

Classic Poetry Series

William Byrd
- poems -

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William Byrd(1543 - 1623)

English composer, born in London in 1542 or 1543; died 4 July, 1623. He was the son of a musician, and studied music principally under Thomas Tallis. He became organist at Lincoln Cathedral in 1563, chorister in the Chapel Royal in 1570, and in 1575 received the title of "Organist of the Chapel Royal" without being obliged to perform the functions of that office.

Byrd was the most distinguished contrapuntist and the most prolific composer of his time in England. Fétis calls him the English Palestrina. He was the first Englishman to write madrigals, a form which originated in Italy in the thirteenth century, and received its highest development in the sixteenth century at the hands of Arcadelt and other masters.

An organist and performer of the first order upon the virginals, Byrd wrote for the latter instrument an enormous number of compositions, many of which are played today. His chief significance lies, however, in his compositions for the Church, of which he produced a great many.

In 1607 he published a collection of gradualia for the whole ecclesiastical year, among which is to be found a three-part setting of the words of the multitude in the Passion according to St. John. A modern edition of this setting was published in 1899. In 1611 "Psalms, Songs and Sonnets, Some Solemn, Others Joyful, Framed to the Life of the Words, Fit for Voyces or Viols, etc." appeared. Probably in the same year was issued "Parthenia", a collection of virginal music, in which Byrd collaborated with J. Bull and Orlando Gibbons.

Three masses -- for three, four, and five voices, respectively -- belong to the composer's best period. The one for five voices was reprinted by the Musical Antiquarian Society in 1841, and in 1899 the same work was issued by Breitkopf and Hartel. Two of his motets, "Domine, ne irascaris" and "Civitas sancti tui", with English texts, are in the repertoire of most Anglican cathedrals.

In spite of the harrowing religious conditions under which he lived, in the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and James I, Byrd remained faithful to his principles and duties as a Catholic, as is shown in his life and by his works. In his last will and testament he prays "that he may live and dye a true and perfect member of the Holy Catholike Church withoute which I beleieve there is noe salvacon for me".

Care For Thy Soul As Thing Of Greatest Price

Care for thy soul as thing of greatest price,
 Made to the end to taste of power divine,
Devoid of guilt, abhorring sin and vice,
 Apt by God's grace to virtue to incline.
Care for it so as by thy retchless train
It be not brought to taste eternal pain.

Care for thy corse, but chiefly for soul's sake;
 Cut off excess, sustaining food is best;
To vanquish pride but comely clothing take;
 Seek after skill, deep ignorance detest.
Care so, I say, the flesh to feed and clothe
That thou harm not thy soul and body both.

Care for the world to do thy body right;
 Rack not thy wit to win thy wicked ways;
Seek not to oppress the weak by wrongful might;
 To pay thy due do banish all delays.
Care to dispend according to thy store,
And in like sort be mindful of the poor.

Care for thy soul, as for thy chiefest stay;
 Care for thy body for thy soul's avail;
Care for the world for body's help alway;
 Care yet but so as virtue may prevail.
Care in such sort that thou be sure of this:
Care keep thee not from heaven and heavenly bliss.

William Byrd

CRABB'D Age and Youth
Cannot live together:
Youth is full of pleasance,
Age is full of care;
Youth like summer morn,
Age like winter weather;
Youth like summer brave,
Age like winter bare.
Youth is full of sport,
Age's breath is short;
Youth is nimble, Age is lame;
Youth is hot and bold,
Age is weak and cold;
Youth is wild, and Age is tame.
Age, I do abhor thee;
Youth, I do adore thee;
O, my Love, my Love is young!
Age, I do defy thee:
O, sweet shepherd, hie thee!
For methinks thou stay'st too long.

William Byrd

What is Life, or Worldly Pleasure

What is life, or worldly pleasure?
What is wealth or golden treasure?
What is grace or Princes smiling?
What are all in one combinde,
which divided so displease?
Apish toyes, and vaine delights,
mindes unrest, and soules disease.

William Byrd

When Younglings First on Cupid Fix Their Sight

When younglings first on Cupid fix their sight,
and see him naked, blindfold and a boy,
though bow and shafts and firebrand be his might,
yet ween they he can work them none annoy.
And therefore with his purple wings they play,
for glorious seemeth love though light as feather,
and when they have done, they ween to scape away,
for blind men they say, shoot they know not whither.

But when by proof they find that he did see,
and that his wound did rather dim their sight,
they wonder more how such a lad as he,
should be of such surpassing power and might
but ants have galls, so hath the bee his sting,
then shield me heavens from such a subtle thing.

William Byrd