WILLIAM BYRD'S POLYPHONIC PART-SONGS:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY

by

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For many years a difference in opinion has existed as to the value of William Byrd's secular compositions in relation to their placement in the established vocal music forms of the sixteenth century. Traditionally, musicologists, following in the footsteps of Canon Edmund H. Fellowes, have lumped them indiscriminately within the great repertory of the Elizabethan madrigal, while judging them to be rather poor expressions of this renowned idiom. More recently, a trend has developed separating these, and other compositions of similar construction, into a separate classification as examples of a native tradition whose development flourished at a time corresponding to that of the madrigal.

Much of the background material of this thesis is based upon the research already recorded by three of the most eminent musicologists, Dr. Alfred Einstein, Canon Edmund H. Fellowes, and Dr. Joseph Kerman. Dr. Einstein's lifelong study of the Italian madrigal has resulted in numerous publications of unparalleled value. Much in the same vein, Canon Fellowes has long been considered the outstanding authority on the English madrigal.

After a considerable period, devoid of any new research, Dr. Joseph Kerman has reexamined the Elizabethan madrigal in relation to its Italian origin. It is within his study that the relative importance of Byrd's secular compositional efforts is again questioned.

This study has been undertaken because of the interest aroused by
Kerman's contention that William Byrd's songs are not madrigals at all, but works representative of a native tradition that thrived despite the forceful invasion of the Italian ideal. In order properly to ascertain the correctness of this assertion, it is necessary to consider the society in which Byrd's music was produced, the native tradition from which it apparently received its origin, and the major musical forms which might have influenced its development.
CHAPTER 1

SOCIAL CLIMATE

English society during the sixteenth century was experiencing radical social transformation and religious reform. Its atmosphere was pregnant with the new ideas and changing values which had already formed the basis of Renaissance thought on the Continent.

This evolutionary turmoil, which engulfed all aspects of English society, had a very decided effect upon the development of English music. E. D. Mackerness has designated the major influences upon the music of this period to be as follows:

After the close of the Middle Ages the social history of English music was affected by three related phenomena: the diffusion of humanistic teachings, the Protestant Reformation and the gradual evolution of a musical public—first rather loosely defined, but eventually of increasing significance.¹

Of these three factors, the superficial effects of the Protestant Reformation are the easiest to attempt to define. They are related to two of the most important events of the Reformation; namely, (1) the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539-1540 by Henry VIII, dispersing many highly trained musicians into English society as the large choirs associated with these monasteries were

disbanded, and (2) the abolition of the Latin rite, resulting in a tremendous need for music based upon an English text. Most of the music used prior to this time was now obsolete and composers were confronted with a new means of expression in the choral services and anthems of the Anglican Church.

The more profound aspects of the Reformation were closely related to the humanistic tendencies supporting the new social structure of the Renaissance. With the fresh approach to respectability granted the average man, came a cultural awareness hitherto unexplored. A new respect for learning per se developed, as well as a renewed interest in Greek and Latin classics. A wide range of knowledge, encompassing many areas of thought and accomplishment, became the mark of a gentleman; to be poorly educated meant social ostracism.

It was considered proper at this time for an educated person to be acquainted with, and somewhat skilled in, all fields of fine art. In so being, he could better appreciate the accomplishments of the more talented, and perchance, discover and develop a specific talent of his own.

Music was a real factor in the new way of life. It's high status stemmed from the Court itself—from the Queen's practical interest and high degree of personal skill; from the réclame of the Chapel Royal and the 'Queen's Music', and the brilliant musicians gathered there.²

English nobility of the Elizabethan period naturally assumed the standard set by its Queen. Music gradually came to occupy an important position in the

habitual behavior of the people. Indeed, the study of music became so conventional that Galliard, a foreigner residing in England at that time, felt compelled to say, "No one could then pretend to a liberal education, who had not made such progress in music as to be able to sing his part at sight . . . ."³

In a similar fashion, Peacham also reflects the spirit of the time a number of years later in his The Compleat Gentleman (1622). He instructs his readers thus: "I desire no more in you than to sing your part sure and at the first sight, withal to play the same upon your viol, or the exercise of the lute privately to yourself."⁴

Under these conditions the composition of English music flourished. This activity was highly instrumental in producing a period of unparalleled musical achievement.

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CHAPTER II

FOREIGN INFLUENCE

It is within the Italian culture that one finds the beginnings of humanistic expression and reformation. As these philosophies became firmly rooted, they spread across the Continent and into the British Isles. The musical innovations of the Renaissance paralleled this development and migration. Originating in Italy, they soon were disseminated throughout the rest of Western Europe.

The English people had numerous opportunities to explore and assimilate Italian thought and practice. Many Englishmen traveled extensively on the Continent, and at the same time Italian noblemen, musicians, and statesmen were often guests in the English courts. This traffic opened up a natural avenue for communication of new musical ideas.

The Elizabethan desire for emulation of the Italian culture was made particularly evident in the popularity enjoyed by Italian music. A major result of this vogue was the publication of five anthologies of translated Italian madrigals.

The importance attributed to these anthologies from the musicological standpoint is two-fold. Not only do they quite vividly portray the type of music which was currently desired by the public, but they were extremely influential
in directing the course taken by similar compositional efforts in subsequent years.

Musica Transalpina (1588), the first of the anthologies to be published, was edited by Nicholas Yonge. Yonge's efforts apparently were stimulated by the enthusiasm which had greeted William Byrd's first English publication several months earlier.

The organization of Musica Transalpina shows considerable Flemish influence, particularly that of "four very similar and well-received collections issued by Pierre Phalèse at Antwerp." The division of the contents into sections according to the number of voices employed is definitely patterned after the Flemish fashion, quite in contrast to that of available Italian models. Further association with the Phalèse anthologies is established by means of the numerous duplications of material.

