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Publication Date

2025-12-23

Resonance of Worship

Religious Themes in William Byrd's Sacred and Secular Music

A Term Paper

Presented to

Dr. Paul Ellison

San Francisco State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

MUS 751: The Graduate Renaissance Seminar

by

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May 2025

Introduction: William Byrd and his significance in Renaissance music.

William Byrd (c. 1539–1623) was one of the most influential composers of the English Renaissance, renowned for his mastery of both sacred and secular music. As a pupil of Thomas Tallis, Byrd played a key role in shaping the polyphonic style of late Renaissance England.¹ His works encompass a wide range of genres, including Latin masses and motets, English anthems, madrigals, and instrumental music.² Despite composing during a period of intense religious conflict in England, Byrd maintained a remarkable ability to infuse his music with profound emotional and spiritual depth.³ His compositions, characterized by intricate polyphony, expressive text setting, and rich harmonic language, highlight his deep understanding of both traditional Catholic liturgical music and the emerging English Protestant musical styles.⁴

Byrd's significance extends beyond his technical brilliance; his music reflects his personal struggles as a devout Catholic in Protestant England. His association with clandestine Catholic circles and his setting of Latin texts often linked to the persecuted Catholic community underscore his religious convictions.⁵ However, Byrd also composed secular music, which, while outwardly unrelated to his faith, often carried allegorical or hidden spiritual meanings.⁶ His ability to merge religious themes with both sacred and secular forms highlights the depth of his artistry and the resilience of his faith in a politically fraught era.⁷ This paper will demonstrate how Byrd's religious beliefs permeate both his sacred and secular compositions. By examining his *Mass for Four Voices* and *Though Amaryllis Dance in Green*, this study will explore how his sacred and secular works share thematic and musical elements, such as polyphony, text painting, and modal harmonies.⁸ Byrd's music serves as a testament to the enduring power of faith and

¹ John Harley, *William Byrd: Gentleman of the Chapel Royal* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 23.

² Kerry McCarthy, *Byrd* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45.

³ Davitt Moroney, *William Byrd* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67.

⁴ Joseph Kerman, *The Masses and Motets of William Byrd* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 89

⁵ Harley, *William Byrd: Gentleman of the Chapel Royal*, 112.

⁶ Peter Phillips, *English Sacred Music, 1549–1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 75.

⁷ McCarthy, *Byrd*, 123.

⁸ Kerman, *The Masses and Motets of William Byrd*, 98.

artistry, transcending genre boundaries and offering profound insights into the intersection of music, religion, and politics in Renaissance England.⁹

William Byrd's deep commitment to Catholicism played a key role in both his life and music, despite the dangers of practicing his faith in Protestant England. Born during a time of religious conflict, Byrd remained loyal to Catholicism even when it was outlawed under Queen Elizabeth I.¹⁰ His faith was not just a personal belief but a guiding force in his career and music. Byrd was connected to Catholic families, such as the Petres and Pagets, who supported him and shared his religious views.¹¹

Byrd's devotion is especially clear in his sacred music, much of which was written for clandestine Catholic worship. His collection *Gradualia* (1605, 1607) consists of Latin motets designed for Catholic services, which were illegal at the time.¹² While Latin motets could still be performed in Protestant services, Latin Mass settings like Byrd's were strictly prohibited and intended for secret Catholic worship. Similarly, his *Mass for Four Voices* (c. 1592–93) was composed for underground Catholic gatherings. In these works, Byrd used expressive melodies and complex harmonies to create music that was not only beautiful but also deeply spiritual and emotional.¹³

However, Byrd's strong faith also brought challenges. Although he held a respected position in the Protestant Chapel Royal and composed Anglican church music, his Catholic ties put him under suspicion.¹⁴ He was fined for refusing to attend Anglican services, and some of his publications were restricted by the authorities.¹⁵ Still, Byrd was never fully punished, likely because of his fame and even the Queen's appreciation for his talent.¹⁶ Despite the risks, Byrd never abandoned his beliefs. His music became both an act of worship and a quiet form of resistance. Through his compositions, he kept Catholic traditions alive and expressed the struggles of his fellow believers in a time of religious oppression.¹⁷

⁹ Moroney, *William Byrd*, 135.

