

03. From Virgin's Womb, Rejoice

(Songs of sundrie natures; 1589)

William Byrd
(1538-1623)
arr. William Melton

Byrd, William

(born between 1539 and 1543 in Lincoln?; died July 4, 1623 in Stondon Massey, Essex)

Another Tudor musical life that begins with unknowns, though it has been ventured that he studied under Thomas Tallis, William Byrd was engaged as organist and chorus master at Lincoln Cathedral in 1563. By 1572 Byrd was in London sharing organ duties with Tallis as a gentleman of the Chapel Royal (though Lincoln still paid him a stipend to compose church music for their use). The two composers also shared a royal patent bestowed by Queen Elizabeth to print and sell music, including the 1575 motet collection *Cantiones sacrae* in which Byrd figured as composer. With the death of Tallis in 1585 Byrd turned increasingly to composition, publishing his own book of madrigals in that year and contributing to the important collection *Musica Transalpina*. Two books of his songs were produced in 1588-89 (*Psalmes, Sonnets, and Songs of Sadness and Pietie; Songs of Sundrie Natures*), and the next period saw much music for virginal (*My Ladye Nevells Booke*, 1591), organ, and viol consort. In the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras funding the arts could be as fickle as any other time, but Byrd carefully cultivated good relations with the Earls of Worcester and Northumberland and many other prominent aristocrats.

The 1590s saw Byrd preoccupied with legal battles and the perils of remaining a prominent Catholic after the ascendancy of the Church of England. Books of *Gradualia*, Latin motets, appeared in 1605 and 1607, and *Psalmes, Songs and Sonnets* in 1611. His many pupils included Thomas Morley and Thomas Tomkins (and probably Peter Philips, Thomas Weelkes, and John Bull). At Byrd's death at home in Stondon Massey he was lauded as "Father of Musick," which shows the respect that he engendered in his contemporaries. The regard of modern scholars has only increased: J. Jeremy Noble noted that "Byrd's musical stature can hardly be overrated" and Edmund Fellowes praised "this great musician, whom many regard as the greatest English composer of all time."

The "carowle" for Christmas Day "From Virgin's Womb – Rejoice, Rejoice" was set to a text by Francis Kindlemarsh issued in *The Paradyse of Daynty Devises* (1578). Byrd composed the work for alto solo with viol consort and published it in the aforementioned *Songs of Sundrie Natures* (1589). To quote the opening verse,

From Virgin's womb this day did spring
The precious seed that saved man,
This day let man rejoice and sweetly sing
Since on this day salvation first began,
This day did Christ man's soul from death remove
With glorious saints to dwell in heaven above.
Rejoice, rejoice, with heart and voice,
In Christ his birth this day rejoice.

Text by William Melton