The most striking difference between the Flemish models and Musica Transalpina lies in the realm of language. Whereas Phalèse had retained the original Italian, Yonge included only English translations. The use of translations enabled Yonge to consider compositions encompassing a much wider scope, some being taken from French as well as English sources.

In his preface to Musica Transalpina Yonge alludes to his sponsorship of a type of singing society. It was composed of "a great number of Gentlemen

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2 Ibid., 50-55.
and merchants of good accompt (as well of this realme as of forreine nations), who met regularly to pursue their musical interests. Much of their music was imported directly from Italy. The selections included in Yonge's publication were chosen from those pieces favored by this group. His taste was evidently quite conservative, for the general tone of _Musica Transalpin_ e, although up-to-date, is definitely centered in the more serious and solemn vein. There are only a very few selections of the lighter, more carefree varieties that were currently predominant in Italy.

Within a very short period of time _Musica Transalpin_ e was followed by another anthology, _Italian Madrigals Englishe_ (1590), compiled by Thomas Watson for the express purpose of promoting the works of Luca Marenzio. For this reason it differs vastly from _Musica Transalpin_ e in its contents. Watson's publication includes twenty-three pieces by Marenzio, and only three pieces by other Italian composers. It is interesting to note that he also included two madrigals in the Italian vein by England's own William Byrd, perhaps in deference to Byrd's monopoly on music printing during this period.  

Several years elapsed before the remaining three anthologies appeared. During this time English composers had an opportunity to crystallize their thoughts concerning a native interpretation of the Italian idiom. The resulting change in

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4See pp. 25-26.
taste is exemplified in the 1597-1598 publications.

During this interim period one of the most active composers was Thomas Morley. His fertile ideas on how best to assimilate Italian practice are demonstrated in numerous books of music. It is through his examples that English composers became aware of the inherent possibilities of the light madrigal, canzonet, and ballet forms.

The appearance of the later anthologies followed closely upon the expiration of William Byrd's music printing monopoly. These collections attest to the extent of Morley's influence and the corresponding growth of the English musical conception. Their organization is generally more Italian than Flemish in orientation, and the music has swung from its original conservative style to a lighter, more popular variety.

The first of these anthologies to appear was Nicholas Yonge's second book of Musica Transalpina (1597). Quite in contrast to his first effort, this collection is based upon "madrigals of the lightest sort, thoroughly infected by the style and spirit of the canzonet."

The last two Italian anthologies are edited by Thomas Morley. They are titled respectively, Canzonets, or Little Short Songs to Four Voices: selected out of the best and approved Italian authors (1597) and Madrigals to Five Voices: selected out of the best approved Italian authors (1598). The

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5Kerman, op. cit., 61.
pieces included are obviously chosen from those used by Morley as models for his own musical efforts.

From these five anthologies it is possible to ascertain the degree to which the English mind was exposed to the Italian idiom. It is also possible thereby, through comparison with English compositional efforts, to consider English comprehension, absorption, and regeneration of this expressive medium.
CHAPTER III

THE ELIZABETHAN MADRIGAL

Secular vocal music in Italy consisted of a variety of forms, each suitable for specific occasions. From these numerous and varied styles English composers selected three which were compatible with their own culture: the balletto, the canzonetta, and the madrigal.

Canon Edmund Fellowes has consistently maintained that it is almost impossible to distinguish between these three approaches to vocal music. It is true that a great deal of overlapping occurred in the use of these styles, with many pieces evidencing transitional qualities, but the basic forms from which the English conceived their elaborations can be traced to their Italian origins.

I. THE BALLET

The characteristics of the Italian balletto form are most clearly illustrated in the compositions of Giovanni Giacomo Gastoldi da Caravaggio. Although this form was defined by popular usage prior to Gastoldi's efforts, a clear crystallization of Italian thought is evidenced in his works.

Gustave Reese has stated that "the dancelike balletto, associated mainly with the name of Gastoldi, in its typical form is strophic and divided into two
portions, each repeated and ending in a fa-la-la or similar refrain.\(^1\) An examination of Gastoldi's "Lo Schernito" is rewarding in its illustration of these principles.\(^2\)

In a more detailed analysis of Gastoldi's compositions Alfred Einstein states that this composer's music is:

\[\ldots\] homophonic; it is also concertante in the twofold sense that the compact five-voiced choir is at times split into trios and that the whole is a sort of musical game of ball in which the motifs are tossed from voice to voice.\(^3\)

Edmund Fellowes, in his study of the English counterpart of the Italian balletto, describes its identifying characteristics as follows: "An essential feature of the Ballet of the English madrigalists \[\ldots\] was the introduction, at the end of each section, of a florid and rhythmical passage vocalized to the syllables Fa la la.\(^4\) He goes on to say that the presence of such a refrain does not necessarily make the composition a ballet; "in the true Ballet a regularly defined dance-rhythm must be maintained throughout all the sections.\(^5\)

The ballet form in its English interpretation was a much expanded type of composition. Whereas the focal interest in the Italian version had been

\(^{1}\)Reese, op. cit., 445-446.
\(^{3}\)Alfred Einstein, The Italian Madrigal, II, 606.
\(^{5}\)Ibid., 58.
concentrated in the "verse," where variety was accomplished through the metrical variation established by the poetry, the English were more concerned with the fa-la refrain. These refrains were lengthened considerably and became an avenue for the exercise of elaborate counterpoint.