¹⁰ Harley, *William Byrd: Gentleman of the Chapel Royal*, 156.

¹¹ McCarthy, *Byrd*, 178.

¹² Moroney, *William Byrd*, 189.

¹³ Kerman, *The Masses and Motets of William Byrd*, 202.

¹⁴ Phillips, *English Sacred Music, 1549–1649*, 215.

¹⁵ Harley, *William Byrd: Gentleman of the Chapel Royal*, 231.

¹⁶ McCarthy, *Byrd*, 245.

¹⁷ McCarthy, Kerry. *Byrd*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Byrd frequently infused his secular works with spiritual themes, often in subtle and symbolic ways. While his sacred compositions directly served Catholic worship, his secular pieces sometimes carried hidden religious or political messages. One of the most prominent ways Byrd accomplished this was through allegory. For instance, his madrigal *Though Amaryllis Dance in Green* (1588) appears to be a typical love song of the period. However, scholars suggest that beneath its surface lies an allusion to religious constancy and persecution, themes that resonate with the struggles of Catholics in England at the time.¹⁸ Byrd used the pastoral tradition common in secular music to craft a double meaning, where "Amaryllis" could symbolize the Catholic Church and its endurance under Protestant rule. Similarly, his consort songs, while outwardly secular, often contained expressive chromaticism and poignant harmonic shifts reminiscent of his sacred works, evoking a sense of lamentation or spiritual longing.¹⁹

Byrd also embedded Latin phrases in some of his works, subtly linking them to Catholic worship, even in pieces that were officially secular.²⁰ One example is his keyboard piece *Walsingham*, based on a ballad tune associated with a suppressed Catholic pilgrimage site.²¹ Through this work, Byrd quietly honored Catholic tradition, expressing his faith within a secular musical form. These elements demonstrate how Byrd's personal faith permeated his entire compositional output, transcending traditional genre boundaries. His compositional techniques were remarkably consistent across both sacred and secular forms, as his music exhibits structural and expressive similarities that reinforce the idea of a unified artistic vision grounded in deep spiritual sensibility. Byrd was a master of polyphonic writing, and his intricate counterpoint appears in both his sacred masses and secular madrigals. His *Mass for Four Voices* (c. 1592–93) demonstrates complex interwoven vocal lines, a technique he also applied in his secular pieces, such as *This Sweet and Merry Month of May*.²² Both compositions highlight his ability to craft independent yet harmonically interdependent vocal lines.

Another unifying element of Byrd's style is his use of text painting musical gestures reflecting the text's meaning. In sacred works like *Ave Verum Corpus*, he highlights key words through harmonic shifts and melismatic phrasing, evoking deep emotional responses. The same technique is evident in secular pieces, where he uses rising or falling melodic lines to illustrate textual images.²³

Byrd's harmonic language remained rooted in Renaissance modal traditions, regardless of genre. His sacred and secular compositions both feature rich modal progressions, avoiding the tonal harmony that would later dominate Baroque music. In works like *Mass for Five Voices* and *Come to Me, Grief-Foretelling*, he utilizes Phrygian cadences and unexpected harmonic turns,

¹⁸ Joseph Kerman, *The Masses and Motets of William Byrd* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 103.

¹⁹ Kerry McCarthy, *Byrd* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 87.

²⁰ Peter Phillips, *English Sacred Music, 1549–1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 95.

²¹ Kerry McCarthy, *Byrd* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²² John Harley, *William Byrd: Gentleman of the Chapel Royal* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 156.

²³ Davitt Moroney, *William Byrd* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 142.

creating a sense of longing that transcends textual content.²⁴ Through these techniques, Byrd blurred the lines between sacred and secular, allowing his music to communicate a deeply spiritual message across all genres. His ability to maintain stylistic continuity across his works is a testament to both his technical mastery and his unwavering faith.

Analysis of Gloria (*Mass for Four Voices* – William Byrd): The Gloria is written in G-Dorian mode, which gives the music a serious and prayerful character. This mode was often used in sacred music during the Renaissance. Byrd avoids modern key changes and instead uses modal harmonic motion, often relying on stepwise or plagal cadences within the G Dorian framework, such as C to G (IV–I). While these cadences resemble tonal movement, they remain rooted in modal practice, contributing to the music’s timeless and spiritual character.

