

# Music & Musical Performance

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Issue 4

Article 6

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November 2023

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### Recommended Citation

McCarthy, Kerry (2023) "Mr Byrde Affirmes It to be Truth," *Music & Musical Performance*: : Iss. 4 , Article 6.  
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## “Mr Byrde Affirmes It to Be Truth”: Reflections on a 400th Anniversary

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### Abstract

This essay briefly contemplates William Byrd’s 400th anniversary.

Keywords: Byrd, England, Tudor, Renaissance, Weelkes, Tallis, anniversary

English Renaissance composers rarely get proper birthday celebrations because we tend not to have documents of the exact year of their birth, much less the exact day. (The one big exception to that rule is Robert Fayrfax, born around ten o’clock at night on April 23, 1464, into the sort of gentry family that was fashionably preoccupied with both pedigrees and horoscopes.) The end of a composer’s life is hardly a happy occasion in itself, but in the case of William Byrd—like so many others—that is all we have to celebrate. 2023 has been the big year to celebrate Byrd: the 400th anniversary of his death. It has been a joyful year, marked by new research, new recordings, a wealth of live performances, and a variety of collectible goodies such as coffee mugs, T-shirts, and (for sunnier and sandier regions than Byrd ever explored) big beach towels. The year 2023 sounded positively futuristic to me when I started studying Byrd’s music several decades ago. We may not (yet) be traveling by jetpack to the British Library or the National Archives, but the range of available resources now goes far beyond anything I could have imagined possible even during the 375th Byrd anniversary. Thanks to DIAMM and Tudor Partbooks, we have some incredible documents within arm’s reach online, including free high-quality color images of every surviving music manuscript from sixteenth-century England. The most recent Byrd anniversary gift, announced by the publishers Stainer & Bell on the day of the anniversary itself (July 4), is unlimited free access to scans of their entire twenty-volume critical edition of Byrd’s complete works—including all the prefatory materials and notes, which are full of treasures for those who wish to dig in. Most importantly, the love of singing, playing, and hearing Byrd’s music shows no signs of waning as a busy year comes to an end. He was, after all, a composer who had the cheek to say: “The oftner you shall heare it, the better cause of liking you will discover.”

That statement, like so many others by Byrd, is found in one of the prefaces to his various songbooks and motet books. These were the essays in which he directly addressed

his wealthy patrons, and quite often his readers or prospective readers as well. Of course a dedicatory preface was always a bit of a public performance in itself. Byrd's younger contemporary Henry Peacham remarked in his *Compleat Gentleman* that the prefaces to books were always worth reading because they were often "best laboured and penned, and the best piece of them." Byrd's own introductions, eight of them in all, show us the composer in the first person. There are a few lapses into obvious insincerity (Queen Elizabeth I is the best keyboard player he has ever heard) and a few moments of almost shocking frankness (not even one out of a thousand people actually has a good singing voice—an opinion dropped casually in the course of his famous eight reasons "to perswade every one to learne to sing," somewhat undermining his effort to sell more copies of the book to eager amateurs.) He begs his musicians to rehearse properly and not just to sight-read everything. He complains about unauthorized copies full of errors. He laments that he has outlived so many of his students. He writes about composing at night, "by lamplight." He talks about the process of editing and improving his own music, and he compares it to the intense, messy, unforgiving art of fine woodworking, which some members of his family did for a living. It can hardly be a coincidence that the first word of music he ever put into print was "Emendemus" (let's make it better).

When Byrd had reached his early seventies, he wrote about "the naturall inclination and love to the art of Musicke, wherein I have spent the better part of mine age." The better part, not all. He had many interests beyond music. He dabbled in lawyering (with mixed results), he collected books on European politics, and we hear from the seventeenth-century biographer and musician Anthony à Wood, perhaps most intriguingly of all, about "the Mathematicks, in which Byrde was excellent." In some ways Byrd was a "compleat" gentleman amateur of exactly the sort admired by Peacham. These other things may have also offered him a way of blowing off steam from his uncompromising style and practice of music. His fellow-composer Thomas Weelkes—who also had his big anniversary in 2023—blew off the steam with drink instead and died thirty-odd years younger than Byrd. There is still an incredibly visceral appeal to Weelkes's own view that "many of us Musitians thinke it as much praise to be some what more then Musitians, as it is for golde to bee some what more than golde." Byrd, for better or worse, was somewhat more than gold.

He was also concerned with social status and social climbing in a way that (say) the pedigreed Fayrfax never had to worry about. In fact much of the information we have about his family (the older brother who imported boatloads of sugar and peppercorns from the New World, the great-uncle whose Cistercian abbey was plundered and dissolved under Henry VIII) comes from an extensive Byrd genealogy written down in 1571 in an attempt to be granted a family crest by the College of Arms. The heraldic authorities found one sufficiently noble ancestor, seven generations back, and Byrd—even before he had been appointed a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal—was now a gentleman in his own right, with a coat of arms and seal bearing three stags' heads. Byrd physically sealed his own will with his "hand and seal" eight months before he died. The same hands that composed his masses and

played his wonderful late keyboard works also bore a distinctive status symbol in the form of a landed gentleman’s signet ring. That status was clearly of social and political use to him. It was also of use to his son Thomas, who went to Spain at the age of twenty and entered a Catholic seminary there, stating in the application papers that he was “of noble parentage.” Renaissance Spain had an exaggerated obsession with nobility and bloodlines that made the Elizabethan College of Arms look like a crew of amateurs. It was at least something that young Thomas Byrd could use to his own advantage. (To modern lovers of music, his more enduring claim to fame is as the godson of the composer Thomas Tallis, who left him the silver tableware and his share of the music-printing monopoly.) Shakespeare was mocked by Ben Jonson for buying a coat of arms and adorning it with the motto *non sanz droict* (not without right); for his rival, that became “not without mustard.” When a group of London printers got together in 1586 to complain in writing about Byrd’s ambitions and his aggressive business practices, they simply called him “one Byrde a Singingman.” The sneer is audible, and rather more subtle than Jonson’s.