In connexion with the Ballet-form of composition it should be stated that the fa-la refrain constituted no actual part of the lyric as such, but was added by the composer of the music, who employed it for purposes closely corresponding to an instrumental interlude introduced between clearly defined sections of the words. 6

A comparison of Gastoldi's balletti and Thomas Morley's ballets is revealing in its portrayal of the use of the fa-la refrain:

With Gastoldi the refrain is very short and generally in the same simple style as the rest of the ballet; with Morley it is a long, contrapuntal interlude, instrumental in character, the most brilliant section of the whole composition. 7

The English ballet was not an isolated form. As composers experimented with its inherent possibilities for variety, they frequently invested it with characteristics generally associated with the canzonet. There was an ever increasing tendency to replace the extreme simplicity exemplified in the homophonic Italian models with a more polyphonic texture. In keeping with the addition of contrapuntal devices, texts of canzonet style were commonly employed.

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6 Ibid., 146.
7 Reese, op. cit., 824.
II. THE CANZONET

Although Gostoldi's compositions served as the prime model for Morley's contributions in the style of the ballet, and thereby for English composers as a whole, the canzonet idiom cannot be directly traced to any one individual's works. There were many and varying examples to study, since the form of the canzonet was much more widely employed by Italian composers than that of the ballet.

The Italian canzonetta at the beginning was very closely related to the villanella, particularly in its aura of simplicity and its formal conciseness. The poetry selected was strophic and generally of no more than six lines, three- and four-line stanzas being the most common. Four of these short stanzas were usually included, and often they were unified through the use of a rhyme or phrase that was repeated at the end of each stanza.

As the canzonet developed away from the villanella, it became freer in its poetic connections within and between stanzas. Individual lines, which originally were composed of eleven syllables, were reduced to seven syllables. Occasionally stanzas would contain lines composed of several different syllabic lengths. The connecting rhymes between stanzas eventually disappeared completely. 8

Gustave Reese, in describing the mature Italian canzonetta, says:

8Kerman, op. cit., 152-154.
The canzonetta, normally in the two-section repetition pattern and either a 4 or a 5, is characterized by lightness of mood, clarity of texture, dance-like rhythm, a certain amount of word-painting (limited, of course, by the strophic form), and frequent use of simple figures of imitation.\(^9\)

Support for all aspects of this description may be obtained by a study of the four-part canzonets included in Morley's *Canzonets*, or Little Short Songs to Four Voices: selected out of the best and approved Italian Authors (1597).\(^{10}\)

Works to be found in this anthology are by such notables as, Anerio, Croce, Vecchi, Bassano, and Viadana.

English composers adopted the basic Italian pattern, but, as in the ballet, they were not content with the simplicity expressed by the Italians. Their first reaction was to reduce the poetry to the first stanza only, thereby radically limiting the poetic interpretation and its influence over the music. Having thus tampered with the overall meaning of the poem, composers tended to elaborate in a more madrigalistic fashion within the individual musical sections of the stanza.

A study of Thomas Morley's canzonets in comparison with their Italian models yields a great deal of insight into the entire English conception of the canzonet idiom:

Though the specific style features are all entirely Italianate, Morley's canzonets as a rule are much longer, more complex, more polyphonic, and more madrigalian than the concise compositions of Vecchi, Croce, and Anerio.\(^{11}\)

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\(^9\)Reese, *op. cit.*, 446.

\(^{10}\)Catherine A. Murphy, *Thomas Morley Editions of Italian Canzonets and Madrigals, 1597-1598* (Tallahassee: Florida State University, 1964).

\(^{11}\)Reese, *op. cit.*, 826.
III. THE MADRIGAL PROPER

Secular choral music in Italy in the 1530's was closely aligned with literary efforts of the same period. As poets sought to express themselves in the manner of Petrarch, so composers sought a more adequate means of expressing this new poetry. The madrigal developed out of this search for a more meaningful idiom.

Without Renaissance and humanism it [the madrigal] could not have been born, for humanism awakened that insatiable interest in letters that engendered a new susceptibility to and feeling for words and created a new conception of their relationship with music. No longer did the musician listen to a poem with naive casualness, placing his text under his vocal lines as well as he conveniently could; he now had something of the linguist's equipment, analyzing the syllables and weighing their musical worth. Symbols and illusions emanating from the texts were absorbed no longer more or less unconsciously, but with refined purposefulness.12

The sixteenth century Italian madrigal was a direct outgrowth of the more serious forms of the frottole family. R. O. Morris claims that it "was never for music, as for literature, a formal type of structure. The name connotes a spirit rather than a form . . . ."13 He goes on to say that in general the madrigal is the secular equivalent of the motet, in that it receives its basic outline and character from the words, while its musical texture is a mixture of the chordal, the polyphonic, and the fugal.14

14 Ibid., 59-60.
The extent to which literature dominated the Italian madrigal is illuminated by Bardi's remarks:

In composing, then, you will make it your chief aim to arrange the verse well and to declaim the words as intelligibly as you can, not letting yourself be led astray by the counterpoint like a bad swimmer who lets himself be carried out of his course by the current and comes to shore beyond the mark that he had set, for you will consider it self-evident that, just as the soul is nobler than the body, so the words are nobler than the counterpoint.\(^{15}\)

The primary concern in any study of Renaissance music must be the relative importance of the positions relegated to words and music. The imaginative manner in which Italian composers used the music to interpret the text in the madrigal medium enable them to attain new expressive heights. As composers competed with each other in the realm of expressiveness, however, they eventually exceeded the sense of good taste resulting in music that was soon out of the public's favor.

Gustave Reese has summarized the traits of the sixteenth century madrigal as being:

1. music composed to set a text of literary quality rather than a text written merely to be set to music (poesia per musica); 2. music intended to express the content of the text; 3. as a result of this, a non-strophic (through-composed) form, on the principle that the same music will not suffice to set the varying content of successive stanzas, the actual form differing from piece to piece and being suggested even more by the content than by the structure of the poem; 4. individual voices that are equal and all engaged in precise and beautiful declamation of the text (as distinguished from the voices in a frottola, with its assignment of the most prominent role to the superius); 5. a texture that may be polyphonic or chordal (and syllabic) and that,

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when it uses imitation, does so because this enhances the rhythmic independence of the voices or illustrates the text rather than because it is intrinsic to the madrigal.\textsuperscript{16}

The outstanding feature of the madrigal is its through-composed form. The shape is determined by the text and, therefore, can never be strophic like that of the canzonet. Even when the madrigal most freely borrows from the musical style and poetry of the canzonet, it still retains its own individual construction.