Byrd builds most of Gloria using imitative polyphony. Each voice (Cantus, Altus, Tenor, Bassus) enters one after another with a similar melody. These lines are skillfully woven together to create a rich, expressive sound. In William Byrd’s *Gloria*, the model is G Dorian. The final, or the primary tone where the music resolves, is G. The reciting tone, which is the most frequently used pitch in phrases, is typically D or occasionally Bb. The ambitus, or range of the mode, extends from F to G’.

The *Gloria* begins with a brief solo intonation by the priest “Gloria in excelsis Deo” in keeping with traditional liturgical practice. This solo entrance establishes a reverent atmosphere before the full choir joins. Byrd introduces the choral section softly with a duet between the upper voices (Cantus and Altus), which is then echoed by the lower voices (Tenor and Bassus). Throughout this passage, Byrd frequently uses intervals of third and fifth, creating a smooth and consonant texture. Melismatic writing appears at the end of the Altus line, initiating a more expressive vocal line. As each voice part enters succession, the polyphony gently unfolds, reflecting the meaning of the text “Et in terra pax” (“and peace on earth”). Eventually, the section transitions to homophony, where all voices move in rhythmic unison to convey a sense of collective praise.

Byrd expands the melismatic writing in the Tenor and Cantus parts, offering each line of greater independence and contributing to a fuller, more joyful texture. In the section “Gratias agimus tibi” (“we give thanks to you”), the music returns to homophony, now enriched with warm harmonies that express gratitude. Later, the texture reduces to three voices, creating a more intimate and humble sound. This sparseness recalls the opening *Kyrie*, reinforcing structural unity, particularly during the phrase “Domine Deus, Rex caelestis” (“Lord God, heavenly King”).

The text “Domine Fili unigenite Jesu Christe” (Lord, only begotten Son, Jesus Christ) is presented in close imitation with flowing lines that recall the *Kyrie* motifs. The phrase “Jesu Christe” is repeated several times in imitation, adding both musical and spiritual weight. This

²⁴ McCarthy, *Byrd*, 113.

repetition slows the tempo and evokes deep reverence. The section concludes with a G major chord featuring a Picardy third, adding brilliance to the name of Christ and mirroring the final cadence of the *Gloria*. This is followed by “Domine Deus, Agnus Dei” (Lord God, Lamb of God), written for three voices with smooth, stepwise imitation that communicates humility and devotion.

In the phrase “Filius Patris” (Son of the Father), all voices participate in a smooth, flowing texture with gentle imitation and clarity. “Qui tollis peccata mundi” (you who take away the sins of the world) appears again in a three-voice setting, this time with a darker tonal color. Byrd repeats this line three times—remarkably, the only textual repetition in the entire *Gloria*. This is followed by the plea “Miserere nobis” (have mercy on us), which is repeated multiple times, intensifying the emotional weight of the petition. Byrd then revisits “Qui tollis peccata mundi” with fresh imitative entries, deepening the devotional tone.

The phrase “Suscipe deprecationem nostram” (receive our prayer) is sung imitatively, with voices entering gently one after another in a meditative texture. Byrd transitions smoothly to “Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris” (you who sit at the right hand of the Father), maintaining the imitative style. “Miserere nobis” returns once more, now sung calmly and clearly in all voices. Soon after, the music shifts to “Quoniam tu solus sanctus” (for you alone are holy), where the harmony brightens and the rhythm gains more energy.

The declaration “Tu solus Dominus” (you alone are the Lord) is rendered with vigorous imitation and rising entries across all voice parts, capturing a sense of divine authority and praise. At “Tu solus altissimus” (you alone are the Highest), the ascending melodic lines create a moment of word painting that underscores the greatness of God. The phrase “Jesu Christe” (Jesus Christ) follows lyrically and clearly, musically linking back to earlier “Jesu Christe” phrases and leading smoothly into the final section.

