



On Byrd's Wings

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William Byrd died in 1623, which means that this year (2023) is Byrd year. Some composers take advantage of the commemoration of their birth or death, but Byrd hardly needs such an event. However, the author of the liner-notes to the present recording thinks differently. "There is a persistent belief in music history that England produced only two truly significant composers: Henry Purcell and Benjamin Britten. But can this be true? What about the Golden Age of British art and culture under the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I? Was it not a golden age of poetry, music and theatre, led by the singular œuvre of Shakespeare? Did English composers not develop a particular musical language before a host of Italian and German musicians made their fortune in London? Has it not been precisely this island existence that has made development of music in England unique, whilst also preventing far-reaching reception on the continent?" This is hard to understand, as Byrd's sacred music is part of the standard repertoire of choirs and vocal ensembles, not only in the United Kingdom, and his keyboard works and consort music are also often performed and well represented on disc. The part of this recording that may be considered a little underexposed is probably the genre of the consort song: a piece for one or several voices and a consort of instruments.

Never mind; a disc with music by Byrd is always welcome. It was for a reason that the poet Henry Peacham called him "our Phoenix Master", as quoted in the booklet. What makes this disc especially attractive is that he is put into his historical context. His music is the core of the programme, but we also hear pieces by English contemporaries and composers of the next generation, some of whom may have been his pupils.

Consort music was not an exclusive English genre, but probably more popular in England than elsewhere, and also still fashionable when it had become obsolete on the mainland. It could be played with different combinations of instruments. One of them was a group of instruments of the same family, such as viols or recorders. Instruments of different kinds could also be mixed; such a formation is known as 'broken consort'. In this programme both kinds of consort can be heard. Most pieces are played by the Boreas Quartett Bremen, a group of four recorder players. A few items are performed by the Håthor Consort, here consisting of four players of viols, from treble to bass. As the track-list shows, some pieces are in more than four parts, which means that there the two ensembles are mixed in different combinations of viols and recorders. One such piece is the Fantasia à 6. Fantasias were very popular in England, often called fancies. They were so typical of the traditional English music that after the Restoration Charles II, having come from exile in France where he had



heard the latest music, expressed “an utter detestation of Fancys”, as the author Roger North stated. Another genre that was much revered was the In nomine, based upon the Sarum antiphon Gloria tibi Trinitas as it was used by John Taverner as cantus firmus in his mass of the same name. Lastly, a substantial part of the consort repertoire consists of dances; the combination of pavan and galliard was the most common. Here we get such a pair from the pen of Thomas Tomkins. In the track-list in the booklet the galliard is omitted.

In the late 16th and early 17th centuries numerous songs were written and published in England. The best-known today are those by John Dowland, but many of his colleagues also contributed to the genre. One of them was Thomas Campion, who is represented here with *The Fairie Queene Proserpina*. Here the voice is accompanied by a lute. It was also a possibility to add a viola da gamba. That is the case in Henry Lawes’s *A Dialogue on a Kisse*. A special genre was the consort song, in which a consort accompanies one or several voices. Strictly speaking that is not the correct description. In fact, the voice is part of the consort; it is consort music in which one or some of the parts are sung, usually the upper part. This means that the balance has to be right: the singer is not a soloist. Such pieces are mostly performed with a consort of viols, but this disc shows that it is perfectly possible to use recorders instead. The voices of Dorothee Miels and Magdalene Harer are such that they blend perfectly with the recorders. There is one piece where the performers have taken some freedom which does not really convince. Byrd’s *O Lord, how vain* comprises three stanzas which end with a chorus, which is performed here by the two sopranos and recorders, which is a rather unlucky decision on the part of the performers. The disc ends with an anthem by Orlando Gibbons, which is scored for five to six voices with consort; here only the two upper voices are sung, the others are performed instrumentally.

One may wonder why a piece from a collection with the German title *Taffel-Consort* is included here. The composer was English; little is known about the formative years of Thomas Simpson. The first documented evidence of his existence is a list of musicians at the court of the Elector Palatine in Heidelberg in 1608. He worked for most of his life in Germany and spent his last years in Copenhagen. All his extant music was published in Germany, and the *Taffel-Consort* was the last, printed in 1621, comprising fifty consort pieces. They include a basso continuo part which has been omitted here. From Peter Holman’s article on Simpson in *New Grove* I conclude that these pieces seem to be intended for strings, including violins. Here they are played on recorders, and these suit the four selected dances pretty well.

The Boreas Quartett Bremen is a fine ensemble; I first heard it on a disc with consort music by Christopher Tye (cpo, 2015) and more recently in a programme with music at the Court of Margaret of Austria (review). I enjoyed both very much, and that is the case here again. Their technically impeccable and lively playing is nice to listen to. In the latter programme they collaborated with Dorothee Miels, and that is a winning combination. I have to say, though, that I regret the slight vibrato in her voice. Her colleague Magdalene Harer is nearly free from that. Their voices blend well in the pieces for two voices. For those who don’t know them: in such pieces Miels is on the left side of the sound spectrum, Harer on the right. As I already mentioned, the balance between the voices and the instruments is just right. The collaboration with the Hathor Consort is a nice addition: some pieces are played by viols alone, but in most cases members of the two ensembles join in a ‘broken consort’, and that works very well.

This disc is an interesting and musically captivating contribution to the Byrd commemoration.

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On Byrd's Wings – William Byrd and his Circle

Dorothee Mields, Magdalene Harer (soprano)
 Ryosuke Sakamoto (lute)
 Boreas Quartett Bremen
 Hathor Consort
 rec. 2022, St. Cosmae und Damiani-Kirche, Lunsen, Germany
Audite 97.818 [66]



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Johan van Veen

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Contents

William Byrd (c1543-1623)
 Have mercy upon me, O God
Henry Lawes (1595-1662)
 A Dialogue on a Kisse
William Byrd
 Christe qui lux es (II, à 4)
Thomas Campion (1567-1620)
 The Fairie Queene Proserpina
Robert Johnson (c1485-1560)
 Satyr's Dance
Thomas Tomkins (1572-1656)
 Pavan & Galliard à 5

William Byrd

Who made thee, Hob, forsake the plough?
 Triumph with pleasant melody
 Christe qui lux es (I, à 4)
 Sermone bilando à 4
 O Lord, how vain
 In Nomine à 5
 Fantasia à 6
 From virgin's womb
Thomas Simpson (1582-1628)
 Suite from *Taffel-Consort*:
 Paduan
 Courante
 Aria
 Volta
Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625)
 See, see, the word is incarnate