Generally, the poetry selected, or written expressly for a madrigal, is from eight to ten lines in length. In the setting of this text no particular pattern is adhered to, and the end result may be quite lacking in any symmetrical feeling. This is, of course, in direct contrast to the rigid symmetry employed in canzonet writing.

The Italian composers sought a rich texture that was provided by five- and six-part writing. The English were more fond of three- and four-part writing. The use of the English madrigal in private homes and by amateur groups may have been a determining factor in this reduction of parts.

At times the distinction between the Elizabethan canzonet and the lighter versions of the madrigal proper is hard to recognize. Alfred Einstein makes reference to this ambiguity when he says:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{16}Reese, op. cit., 315.
\end{quote}
But when the madrigal begins to repeat not merely its last part but also its first—begins, in other words, to take on the schematic form AA'BC'C'—the distinction between the two forms, which had hitherto led an independent and even antagonistic existence, becomes confused and indistinct.\(^{17}\)

There has been much controversy over the degree to which the English composers utilized and expressed the great literature of the Elizabethan period in their madrigals. Contrary to the view set forth by Fellowes and others of his persuasion, the Elizabethan madrigal apparently received little attention from contemporary poets, and frequently poetry of a very superficial nature was utilized. This was in direct opposition to the importance attributed to literature by the Italians:

But whereas in Italy the madrigalists had set poetry by the greatest of their poets, Petrarch, Ariosto, Bembo, Tasso, Guarini, in England the musicians preferred lighter verses, specially written for them to set. They used very little by the great poets of the age, Sidney, Spenser, Daniel, Drayton, Marlowe, Shakespeare, and were therefore less dominated by literary tradition than the Italians. The poems were less serious, more popular, and gayer, and the music to which they were set was intended not for professional singers but for amateur performance in private houses. Thus the English madrigal, for all the charm of the verses, is more purely musical than the Italian, and though it coincided with the best work of the poets it was in no way subservient to literature.\(^{18}\)

This apparent disregard for poetry of literary worth did not seem to injure music being written for the English madrigal. Instead, it appears to have freed the composers to follow the dictates of their musical consciences. Their work under these circumstances developed into a satisfying reconciliation of

\(^{17}\)Einstein, *op. cit.*, II, 576.

words and music.

The moderation governing English composition enabled it to succeed in the very area where Italian composition failed. R. O. Morris, in retrospect, has stated:

One of the strongest features of the English madrigalists is their ability to introduce such occasional touches of realism into their work without allowing the habit to master them; in the Italian madrigalists the structural continuity and melodic outline are often sacrificed fruitlessly in the attempt to illustrate every tiny detail of the words.¹⁹

Thomas Morley, although thoroughly acquainted with the academically supported, serious Italian madrigal, was by far the outstanding proponent of the light madrigal. In choosing to ignore the more poetically oriented style in favor of the musical freedom made possibly by the more superficial texts, he helped to guide the course of English musical thought.

In appraising contemporary compositional practice, Morley exhorted:

If therefore you will compose in this kind, you must possess yourself of an amorous humour (for in no composition shall you prove admirable except you put on and possess yourself wholly with that vein wherein you compose), so that you must in your music be wavering like the wind, sometimes wanton, sometimes drooping, sometimes grave and staid, otherwhile effeminate; you may maintain points and revert them, use triplas, and show the very uttermost of your variety, and the more variety you show the better shall you please.²⁰

Clearly advocating the Italian aesthetic of musical illustration of the text, Morley nevertheless failed to give strict adherence to it in his own works.

¹⁹Morris, op. cit., 61.

Rather, he wrote in an attractive musical style which placed the text in a subservient position.

Even though the majority of English composers, like Morley, were more inclined to express themselves in the form of the light madrigal, there was a group of younger composers who sought poetry of greater value to be set in a more serious fashion. It is in the works of these men that the Elizabethan madrigal reached its climax. The two outstanding contributors in this field were Thomas Weelkes and John Wilbye. Two other composers worthy of mention were George Kirbye and John Ward.
CHAPTER IV

ENGLISH NATIVE MUSICAL TRADITION

Whereas the madrigal was a highly favored form in Italy in the 1530's, it was not until some fifty years later that it gained a substantial foothold in English composition. This disregard of the madrigal ideal was not caused by a lack of familiarity with Italian accomplishments in this field, but rather, was a result of the desire of the English people to develop their own native style and the need to fill the musical gap created by the change of language and ritual in the Anglican Church.

During Elizabeth's reign, as more and more Italian music became known through the anthologies of translated Italian madrigals, a sharp division became evident among English composers. One group, under the leadership of William Byrd, continued to compose in the traditional native style, while the new "madrigalists" branched out into the Italian idiom.

Quite in contrast to Edmund Fellowes' failure adequately to differentiate between these two musical approaches, Joseph Kerman has made a detailed study and comparison. The latter has prefaced his remarks as follows:

To call Byrd, Gibbons, Mundy, Carlton, and Alison "madrigalists" is to rob the term of any distinctive meaning except perhaps a vague chronological one. Their musical styles lack all the essential characteristics of the real Italianate writings of Morley, Weelkes, Wilbye, Bateson, and Ward. To put it as briefly as possible for the moment, the madrigal proper attempts to illustrate the meaning of the words point by point, along certain conventional lines developed by the Italian composers. The English song on the
contrary is an abstract composition that obeys purely musical rather than literary dictates, and looks stylistically either to an ancient native tradition of strophic song, or to the established idioms of English Church music which are more Netherlandish than Italian in orientation.