“Cum Sancto Spiritu” (with the Holy Spirit) reintroduces full polyphonic energy. Each voice enters imitatively, enriching the texture and symbolizing Trinitarian unity. “In gloria Dei Patris” (in the glory of God the Father) is set with rising motion, especially in the soprano line. The imitation becomes increasingly intense, propelling the music toward the closing of *Amen*. In the Alto line, Byrd introduces a striking false relation between F $\sharp$ and F $\natural$, adding harmonic tension and expressive color that resolves satisfyingly. The final *Amen* is extended and melismatic in all voices, drawing on and inverting earlier motifs to bring structural closure. The cadence lands firmly on a G major chord with a Tierce de Picardie, concluding the *Gloria* with peace and uplift.

Byrd composed this Mass for clandestine Catholic worship in Protestant England, where such services were likely performed by only four singers—one per part—giving the music an intimate character. His detailed setting of the Latin text reflects a deep religious commitment; the *Gloria* is not merely beautiful—it is an act of worship. Through modal harmony and expressive imitation, Byrd blends faith and artistry in a seamless union. Although *Mass for Four Voices* is

not a parody of mass in the traditional sense, it follows a similar approach by reusing musical ideas across movements. For instance, the opening four-note motif in the Altus (G–D–F) appears at the beginning of both the *Kyrie* (“Kyrie eleison”) and the *Gloria* (“Et in terra pax”), creating thematic unity across the Mass. Byrd’s reuse of internal motifs across the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, and later sections suggests a compositional technique akin to parody, where musical cohesion is achieved through self-referential imitation rather than borrowing from other works. This subtle device reinforces the liturgical and artistic coherence of the Mass²⁵. The work is in G Dorian, as shown by Byrd’s own notation including both B $\flat$ and E $\flat$ in the key signature, reflecting the modal practice of his time and his attention to precise harmonic control²⁶. The final chord of the *Gloria* is G major with B natural forming a Tierce de Picardie, a common Renaissance technique that ends the piece with a sense of brightness and hope. Even so, the final cadence remains a modal plagal cadence (C–G, IV–I), simply colored by the raised third (B $\sharp$), offering a radiant conclusion. While the *Gloria* may begin and end on G in multiple voice parts, the structure is firmly grounded in G Dorian, and Byrd’s ending merges modal consistency with expressive radiance to symbolize peace and devotion.

“Though Amaryllis Dance in Green” William Byrd’s “Though Amaryllis Dance in Green” is a light secular song (madrigal) from his 1588 collection of *Psalmes, Sonets, and Songs*. It is written in the Ionian mode on C, which corresponds to the modern C major scale. This mode gives the music a bright and cheerful sound that suits the poem’s happy, pastoral mood. The vocal range extends from F (below middle C) to g’ (above middle C), which is typical for Renaissance vocal music. The piece is scored for five voices—Cantus, Medius, Contra tenor, Tenor, and Bassus—and uses new music for each line of the first stanza, a technique known as through-composition. At the end of the stanza, Byrd repeats the line “Hey ho! ’Chill love no more” as a refrain, giving the piece a clear and satisfying conclusion.

Even though the printed version of the song includes five stanzas of the poem, Byrd only set music to the first one. Singers could sing the remaining stanzas to the same music if they wished. The final line of each stanza receives special musical treatment to highlight its emotional meaning.

The piece opens with an imitation of the line “Though Amaryllis dance in green,” which gives the music a joyful and lively character. Later, at the phrase “Sing full clear,” all the voices join in homophony to produce a strong, unified sound that reflects the clarity described in the text. When the words shift to “Corinna with smiling cheer,” Byrd responds with softer, smoother musical lines, capturing her gentle and pleasant character. A dramatic change occurs at the line “Yet since their eyes make hearts so sore,” where Byrd introduces minor harmonies,

²⁵ Author’s analytical observation based on score study and comparison of recurring motifs.

²⁶ The author’s analysis is based on Renaissance notation norms and examination of Byrd’s Mass for Four Voices score. This observation is not drawn from a published source but reflects typical editorial findings.

suspensions, and sharp dissonances (false relations) to express sadness and emotional tension. The rhythm also slows down here. The refrain “Hey ho! ’Chill love no more” appears in a more unified texture, often with a descending melodic line, emphasizing the speaker’s resignation and disappointment. It brings musical and emotional weight to the close of the stanza.

