

The Memorial Church of Harvard University
Music Notes for Sunday, September 3, 2023

Today's service presents the first opportunity to hear the Ferris Choral Fellows of 2023-2024, and I would like to extend a warm welcome to the new members of the group. William Byrd—whose 400th-anniversary occurs this year—represents the pinnacle of artistic achievement in the Tudor period. A prolific and versatile composer in virtually all contemporary English genres, Byrd's music could be heard in the great cathedrals, in private chapels, at court, and in domestic amateur music-making. Indeed, the quality of his output even transcended the bitter religious divisions of the time, and his music was admired and performed by Protestants and Roman Catholics alike.

“Praise Our Lord, All Ye Gentiles” comes from Byrd's final collection of published music, *Psalmes, Songs, and Sonnets* (1611). The four brief lines of Psalm 117 are fashioned into a substantial, joyful setting that incorporates a wide range of musical styles, from pure homophony to dense, active, six-part imitation.

Byrd's three well-known settings of the Mass Ordinary—for three, four, and five voices—were probably written to provide music for English Catholics to sing during their clandestine services. The Gloria and Agnus Dei from the *Mass for Four Voices* display Byrd's exquisite mastery of vocal polyphonic writing: the hauntingly beautiful setting of the text “dona nobis pacem” is particularly noteworthy.

William Byrd's keyboard music has always stood in the shadow of his vocal music, notwithstanding admirers as diverse as Moscheles, Rubinstein, and Glenn Gould. Byrd masterfully combined English and Italian Renaissance traditions to create an independent musical language suitable to the refined keyboard instruments of the time. In the sixteenth century, the fantasia was still an unclassified genre containing elements from a wide variety of different styles: Thomas Morley states that a fantasia is made “when a musician taketh a point at his pleasure and wresteth and turneth it as he list.” The prelude and postlude are two examples of Byrd's prowess in this artform, both of which are contained in the primary source of keyboard music from the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean period in England, the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*.