England's native musical heritage is long and distinguished, achieving recognition as early as c. 1240 with the well-known "Sumer is icumen in." This masterpiece was followed in the fourteenth century by the development of "English descant," which had such a strong influence on the Continental "faux-bourdon." In subsequent years such outstanding personalities as John Dunstable, Taverner, Tallis, Tye, Shepherd, Mundy, and White developed their distinctive styles.

Despite the long list of names associated with England's musical history, a comparatively small amount of music is available for examination. John Stevens in his Music & Poetry in the Early Tudor Court has found it necessary to base his conclusions on just three manuscripts available through the British Museum: The Fayrfax Manuscript, or The Fayrfax Book (BM Add. MS 5465), Henry VIII's MS (BM Add. MS 31922), and Ritson's MS (BM Add. MS 5665).

In summarizing the contents of these manuscripts he writes:

... the songs of these music-books can be divided into three main groups. The first consists mainly of the carols in Ritson's MS: the 'rude' popular verses receive vigorous metrical setting in highly stylized music built up from an old-fashioned popular mode. The second group includes the traditional amorous and political songs and long Passion carols from The Fayrfax MS:

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1 Kerman, op. cit., 12.

here, ornate, 'rhetorical' verse is set to contrapuntal music, sometimes elaborately patterned, sometimes dramatic and expressive, in the 'English' manner; passages in which natural accent is treated with some respect merge into florid, ornamental roulades. The third group is made up of the choral songs of Henry VIII's and Ritson's MSS: courtly 'balets', some of the slightest kind, are set in a concise and balanced chordal style.\(^3\)

Apparently the only English secular set to be printed between 1530 and 1588 was Thomas Whythorne's seventy-six *Songes to three, fower, and five voyces* (1571). This publication must, therefore, be the standard by which one gauges the English musical conception during the early years of the Elizabethan period. The contents also may be considered to be an accumulation of those ideas which prevailed prior to Elizabeth's reign.

While in the process of describing some of Whythorne's pieces in detail, Gustave Reese sheds considerable light on an important phase of English music:

Some Whythorne pieces, though all the parts have words, belong stylistically to the important repertory of the Elizabethan strophic solo song with accompaniment of viols (usually four). In this type, which may be called the contrapuntally accompanied solo song, the upper voice generally carries a syllabic setting of the poem, while the lower voices, faster moving and noticeably less melodic, weave an amorphous polyphonic texture below the tune, and fill in gaps between its phrases.\(^4\)

One thing becomes clear from a survey of this material. It was not until the Elizabethan period that a sufficient repertory of English music in the native tradition existed for public consumption and evaluation. The publication of


\(^4\)Reese, *op. cit.*, 817.
William Byrd's three sets, dating from 1588, 1589, and 1611, greatly augmented the sources available for study and comparison.

Byrd's music is rich in its expression of native thought. Rooted in the "native tradition of solo song with viol accompaniment and the straightforward English polyphonic songs of the earlier part of the century," his secular polyphonic songs display a vast degree of individuality and artistry.

5Andrews, op. cit., 5.
CHAPTER V

WILLIAM BYRD'S POLYPHONIC PART-SONGS

(TRADITION VERSUS MADRIGAL)

There is little information available concerning the early years of
William Byrd's life. He apparently was born in 1543, for he claimed to be in his
eightieth year at the writing of his will in 1622. As to his place of birth and
parentage there has been much speculation but no conclusive verification.

It is recorded that on February 27, 1563, at the age of twenty, Byrd
was appointed organist of Lincoln Cathedral. He served there only a short time,
resigning his appointment in 1572 in order to assume the duties of organist of the
Chapel Royal jointly with Thomas Tallis. Byrd's affiliation with the Chapel Royal
had begun prior to this time. On February 22, 1570, he had been sworn a
Gentleman of the Chapel Royal to fill the vacancy created by the death of
Robert Parsons.

Authorities are not in agreement as to the degree to which Byrd was
influenced by his association with Tallis. It is known that a strong friendship
existed between them. Not only did they collaborate in their work, but Tallis
was the godfather of Byrd's second son. Further cooperation is evidenced in the
fact that in 1575 they became partners in a printing license, granted to them by
the Crown:
In 1575, Elizabeth granted Tallis and Byrd jointly a 21-year monopoly for printing music and music paper, the Letters Patent that she issued being the earliest English examples of the kind known.¹

When Tallis died, ten years later in 1585, the printing license passed on to Byrd. He had sole possession of it until its expiration at the end of the twenty-one year period. At the end of this period a new license was granted to Thomas Morley, and later to Thomas East.²

Byrd was one of the most versatile composers of the Renaissance. A staunch Catholic, his finest works are to be found in the realm of Latin church music. He was not averse, however, to pursuing the opportunities afforded by the Anglican Church, and he produced many works of outstanding merit. These compositions have been widely acclaimed and much of Byrd’s reputation is based on studies of these works. His secular contributions are to be gratefully acknowledged, as well, and it is these upon which attention will now be focused.

A just evaluation of Byrd’s polyphonic settings of English texts may be obtained by means of a comprehensive survey of the three collections which he published in 1588, 1589, and 1611. Except for the church music designed for public worship, these volumes contain the main body of his English works.

David Brown in connection with Byrd’s position in the history of English secular music states:

¹Reese, op. cit., 784-785.
Byrd was certainly no musical reactionary and his compositions reveal more numerous progressive traits than it has been customary to credit to him. But his own personal style was too firmly rooted for him to be able, even if he were really inclined, to embrace fully the Italian madrigal style which saturated English secular music in the last decade of the sixteenth century; he was, after all, 45 years old when 'Musica Transalpina' appeared. He did not remain aloof from the activities of the new school of English madrigalists and contributed three collections to this magnificent series of secular publications. Yet these only serve to prove how fundamentally different his musical attitude and style were from those of his young contemporaries, even when he was deliberately writing with madrigalian inflections. 3

These interesting observations lead to a study of the artist's works in order to make some evaluation in comparing the polyphonic part-song with his more famous sacred services.