Byrd’s use of polyphonic texture is especially striking. The five independent voice parts weaves around each other with energetic imitation, as if in a musical conversation. This overlapping creates a sense of motion, evoking the imagery of dancing. Byrd skillfully alternates between thicker textures (with all voices active) and lighter textures (with only a few), maintaining both clarity and interest. At important lines such as the refrain, he employs homophony, helping the text stand out and reinforcing the mood shifts.

The rhythms are playful and at times complex. Byrd uses hemiolas (shifting between two- and three-beat groupings) and subtle changes in pulse to match the natural flow of the poetry. Since the original music contains no bar lines or dynamic markings, performers must shape each phrase based on text accents and melodic contour. Byrd’s setting is expressive but never exaggerated, showing his sensitivity to poetic content and his command of musical rhetoric.

Cadences and Harmonic Motion: The music stays mostly in C major (Ionian mode). Byrd uses cadences (musical endings), often on C or G chords. He sometimes ends phrases with authentic cadences (G to C) and plagal cadences (F to C). In some places, Byrd uses D major chords (F# in harmony) that resolve to G major, which adds brightness and forward motion. Although the piece is modal (C Ionian), this analysis occasionally uses tonal terms (like C major or G to C cadence) to help modern readers better imagine Byrd’s expressive choices, especially in relation to word painting, harmonic color, and emotional character.

Sometimes Byrd connects the end of one phrase with the start of the next, keeping the music flowing. The final cadence is strong and clear, ending the piece with a full C major chord.

This piece was intended for domestic music-making or performance in small groups, typically with one singer per part. In line with Renaissance printing practices, the music was published in part books, meaning each performer read from their own vocal line rather than from a full score, which was uncommon at the time. Performances were usually a cappella, though light instrumental accompaniment such as from viols, or a lute may have been used to support the voices. Singers need to follow the text accents carefully and shape the phrases expressively. Since there are no written dynamics or tempo markings, the performers decide how to shape each phrase using the text and natural musical motion.

Though Amaryllis Dance in Green shows Byrd’s skill in writing joyful, elegant secular music. Even though the words are partly sad, the music stays lively and full of energy. Byrd uses clear counterpoint, expressive harmonies, and smart word setting to turn a simple poem into a rich musical experience. The mix of happy and sad feelings makes this madrigal charming, clever, and enjoyable – both to sing and to study.

Conclusion:

William Byrd's music stands as a powerful example of how deeply religious themes can transcend the traditional boundaries between sacred and secular genres. Whether composing Latin Masses for secret Catholic worship or crafting pastoral madrigals for the Elizabethan court, Byrd infused his music with emotional sincerity, spiritual depth, and technical brilliance. His consistent use of techniques like polyphony, modality, and expressive text painting helped unify his artistic output and allowed sacred ideas to appear even in nonreligious works. Understanding Byrd's music within its religious and political context adds rich meaning to his compositions. As a devout Catholic in a Protestant nation, Byrd navigated immense personal and professional risk to maintain his faith through music. His sacred works reflect devotion and resistance; his secular works often carry hidden or symbolic meaning that speaks to his beliefs. Both require a sensitive, informed approach to fully appreciate their depth and intention. Byrd's legacy endures because of this unique blend of faith and artistry. He did not merely follow Renaissance conventions—he elevated them, using the tools of his time to express something timeless. His music stands out not only for its technical mastery but also for its emotional depth and spiritual resonance. Today, performers and scholars continue to study and interpret Byrd's music, not just for its beauty, but for what it reveals about the human condition in a time of persecution, belief, and artistic flourishing. His works offer insight into the tensions of Renaissance England, where personal faith often had to coexist with political conformity. Byrd's ability to preserve his musical and spiritual integrity through these challenges remains one of the most compelling aspects of his life and work. In both sacred and secular contexts, Byrd's music offers more than sound—it offers reflection, resistance, and hope. His voice continues to speak across centuries, reminding us of that music, at its highest level, is not only art, but an expression of belief, identity, and enduring humanity.

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