

# MODERN BYRD CONTRAFACTA

Richard Turbet

Back in the Age of Paper, *Early Music Review* published my article “Nevell and Byrd: paintings and contrafacta” (no 156, 2013, p. 15) in which I listed all my previous writings that had noted contrafacta of Byrd’s music published since the seventeenth century, and brought the list up to date with those few more which had subsequently emerged. Contrafacta are either choral pieces whose original texts have been replaced by completely different words which are not mere translations of the original texts; or are instrumental works onto which a verbal text has been imposed. As I stated in my article cited above, the outstanding piece of writing about early Byrd contrafacta is by Kerry McCarthy,<sup>1</sup> and focuses on the seventeenth century, a volatile period for liturgical music when there was a demand for new anthems in English for the services of the recently established Anglican Church. Several works originally composed to Latin words by Byrd (and indeed his contemporaries) were refitted with English texts, to enable them to be performed with propriety in the Church of England. Subsequently, Byrd’s music was largely overlooked and seldom published in the centuries after his death, particularly during the period 1695-1840. A revival started after the latter date, and a couple of his works were published with different texts from the originals (for no obvious reasons) during the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The situation began to change in the twentieth century and in the twenty-first century is now quite different: more liberal and accommodating attitudes to worship have seen the old prejudices against Latin texts evaporate, so this is no longer the major issue which it was four centuries previously. Yet there remains a steady trickle of contrafacta based on pieces by Byrd. In this article I list half a dozen modern Byrd contrafacta which I have found since 2013, and I make some attempt to answer the reasonable question as to why, when there is no embargo upon what music by Byrd might be sung liturgically (or elsewhere), there is still perceived to be a need to provide such modern contrafacta.

1. *As I went to Bethlehem*, arranged by Trevor Widdicombe, words by G. Hitchcock.  
Adapted from variation 21 of *Walsingham* for keyboard. Originally published in the *University carol book*, edited by Erik Routley; many previous editions and reissues, most recently York: Banks, 2007. Published separately, London: EMI Archive, 2007.
2. *The Earl of Salisbury carol*, arranged by Richard Graves, words by W. Ballet.  
Adapted from *Pavan: the Earl of Salisbury*. Published as SATB, Eboracum choral series, 56, York: Banks, 1976, and as SS/A with piano, Eboracum choral series, 74, 1978.
3. *How lovely: adapted from Psalm 84*, edited and arranged by William David Young.  
Based on *Pavan: the Earl of Salisbury*. H.W. Gray series. Van Nuys: Alfred, 2010. Publisher’s number 32362.
4. *If ye love me keep my commandments*, adapted by S. Drummond Wolff.  
Adapted from *Pavan: the Earl of Salisbury*. The musical times, 1230. London: Novello, 1945.
5. *Slow, slow, fresh fount*, arranged by Roy Douglas, words by Ben Jonson.  
Transcribed from *Pavan: the Earl of Salisbury*. Oxford choral songs, 884. London: Oxford University Press, 1950.
6. *This little babe: a Christmas song*, arranged by Lionel Lethbridge, words by W.M. Atkins.  
Based on *La volta*, T 482, BK 91. Oxford choral songs from the old masters, 48. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.

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1 McCarthy, Kerry. “‘Brought to speake English with the rest’: Byrd’s motet contrafacta”, *Musical times* 148 (Autumn 2007): 51-60.

2 Turbet, *op. cit.*

All six pieces are based upon keyboard works, and four of those are based upon one piece. Byrd left a number of anthems and carols, so why has it been felt necessary to adapt or arrange his keyboard pieces to boost this number? There are two reasons.

I was invited to give an address, in lieu of a sermon, at choral mattins during the William Byrd Festival held during May 2011 at Stondon Massey, where Byrd died and is buried.<sup>3</sup> For the anthem, the local music group bravely performed Tallis's *If ye love me*, one of his shortest compositions, but one which was in an idiom unfamiliar and challenging to the members of the group, given their musical backgrounds and abilities. That they began and ended together was for them a serious, satisfying and commendable achievement. The three keyboard pieces by Byrd which form the bases of the contrafacta in this article are all tuneful and, in the ways in which they are adapted, simple. Byrd's own anthems and carols are challenging propositions to professional singers, much less amateurs, and would be beyond the capabilities of those amateurs possessing modest musical attainments, however enthusiastic or ambitious. Nevertheless, some leaders of churches' music groups and the like are keen to perform music by Byrd (and his teacher Tallis), while it may also be that they or their groups' members have heard or played Byrd's keyboard pieces listed above, and found them attractive, particularly the Salisbury pavan. So, divested of any theological or liturgical baggage, these are the two reasons why such contrafacta have been created and published, performed and even recorded:<sup>4</sup> the desire to broaden repertoires with accessible works by the greatest composers; and the sheer attractiveness of the original pieces on which such contrafacta are based. I believe my list to be comprehensive for now, but unless they have saturated the market, it is not unreasonable to expect that more Byrd contrafacta will become available either through the medium of print or electronically. In the broader and more academic picture of Byrd reception, they indicate a desire to perform, disseminate and popularize his music mainly within the context of Christian worship, but free of any denominational boundaries.

#### APPENDIX

In the 2013 article which I cited above in my opening sentence, I mention two modern Byrd contrafacta which I had recently come across. One of these was perplexing. Byrd's setting of the processional hymn *Pange lingua* in his first book of *Gradualia* (1605) is in three *partes* or verses after the initial verse in plainsong. For some reason the Dutch publisher Annie Bank issued the text of *pars* 3, *Tantum ergo*, set to the music of *pars* 2, *Verbum caro*, publisher's number G 44. While researching the current article, I discovered that Annie Bank also advertises separate editions of pieces by Byrd titled *Verbum caro* and *Tantum ergo*, respectively publisher's numbers G 25 and G 43 (Amsterdam, 1950). Rendering the contrafactum the more perplexing, both these editions are of the original compositions by Byrd!

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- Marie Connolly, Music Director of St Monica's Catholic Church, Edmond, OK, USA, for kindly providing me with a copy of #3.
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<sup>3</sup> Smith, Alan "Stondon Byrd Festival", *Early music review* 142 (2011): 38.

<sup>4</sup> "Lord, make me to know", track 16 on *Byrd*, Vienna Vocal Consort, Klanglogo KL1401. See also Turbet, *op.cit.*, final paragraph.