Byrd's three collections, titled Psalms, Sonets and Songs (1588), Songs of Sundrie Natures (1589), and Psalms, Songs and Sonnets (1611) are subdivided into categories according to the style and purpose of their contents. The psalms and "songs of pietie," as Byrd classifies them on the title page of his 1588 set, were generally intended for private devotional use, and consequently, only a very few incorporate the compositional practices employed in the writing of motets and anthems for public worship. Instead, they "come closer to the category of sacred madrigals or solo settings of devotional words." 4 The sonnets and pastorals parallel the Elizabethan madrigal in purpose, but stylistically are more closely


4 Andrews, op. cit., 263.
associated with the aforementioned native musical tradition.

This association with the traditional aspects of English style is most impressively expressed in Byrd’s use of the technique of writing for a solo voice with string accompaniment. His 1588 collection is almost exclusively written in this idiom, and a goodly portion of the contents of his two later publications follows suit.

Support for the assumption that the songs in the 1588 set are not in their original form is to be found in "The Epistle to the Reader" which prefaces this volume:

> If thou delight in music of great compass, here are divers songs which being originally made for instruments to express the harmony, and one voice to pronounce the ditty, are now framed in all parts for voices to sing the same.  

Byrd, in the process of transcribing these songs from the earlier solo settings, has adapted his music to the vocal ensemble in a polyphonic manner. This adaptation may well have been made in response to the demand created by the popularity currently enjoyed by the Italian madrigal. The solo song origin, however, is never completely disguised and remains a favorite compositional device in Byrd’s later efforts.

The solo song arrangements are marked by the presence of a definite solo voice, differentiated from its accompaniment by certain technical characteristics. Joseph Kerman, in commenting on the uniformity of these technical features,

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deems the lead voice, or "first singing part," to be recognizable because:

... it is usually the last to enter, and is more vocal in conception than the other parts; it generally progresses more slowly; it has a more rounded melody, with no awkward skips, especially at cadences; its range is usually within an octave or a ninth (the other voices cover a 10th or an 11th, sometimes a 12th or a 13th, in one case a 14th); it declaims the words carefully, and never repeats the text except under exceptional circumstances. 6

Even more conspicuous is the manner in which the solo voice rests before the start of each new line, while the polyphonic accompaniment anticipates the melodic figure which the solo voice is to employ. 7 All of these distinctive features are amply illustrated in the songs included in the 1588 set.

The polyphonic accompaniment underneath "the first singing part" in no way expresses a comparable degree of freedom and equality. This conception of a solo voice with accompaniment, therefore, differs radically from the madrigal ideal, which asserts equality of voicing and uniform declamation of the text.

Alfred Einstein realistically confronts the latter concept and its involvement in compositional methods when he states:

One of the laws governing this form is, that the most accurate and untrammeled declamation must be observed in each part; it is positively affecting to see how impartially they are treated; hardly a piece can be found, in which each part does not get the entire text. This was a matter of course in the earlier, homophonic madrigal, in which all the parts declaim together; but even in the more actively imitative passages the leading part may repeat the line of verse or soar away in a melisma, so as to allow the others time and to gather its strength for the cadence . . . . Furthermore,

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6 Kerman, op. cit., 103.
7 Ibid., 104.
as regards completeness, each singer was entitled not merely to the entire text, but equally to the entire expression. 8

This is not to say that Byrd never approached the madrigal ideal in any of his writings. Rather, it is to emphasize the vast difference in formal construction which permeated his earlier works and recurred periodically throughout his entire career.

The formal structure of the solo song style influenced the type of poetry selected to be set to music, as well as the manner in which it was to be used. In the traditional fashion poems of many stanzas were set in a strophic manner. Habitually Byrd utilized the first two stanzas in the music. In his 1588 set he had the remaining verses printed below the music, but in his later volumes, whether because of printing expenses or because he had little interest in the text, the additional verses are ignored entirely.

Possibly the use of these extra stanzas was optional. Edmund Fellowes, in addressing himself to the problems involved, has suggested that in the brighter numbers, such as Though Amaryllis dance in green (1588 Set, No. 12), one or two further verses might have been sung. In the more elaborate compositions, however, it would have been more difficult, and in some cases the metrical settings of the first two verses are impossible to reconcile with the rhetorical rhythm of the remaining verses. Fellowes concludes his remarks with the following example:

O you that hear this voice (Byrd's 1588 Set, No. 16) is a poem by Sidney in nine stanzas, two of which are used in the musical setting, the remaining seven being printed at the foot of the page; in this case four repetitions would not only be tedious, but there would still remain an odd stanza with only half the number of lines required to fit to the music.\(^9\)

Coinciding with his strophic approach to poetry, exemplified in the solo song technique, was the composer's tendency to set a repetition of the last two lines of a stanza. This repetition of the final couplet assumed various forms as it was incorporated into the patterns adhered to in the different classifications of songs.

In setting the metrical psalms of the 1588 set, Byrd, in the main, composed music to support the first two stanzas, totaling eight lines. He then expanded his composition by an exact musical and poetic repetition of the final couplet.

