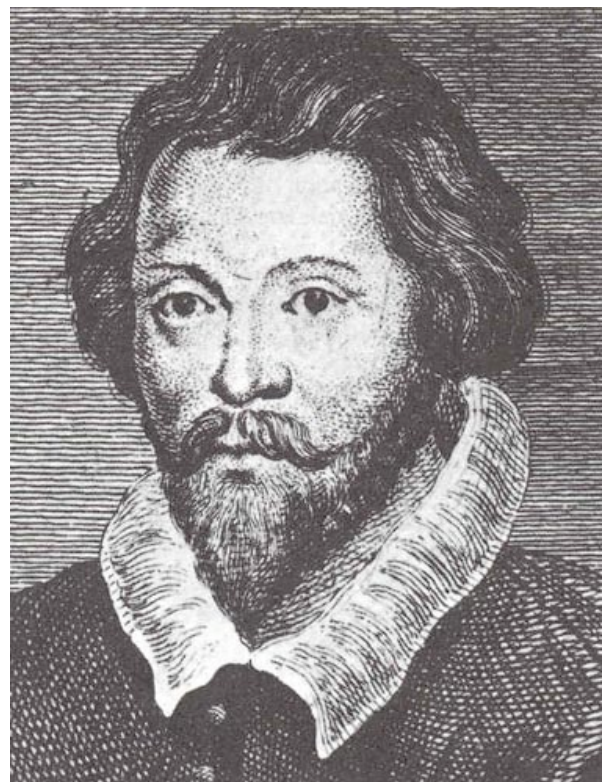

WHAT WE SING

at St Bartholomew's

No. 6 Mass for five voices

by William Byrd (1540-1623)

sung on Sunday 22 March 2009 by the boys and men



WHAT WE SING is a scheme that is designed to enhance and complement the music sung by the church choirs throughout the year. We hope that it will help the whole church community to achieve a greater understanding and appreciation of the music that is heard each Sunday. It will also form an integral part of the education and training of the boy and girl choristers, helping them to understand what they are singing about and to discover the lives and stories behind the music itself.

The hope is that **contributions** will be forthcoming from many different people within the church community. We'll always be delighted to hear from those who wish to write an article for the series. Please contact Fraser Wilson or Fr Andrew McCroskery if you would like to know more.

You can find current music lists and details of future issues on the table at the back of church and also on the internet at **www.stbartholomews.ie**. Past issues are archived there, too.

Forthcoming issues

Sunday 5 April: *Pergolesi* Stabat Mater

Mass for five voices

by William Byrd (1540-1623)

sung on Sunday 22 March 2009 by the boys and men

by Des Ryan

One of the most defining influences on William Byrd's life, both personal and musical, was his devout commitment to Catholicism. Despite serving as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in London and composing for the Anglican service, Byrd privately maintained a devout Catholic faith. In Elizabethan England, such a commitment was fraught with risk: recusancy – the refusal to attend Church of England services – was outlawed, with the result that all Catholic worship was forced underground. Byrd's home was often cited in the 1580s as a seat of recusancy, and his family was subjected to persecution and annual fines

for professing their faith. By the 1590s, the campaign against recusancy had intensified further still. Byrd accordingly left London for Standon Massey, Essex, a safe haven for Catholics generally and a refuge for Byrd in particular, since Standon was close to the country seat of Sir John Petre, the composer's patron. There, Byrd concentrated on the composition of music that would be of use in Catholic worship, his output including works such as *Gradualia*, compilations containing settings of the Mass Proper to specific feast days. During this period Byrd would also publish three settings of the Mass Ordinary, for three, four and five voices respectively. It is movements from the last of these, the *Mass for five voices* (SATTB), that we sing this morning at St Bartholomew's: the Kyrie, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei.

In singing and listening to the various movements this morning, it is instructive to recall that they were written for performance not by large choirs in public churches, but instead to be sung in the family chapel. The intimacy of the voicing in the *Mass for five voices*, with many constituent sections of individual movements involving three or fewer voices, is a vivid evocation of this. Quite apart from the low numbers attending such clandestine services, the atmosphere must surely have been highly charged: given the climate, Byrd's Catholic patrons could have been neither complacent about the profession of their faith, nor indifferent to its dramatic and deepening reversal of fortunes. It is significant, for example, that the *Mass for five voices* is in minor keys and replete with dissonances, representing much more anguished writing than any previous English setting of the Mass.

Points to listen for

Kyrie: The inclusion of a Kyrie is unusual when compared to most pre-Reformation settings of the Latin mass by English composers. Byrd, however, favoured the continental tradition of setting the Mass in full. This Kyrie is in tripartite form, and each section is based upon a single point of imitation. The opening figure here, comprising of step movement in the treble line, recurs throughout a number of the other movements in this Mass, including the Agnus Dei.

Sanctus and Benedictus: The Sanctus opens with the intermingling of the device of melisma (one syllable being set to many different notes) in the

treble line with sustained, held notes in other lines. The effect is to create an evocation of celestial wonder. This ethereal atmosphere is abruptly altered with the section that immediately follows, where Byrd sets the words “Domine Deus Sabbaoth” as a stark, homophonic exclamation.

As already observed, many sections in this work are suggestive of the small numbers attending and singing at the clandestine Masses for which Byrd wrote this setting. One such example to listen for in the Sanctus occurs in Byrd’s use of a trio for ‘Pleni sunt caeli,’ after which the full choir enters for the ‘Osanna’. With this latter word Byrd uses a hemiola or ambivalent cross rhythm technique, in which he alters the note values to create a sense of triple time. The effect is the creation of a lilting, dance-like feel that introduces levity. The Benedictus is set as another trio, after which the ‘Osanna’ is repeated exactly.

Agnus Dei: The Agnus Dei is in three parts. The first section is scored for the three upper voices and begins in a manner that is redolent of the opening Kyrie. With the words ‘Miserere nobis’, Byrd powerfully evokes a plea for mercy by setting these words to a sustained descending melodic line and then repeating the sequence down a whole step. The effect is both to underline the sincerity of the plea, and to emphasise its mounting urgency and significance. The anguish of the clandestine Catholic congregation and its desperate need for reassurance are thus vividly captured. This emphasis on contrition and redemption is continued in the second section, where four voice parts again plead ‘Miserere nobis’ a further three times.

The final section of the Agnus Dei involves a complete shift in mood, with the anguished pleas for mercy being replaced with the bold exhortation, sung by the full choir, ‘Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi’.

The final ‘Dona nobis pacem’ signals a return to serenity, with anguish melting into hope: the movement ends with an exceptionally contemplative plea for everlasting peace.