

PROGRAM NOTES

Thank you for joining us tonight as we venture together into the distant past. We'll be exploring the sonic world of late 16th-century England, as it was guided by the steady hand of Elizabeth I, both a patron and player of music. Music was central to many aspects of Elizabethan life. The court and the church were large musical institutions employing composers and performers (and in the church, training young choristers), and both were headed by Elizabeth herself. Domestic music-making was also prevalent, and the burgeoning market for musical publications was controlled jointly by William Byrd and Thomas Tallis—this power granted by the queen herself. These different contexts for music-making yielded a broad array of musical styles, which we hope to demonstrate in this program. Both tonight's program and our forthcoming CD are drawn entirely from a single manuscript source which contains a wealth of styles and composers. This Elizabethan manuscript was copied out in 1578 and is preserved in the British Library under the shelf mark, Additional Manuscript 31390. We open tonight's performance by playing the very first piece in the manuscript, the beautiful motet *In Æternum* by William Mundy.

During the reign of Elizabeth I, there was no way to record music other than by inscribing musical notation onto paper. A musical manuscript is like a mix-tape or a playlist in that it gathers together items for later hearing, for posterity. In terms of 16th-century music books, these two functions were best served by two different formats. For ease of use, a set of part-books was ideal: you could simply hand them out to your friends, sit right down and get playing. But lose one part-book and you'd lost that part forever and rendered the rest of the set useless. A score format, with the parts aligned vertically over a number of pages, is the safest way to store polyphonic music but is impossible for five or six viol players to play from. The manuscript from which these pieces are drawn attempts to find a middle ground by using "table-book" format. Each opening (the two pages that lie next to each other) contains all the parts for a single piece. However, the parts are not aligned in the manner of a score — rather they are oriented in the four cardinal directions, so that with the book in the center of a table, players can gather around it in a circle and all see their parts. While this format did not quite gain popularity (Dowland's *Lachrimae* of 1604 is another famous and rare example), it is a perfect materialization of the joys of playing consort music: to be gathered in a circle with friends around a piece of notation, instruments at the ready to make sonorous the lines of polyphony.

The 135 pieces preserved in Add. MS 31390 provide a glimpse of musical life in the 1570s. Some of the pieces reflect the "hottest new releases" of 1578 (when the bulk of the manuscript was copied), selections by the up-and-coming William Byrd, who had just replaced Robert Parsons (also represented in the manuscript) at the Chapel Royal. Other pieces are "golden oldies" from the first half of the 16th century, classics by Taverner and Sheppard. Some reflect popular foreign trends in vocal music, Italian madrigals, chansons from France as well as those written in England by Philip Van Wilder in the French style. Equally various are the instrumental genres represented in the collection. The title page of Add. MS 31390 describes the volume as "A booke of in nomines and other solfainge songes . . . for voyces or instrumentes." and even though none of the pieces contains lyrics, the repertory does contain both vocal and instrumental genres. Devout motets rub elbows with lovesick chansons and lighthearted madrigals. Harmonically and rhythmically complex instrumental works involving canons, the use of *cantus firmus*, and metrical proportions juxtapose with works that are less learned, built on popular tunes or short, repeating harmonic patterns. As we've tried to capture in our programming, Add. MS 31390 is a marvelous smorgasbord of musical textures and styles, an array of sonorities reflecting the international and cosmopolitan diversity of Elizabethan English society.

The curious tradition of writing "In nomines" began with a six-voice mass written by John Taverner. Like many masses of this era, Taverner's creates a sense of unity throughout the multi-section work by incorporating a single piece of chant into every section, often in the form of a slow-moving *cantus firmus*. In this case, it was the *Gloria tibi Trinitas* chant. A particularly beautiful section of Taverner's mass occurs within the Benedictus: instead of all six voices, Taverner uses only four to set the words "in nomine Domini" while the *Gloria tibi Trinitas* chant is presented in full in slow notes in the alto. This excerpt from Taverner's mass became popular, appearing in a number of manuscripts independently from the rest of the mass and without text. Other composers liked the excerpt so much they began writing their own versions, keeping the line of chant (often still in the alto part) but replacing Taverner's music with their own. The "In nomine" became a standard type of instrumental composition

within the English viol consort and keyboard traditions, so recognized as a genre that it could be referred to on the title page of Add. MS 31390. Because the viol consort tradition was fairly insular, players were well-versed in the repertory. This allowed composers to include subtle references and in-jokes in their pieces that musicians would have recognized and appreciated. Playful intertextuality of this kind abounds in *In nomine* in parallel to a tradition of innovation — part of the fun is in seeing how different the pieces can sound given the parameter that they all contain an identical line of chant.

On tonight's program, the anonymous *In nomine*, for example, changes the meter in which the chant moves from four to six and then subdivides each six-beat note into two three-beat notes. This creates rhythmic tension between the chant line and the other voices that group the pulse differently. This *In nomine* is also unusual for its sections of homophony — where all the parts play in rhythmic unison rather than in melodic imitation of each other. Other *In nomine*s create variation by moving the chant to a different voice than the alto. Byrd's *In nomine #1* setting has the chant in the highest line and the Brewster setting puts it in the tenor. In a remarkable bit of experimentation, Picforth's *In nomine* has fully serialized rhythm: each part plays only a single rhythmic note value for the entire duration of the piece. The composite pulsating texture, reminiscent of the 1970s minimalism of Steve Reich, serves as an avant-garde rejection of the musical virtue of *varietas*. The Strogers's *In nomine* plays with modality, contrasting the minor-sounding f-natural in the chant with major-sounding f-sharps in the other parts to striking effect — an effect borrowed from the Parson's a5 setting, perhaps the most widely circulated *In nomine* after the original. Christopher Tye gave evocative names to his many *In nomine*s. In *Crye* the quick repeating notes have been likened by some to the cries of street vendors hawking their wares, a familiar sound to early-modern city dwellers.

The six works by William Byrd that are preserved in Add. MS 31390 capture a snapshot of the most revered Elizabethan composer as a young man on the cusp of a prolific career in which his music was widely copied and published. We've chosen to highlight the less-public face of Byrd. The *In nomine #1* is unique to our manuscript, appearing in no other source, and the six-part motet, *O salutaris*, is one of just a handful of early motets that Byrd didn't later publish. Constructed around a three-voice canon, *O salutaris* shows the young Byrd flexing his contrapuntal muscles, pushing the rules right up to the breaking point—proving his compositional virtuosity, and experimenting with the techniques he continued to use (albeit more sparingly) throughout his career. You will hear a similar exploitation of the loopholes of counterpoint to create lush dissonances in Tye's enigmatic *Lawdes Deo*.

Some of the pieces on tonight's program are standards. Those who have sung in a choir will surely know and love Tallis's *O sacrum convivium*. Taverner's original *In nomine* is also a classic (although the anonymous *si placet* in the fifth voice is found only in Add. MS 31390 and is rarely performed). Aficionados of viol consort music will also likely be familiar with Tye's *Crye* and Taverner's *Quem ad modum*. We hope our inclusion here of these gems re-contextualizes them to offer a more complete view of the repertory available to Elizabethan viol players, be they aristocratic amateurs, courtly professionals, or choir boys in training. We thank Music Before 1800 for inviting us to play here tonight and hope this concert and our recording provide a fuller picture of this important and beautiful manuscript.

—Zoe Weiss