His setting of sonnets seemed to vary according to the national origin of the text. He made little effort to use parallel poetic and musical forms, being more concerned with the musical, rather than the poetic accuracy. H. K. Andrews has determined the following traits to hold true in most of the sonnets:

He usually sets the two quatrains of the octave to the same music, sometimes with minor alterations, at others with exact repetition. In the case of the Italian sonnet, the first three and last three lines of the sestet are often set to the same music; in the English sonnet Byrd usually repeats the last two lines, words and music, thus turning the sestet into an eight-line section. The musical shape of the Italian sonnet, set in this manner is A-A-B-B; of the English, A-A-B-C-C.\(^{10}\)

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\(^{10}\)Andrews, *op. cit.*, 264-265.
The pastorals in Byrd's 1588 set generally meet one of two standard patterns: either they are strophic settings of six line stanzas with a repeat of the last couplet of each stanza, or, occasionally, two stanzas are combined to form the foundation of the strophic setting with a repeat of the final couplet of the second stanza. "O you that hear this voice" (1588 Set, No. 16) is a good example of this latter device.

As in the preceding forms, the "songs of sadness and pietie" also fit the strophic pattern, frequently with the repetition of the final couplet.

This persistent use of strophic settings in the prescribed manner widens the gap, established by the solo song technique, between Byrd's native idiom and the madrigal proper. As has been previously stated, the main feature of the madrigal is its through-composed form. ¹¹

This is not meant to imply that Byrd did not write any works in the through-composed medium, but rather that a large portion of his works are very definitely not of that variety. "Indeed Byrd comes to compose more and more strophic poems all the way through, as though to be sure that later stanzas would be sung."¹²

Whereas Byrd's 1588 set is composed almost exclusively of strophic, solo song arrangements (the only exception being No. 1, "O God, give ear," in which all four stanzas are set to music in a through-composed manner) his volumes

¹¹See p. 16.

¹²Kerman, _op. cit._, 102.
of 1589 and 1611 show considerably more variety. In these later publications polyphonic songs in the Netherlandish tradition regularly share honors with the various solo song arrangements.

The pieces Byrd selected to set in the polyphonic, *a cappella* medium are for the most part in three- and four-voice arrangements. His five- and six-voice settings generally revert to the contrapuntally accompanied solo song technique. Exceptionally, in his 1611 set there are a number of five- and six-voice psalm settings composed in the polyphonic motet style.

H. K. Andrews, in studying the seven psalms included in the 1589 set, has made the following observations:

The style of the seven penitential psalms in the 1589 book is very different; only two stanzas (=eight lines) of each of these are given; these are set through for three voices in the old motet style; the text is divided up into small fragments and each of these is treated fugally with much verbal repetition and a close-knit imitative technique. 13

The sonnets and pastorals following these psalms are composed much in the same fashion; the music is strongly modal and the counterpoint quite learned and elaborate. The poetry selected could well have been set in a genuine madrigal fashion, but Byrd consistently seems to have avoided this idiom whenever possible. They are, in general, closely related to the early English part-song.

John Stevens' analysis of the Elizabethan madrigal in the light of the early Tudor books seems to be equally appropriate when comparing the madrigal to the majority of Byrd's polyphonic works:

The madrigal differs from early polyphonic songs in these respects: each phrase of the text is given an appropriate melodic figure which is developed by imitation, and during the course of which the words may be repeated; the musical sections (that is, the verbal phrases) overlap each other instead of being divided by cadences; harmonic suspensions play a large part in expressing the text; naturalistic effects on words like 'sighs', 'hover', 'aloft', are so common as to be trite. The matter-of-course repetition of the words is most important. Repetition is found also in the early Tudor books, but with a different meaning: it has an effect of climax, it is part of declamation.

If Byrd had wanted to compose in the true madrigal style, the transition from these polyphonic works to the Italian-Elizabethan ideal would have been relatively simple. It certainly was not the lack of understanding or ability that prevented him from absorbing the madrigal aesthetic. On the contrary, he showed a complete mastery of it as early as 1590 when he composed "This sweet and merry month of May," a 6, for Thomas Watson's Italian Madrigals Englished. Apparently, he simply did not feel that this form was ideal for the expression of his own creative insights.

Some of Byrd's three- and four-part songs do show the effect of extended association with the madrigal ideal. "While that the Sun" (1589 Set, No. 23) is one of his earliest songs to resemble the foreign idiom. Although still set in a strophic manner, it incorporates much of the madrigal aesthetic in its unchanging refrain. Another example, and perhaps the most purely Italianate piece in the three publications, is Byrd's four-voice arrangement of "This sweet and merry month of May" (1611 Set, No. 9). A reduction of his six-voice setting, it shows

14 Stevens, op. cit., 107.
that the composer had a complete understanding of the Italian technique.

Joseph Kerman comments upon what he calls the "transitional" songs. Having their roots in the five- and six-part contrapuntally accompanied solo song tradition, they demonstrate Byrd's efforts "to bridge the gap between solo and polyphonic writing, and sometimes madrigalesque writing too." This struggle, activated by the presence of two powerful musical idioms within a single culture, provoked a variety of otherwise unexplainable musical abnormalities.

The first concession that Byrd made, as a result of the popularity enjoyed by the madrigal, was to adapt what were originally solo songs with viol accompaniment to completely vocal settings. With the addition of words to the accompanying parts he openly acknowledged the competition provided by this a cappella medium.

His concession was not complete in the 1588 set, however, for he inserted the rubric "the first singing part" above the melodic voice bearing the solo ideal. An examination of those pieces in which he failed to include this designation yields further madrigalian peculiarities. These songs contain a considerable number of passages written in simple homophonic style and upon occasion exhibit the composer's tendency to divide the choir into smaller groups. Particularly surprising is Byrd's setting of "Ambitious love" (1588 Set, No. 18).

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15 Kerman, op. cit., 111.
Although the upper voice definitely carries the melody, a homophonic conception prevails throughout the entire piece.  