Byrd seems to have had no difficulty in gaining the respect of his musical colleagues. His student Thomas Morley wrote in 1597 that he was “never without reverence to be named of the musicians.” As Byrd’s life came to a close, there were tributes to him in even more glowing terms: “a Father of Musicke,” “meere Angelicall.” There were surely some seventeenth-century musicians who revered the idea of old Byrd (as some eighteenth-century musicians revered the idea of old Bach) while preferring quite different styles of music in their own daily lives, but Byrd’s influence and prestige was unmistakable. We can see him being invoked as an authority on what might be called the canon of English Renaissance church music. After some back-and-forth in the early-seventeenth-century Chirk Castle partbooks about the authorship of an anthem, a scribe adds: “Some say Mr Parsons: Mr Byrde affirmes it to be truth.” Case closed. This is reminiscent of an episode in the later life of Guillaume Dufay, where he was asked to resolve a dispute between some musicians on the correct mode of a piece of chant. (Dufay solved the problem with a bit of textual criticism: he came to the conclusion that the ending of the piece had been mangled by unskilled copyists—a practice that Byrd loathed, as we have seen—and then he determined the mode with ease.) We can see Byrd being invoked as an international authority on the quality of a musical instrument. In 1610, the peripatetic and somewhat unscrupulous organist John Bull was trying to sell an organ to the Brussels court of the Habsburg archdukes Albert and Isabella for a large sum of money. An agent at the court reported that “he sabido de un musico famoso llamado Burd, m[aest]ro que fue de P[edr]o fli]lippi, que el organo no valia mil florines”: “I have learned from a famous musician named Byrd, who was teacher of Peter Philips, that the organ was not worth a thousand florins.” Once again, case closed.

We can also see Byrd being invoked as an authority on a much smaller and more local scale, in the still somewhat underexplored world of Elizabethan amateur composition. A gentleman enthusiast (the young Earl of Worcester) had just shared his new song in 1573

with a friend (Thomas, Lord Paget) who had similar interests: “I understand that youe thinke there was a berd sange in my ere that made me alter my vayne / yt is verye true the thing came not to youe w[ith]thouwt the sight of mr byrde / saving the last part / w[hi]ch he never sawe.” Even amid his frenzied professional activities of the 1570s, Byrd still had the time (or made the time) to offer corrections and suggestions on an amateur’s new work—“saving the last part,” which had to fend for itself. Worcester became the patron of a large printed collection of Byrd’s motets in 1589, and Paget spent more than a decade providing the composer with valuable Catholic connections, along with a generous supply of blank music paper. Another letter to Paget (this time from Ralph Sheldon, a dealer in the luxury tapestries that adorned the music rooms of these discerning amateurs) describes Byrd in arresting terms: “Of Mr Byrde yow are not worthie and we take comfort in him as a Leane to by whom we are Releved upon every casual wreke.” Joseph Kerman—one of the many wonderful Byrd specialists who did not quite live to see this year—called that letter “astonishing.” “Of Mr. Byrd you are not worthy”—I considered using that as the title of my 400th anniversary reflections, but it seemed a little aggressive. It certainly does capture something about life in Byrd’s circles: the jealously guarded friendships, the fierce loyalties, the eagerness to defend oneself and one’s position. Byrd himself was heard at least once using “vile and bitter words” in court. It can be difficult to square that with the almost unearthly beauty and sweetness of so much of his music, but that was the world in which he created it.

Byrd’s best-known statement about a fellow-musician is probably his lament *Ye sacred Muses* on the death of Thomas Tallis in 1585. The text is a fashionably “Englised” version of the first stanza of a poignant Latin poem, *Musae Jovis*, on the death of Josquin des Prez: “Weep, Muses, offspring of thrice-great Jove . . .” (What happened to the other stanzas? Were they translated too? Are they still lurking in some obscure Elizabethan manuscript?) Another song by Byrd, a much lesser-known song, invokes one of the nine muses in particular. She’s not the muse we might expect:

Thou poets’ friend that haunts Parnassus hill,  
And shroud’st in shade where Muses do abide,  
Bedewed with tears from Helicon’s distil,  
To skillless hand, fair Clio, be my guide,  
And sing with me in praise of Music’s art,  
Whose joyful sound doth salve the sighing heart.

Clio is the muse of history, of remembering and studying the past. Byrd is invoking her to help him speak *about* music, “in praise of Music’s art.” When Edmund Spenser wrote his sprawling Elizabethan epic *The Faerie Queene*, he also invoked Clio, addressing her as “Daughter of Phoebus and of Memorie”: the offspring of radiant creativity and memory. It is a remarkably good description of what we do, or at least what we try to do, when we think and write about early music. Those are words to live by as we finish this Byrd year.