



On Byrd's Wings

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Northern Souls

An illuminating contemporary illustration of English consort music is found in the beautifully produced album “On Byrd’s wings” (audite, issued 2023) by sopranos Dorothee Miels and Magdalene Harer, the Boreas Quartett Bremen, the Hather Consort (of viola da gambas) and lutenist Ryosuke Sakamoto. Covering the music of Byrd (who dominates the album with nine pieces, both vocal and instrumental), Henry Lawes, Thomas Campion, Robert Johnson, Orlando Gibbons and Thomas Simpson, a demonstrative confessional and chronological range is provided to illustrate and colour an aural picture of post-Reformation English consort music. Recorded at St Cosmas and Damien church, Lunsen, the setting provides a somewhat provocative spatial reminder that this music was intended for intimate secular settings, softly furnished and with challenging acoustics, quite unlike the sharp enhancing quality of this church. Recording in this space helps to reveal the technical workings of the English consort music included on the album, in both the finely tuned and distinctive voice of two talented sopranos, and the expressive instrumentalists. The confident and concise liner notes, with text by Nike Keisinger, translated by Viola Scheffel, provide a valuable explanation of the themes and justification for the choice of music, recognizing the practical limitations and realities of the spatial context of early modern domestic music-making, and the intimate relationship this world exercised with the public world of theatre. These themes are drawn out in the recording, the clarity of the singers’ voices marking the distinction of the text, and emphasizing the significance of poetic-consort performance. Further discussion might have been provided regarding the melancholic themes of many of the pieces, particularly given their religious resonances with both Catholic and Protestant early modern minds. Nonetheless, the recording is produced to a high quality, and provides a timely reminder of Byrd’s poetic and dramatic connections, illustrating the point clearly that, unlike today, Byrd was just as well known and appreciated for his domestic consort music as he was for his church anthems.

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