight in similarly complex fugal devices and amusing attempts at metric confusion. Jenkins's *Pavan in G* could hardly unfurl a more gorgeously embroidered contrapuntal fabric, and by the end of *Fantasia No. 15*, no one can have any idea where to find a regular pulse until the riotous part writing subsides and the final cadence settles matters for good.

With **William Lawes** (1602-45), on the other hand, one confronts a wildly free spirit who, according to an obituary, was not averse to 'break[ing] the mathematical rules of composition'. Concocting a surprising mix of styles as well as encouraging unusual harmonic wanderings, Lawes calls to mind the experimental side of Byrd fitted out in a newly Baroque suit. In the *Fantasy to the Consort Sett in C minor*, an ungainly opening theme sets the stage for a sequence of unpredictable musical encounters depicting human desperation and our attempts to escape it. It's a striking kind of musical portraiture, and the final brush stroke signs off with the composer's frequent signature motif, the three taps of the anapest (short-short-long) 'Will-iam Lawes'. No less striking is Lawes's finest pavan which honours the famous motif that begins Dowland's 'Flow, my tears' and spins out an extended elegy that seems suspended in time.

The 20-year-old **Henry Purcell** (1659-95) surely made a study of Byrd and the entire tradition of English consorts in his astounding viol fantasias, all composed over the summer of 1680. Following his mentor Matthew Locke, Purcell also enjoys frequent changes of tempo within one musical work – something of a novelty in the fantasia – but nothing prepares one for the mastery of arcane fugal devices and ingenious chromatic counterpoint that pervade this collection. Yet it's the quicksilver shift between affects that is most impressive in the way that each succeeding gesture contributes to a wondrously compelling narrative. From the weighty, dragged tones of a royal funeral to the scampering of joyful fairies in the forest, scarcely a topic of contemporary music is missed out. Purcell even manages this acute portrayal of mutable passions in the valedictory *Fantasia upon one note*, in which he ties a compositional arm behind his back and succeeds nonetheless in devising an entire piece over a persistently enunciated middle C. Byrd would have been proud.

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