David Brown, in his survey of the 1588 volume, has elected to comment briefly on Byrd's setting of "La virginella" (1588 Set, No. 24). He finds that the Ruggiero melody in the bass tends to give this piece a distinctive Italian flavor, even though Byrd refers to this piece as a solo song. The more natural underlaying of words, the less awkward adaptation of the instrumental writing, the amount of homophonic writing found in the accompanying voices, and the clearer, more frequent cadences, all serve to distinguish this piece from the rest of the selections in this volume.

In the last two publications, Songs of Sundrie Natures (1589) and Psalms, Songs and Sonnets (1611), the disintegration of the native style, as it is infiltrated by traits generally associated with the madrigal tradition, becomes more evident. The predominant melodic voice gradually is absorbed until, in the later compositions, it scarcely can be distinguished. Repetitions of the text are more frequent, and a moderate amount of word-painting occurs. Byrd demonstrates a gradual awareness of the antiphonal possibilities of a divided choir.

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16 Ibid., 113.

17 The Ruggiero melody, originally occurring in Canto 44, stanza 61, of Orlando furioso in the early 16th century, was the most popular of a group of pre-existent melodic formulas. It usually was incorporated as the bass line in instrumental compositions of an improvisatory nature.

three-part sections occurring with some frequency in his 1611 set.

In his setting of the final couplet of the sestet of the sonnet "Weeping full sore" (1589 Set, No. 26) a fine example of Byrd's use of antiphonal groups in a madrigalian manner is found. He was not inhibited or unimaginative in his employment of this idea once he was convinced of its acceptability. His conception gradually came to include alternations of solo and chorus passages, as well as a variety of choral groupings.

Probably the most unusual composition in Byrd's collections is "Come woeful Orpheus" (1611 Set, No. 19). In this work Byrd has taken the opportunity provoked by the text to experiment with chromatic alterations. The notes he employs are more successful in fulfilling their melodic function of illustrating the words "sourest sharps and uncouth flats," than they are at achieving their harmonic potential.

Byrd's attempts at word-painting are few and they are governed by the greatest moderation. This aesthetic of the madrigal tradition never achieved a natural position in his compositional techniques. David Brown, in drawing a comparison between William Byrd and Luca Marenzio, possibly the most outstanding Italian madrigalist, deems them to have radically different musical outlooks:

The essential difference is that Byrd has little interest in the expression of details of the text. He is not "literary minded", and purely musical values always guide his inspiration. Here he matches the plea of the text with music which, in its mounting intensity, mirrors the insistent cry of the words. The text guides but never cramps the music... 19

19 Ibid., 372.
The madrigal, conversely, is filled with detailed textual interpretation. Catherine Murphy, in her study of Morley's edition of translated madrigals, finds numerous and varied examples of text-painting:

The music seems to be conceived and molded with pictorial intentions, which are realized by employing various technical resources: melodic line, tonality, rhythmic organization, harmony, dissonance and chromatic alteration.\(^{20}\)

Byrd's general approach was to create exactly the right atmosphere and mood in the music as a whole for the general sense of the words, without indulging in the extravagances of word-painting which are a feature of the Italian madrigalists. He did, occasionally, use musical devices to illustrate words individually or in short phrases, but only with the greatest discretion.

Byrd's rejection of the basic madrigal ideal is not surprising. In a sense, the degree to which he utilized various traits of the madrigal aesthetic is more remarkable. He belonged to an older generation which had its own individual musical tradition. The maintenance and development of this tradition is largely due to his efforts, and those few composers who followed in his footsteps. His stand in the face of foreign invasion is a credit to the esteem with which he was regarded.

\(^{20}\) Murphy, *op. cit.*, 76.
CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY

The present study has concentrated on William Byrd's contributions to the musical repertory of Elizabethan England. An attempt has been made to analyze this music in the light of the sociological situation from which it received its impetus, as well as the musicological factors which influenced its development.

William Byrd was born and raised in a society which was undergoing a complete social and religious transformation. The humanistic ideals governing the standards of the resulting culture lent a new respectability to music and musicianship.

In keeping with the international outlook of this new culture was its absorption of anything and everything new and foreign. The Italian madrigal met this criteria and, consequently, was rapidly and wholeheartedly embraced by the English people.

The entrance and acceptance of this form into English society was greatly advanced by the publication of five anthologies of translated Italian madrigals. These publications not only demonstrated the popularity enjoyed by the Italian idiom, but served as models for subsequent works by English composers.

At the time of publication of the first of these anthologies, William Byrd was forty-five years old, had a well-established reputation among English
composers, had a monopoly on the printing of music and music paper, and had just issued his first volume of secular publications. His style of composition, under these conditions, was not radically influenced or changed by the invasion of the Italian ideal.

The majority of Byrd's secular contributions to English musical literature are contained in three separate publications: Psalms, Sonets and Songs (1588), Songs of Sundrie Natures (1589), and Psalms, Songs and Sonnets (1611). An analysis of the music contained in these publications yields certain very definite musical ideas. The songs included in his 1588 set are, fundamentally, contrapuntally accompanied solo songs set in a strophic fashion in which the final couplet of each stanza is often repeated both musically and poetically. His 1589 and 1611 sets show considerably more variety, exhibiting not only polyphonic arrangements of accompanied solo song, but an interpretation of the polyphonic, motet style which is Netherlandish in origin.

The influence of the Italian and English madrigals on Byrd's style may be observed in certain "transitional" songs. These songs feature such traits as his growing tendency to set poems in a through-composed manner, a more equal distribution of voicing and declamation of the text, more obvious attempts at homophonic writing, considerable experimentation with the use of antiphonal choirs and alternations of solo and chorus writing, the unexpected appearance of a chromatic composition, and moderate attempts at word-painting.

Despite the impression made by the madrigal on Byrd's compositions, his
style essentially relates back to the tradition governing the works of Taverner, Tallis, Tye, Mundy, and Whythorne. His technique is one of selection, expansion and development of established methods, tempered by an amazing degree of individuality and imagination.
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