

RICHARD TURBET: *Look down O lord*, a surprising Byrd premiere on disc

Most of Byrd's choral music has now appeared on compact disc. All of the Latin sacred music is available, though only just over half of the Anglican music has been commercially recorded. Of his secular vocal music, all but a few of the consort songs which survive complete are dotted around several anthologies on disc, a few of which are devoted to Byrd; least satisfactory is the situation regarding the partsongs and madrigals: about half are on disc, but the proportion of the *Songs of Sundry Natures* is considerably lower even than that. One ambiguous area is where songs from secular collections have sacred words. Neither fish nor fowl, they tend to slip out of the discographical net altogether. Such an item is "Look down O Lord", one of Byrd's last compositions, which was published in *The Tears or Lamentations of a Sorrowful Soul* compiled by William Leighton (London: Stainsby, 1614). It could never have been sung liturgically during or for centuries after Byrd's own lifetime, but since David Wulstan's edition was published (London: Chester, 1971) it has become a staple of Anglican midweek choral evensongs, scheduled for days when the service is unaccompanied, or when the trebles have a night off and only the layclerks sing. Despite its expressive setting and a sublime conclusion which proves that even aged over seventy, Byrd could come up with a phrase to make the listener sit up and take notice, it has missed being recorded. Or so I thought.

Recently, when investigating to see whether another piece altogether was on disc, I was surprised to find that there has been a commercial recording of "Look down O Lord" available for the last ten years. More intriguingly, the choir who released the recording in 2005 are Mennonites: the Oasis Chorale, whose contact address is Kinzers, Pennsylvania, but whose members come from throughout the USA. They have released seven recordings, and on most of them there are pieces of Renaissance and Baroque music. Furthermore, on three of them there are Tudor pieces, by Tallis and Byrd. On *Treasures in Heaven* (Altar of Praise Studio AP892) they sing Tallis's "If ye love me", on *And Your Heart Shall Rejoice* (Oasis Chorale OC52012) "I will not leave you comfortless", the usual English version of Byrd's "Non vos relinquam", and on *In Endless Light* (Altar of Praise Studio AP951) they premiere "Look down O Lord". On other discs there is music by the likes of Purcell, Boyce and Hassler, with their repertory embracing composers of the intervening periods up to and including Charles Wood and Eric Whitacre.

All seven of the choir's discs are available from their own website, but purchasers from outside North America need to contact Oasis Chorale individually to arrange delivery. However, four of the discs, including *In Endless Light* can be purchased online from the website Singers.com at www.singers.com.

Although this short article is not a review as such, it is worth commenting on Oasis Chorale's performances of the two pieces by Byrd. The choir consists of over thirty singers, but the opening bars of "I will not leave you comfortless" to which I was able to listen on their website were well balanced, clear and in tune in all parts. Turning to the focus of this article, "Look down O Lord", the steady tempo is well judged in what is a resonant acoustic (Sacred Heart Cathedral, Pueblo, Colorado), so that each part (SSTB) is clearly audible. The overall tone of the female voices is radiant, with the altos singing the second soprano line, equal in range to the first. Byrd's writing does no favours to the male singers, especially the tenors, but although they could have been a fraction more forward and assertive, they cope sufficiently with Byrd's vocally athletic requirements, and the basses provide a solid foundation. The rest of the disc includes music by Boyce, Mendelssohn, Grieg and Haydn, besides modern American composers, and some tasteful arrangements of African-American spirituals. This might or might not be of any interest to readers of *EMR* but suffice to say that the choir makes an absolutely beautiful sound, incidentally well suited to performing early music, with some good soloists and, given the resonant acoustic of the recording venue, conductor Wendell Nisly judges his tempi to perfection.

Commercially recorded premieres and unica of choral music by Byrd can crop up on discs devoted to his music, or on themed anthologies recorded by usually specialist chamber choirs or by Christian denominational choirs that are invariably Anglican or Roman Catholic. It completely breaks the mould, and is therefore all the more remarkable (and, without wishing to sound patronizing, commendable), that a Mennonite choir should not only choose to record music by the likes of Byrd and Tallis, but also should record the premiere of a work that is a staple of the modern Anglican repertory.