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*Some thoughts about cantus firmus
 composition; and a plea for Byrd's
 Christus resurgens*

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No single work of Byrd's has been the subject of such conflicting opinions as *Christus resurgens*, that anachronistic cantus firmus motet which found its way into the first book of *Gradualia* motets in 1605.¹ For H. B. Collins the motet was 'caviare to the general', 'a wonderful meditation on the Plainchant, like nothing so much as some of Bach's Choral preludes, or the slow movements of his violin sonatas'.² For Joseph Kerman it was 'obviously ... the oldest piece in the collection by far – the oldest and crudest piece, in fact, ever published or anthologised by the composer'.³ The conflict prompts a renewed search for the criteria that composers of Byrd's generation would have applied to cantus firmus composition, and indeed it prompts a reinvestigation of the relationship between the improvised art of descanting and the art of cantus firmus composition in England during the mid to late sixteenth century.

It may be helpful to begin with to see what Thomas Morley has to say about these matters in his unique *Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* of 1597,⁴ for Morley, after all, was a pupil of Byrd's. Moreover Morley dedicated the book to his beloved master, placing Byrd's name prominently at the head of the dedicatory page. Morley's preface is well worth reading, not least the section in which Morley acknowledges Byrd's presence in the book:

Accept (I pray you) of this booke, both that you may exercise your deepe skill in

¹ *Gradualia*, Book I (London, 1605), no. 10 of four-part fascicle. Ed. in TCM 7, p. 143 and BW 5, p. 64.

² 'Byrd's Latin Church Music for Practical Use in the Roman Liturgy', *Music & Letters* 4 (1923), p. 257.

³ MWB 1, p. 62.

⁴ Square-bracketed page references throughout are to the edition by R. A. Harman (London, 1952).

censuring of what shall be amisse, as also defend what is in it truely spoken, as that which somtime proceeded from your selfe. (Dedication [3])

Morley's book divides into three principal sections. The first deals with basic matters of pitch and rhythm; in it Morley draws upon a multiplicity of hallowed authorities, especially in the pretentiously overblown discussion of 'proportions', as if to establish his academic credentials as a 'learned' author. The other two sections are much more relevant to contemporary practice, and they are much more Morley's own. Indeed Morley goes as far as to declare concerning the second part – 'treating of Descant' – that 'there is nothing in it which I have seene set downe in writing by others . . . except the cords of descant, and that common rule of prohibited consequence of perfect cords [i.e. parallel fifths, unisons and octaves]'.⁵ It is in this section especially that Morley is likely to have been reworking most closely the ideas which 'somtime proceeded' from that 'Father of music',⁶ his master William Byrd.

In many respects the extensive second section is the nub of the entire book, for it describes the way in which the aspiring composer established for himself the ground rules of composition through the practical experience of improvising a melody against a *plainsong* (i.e. a cantus firmus; not necessarily a Gregorian chant). As Morley put it, 'singing extempore upon a plainsong is indeede a peece of cunning, and very necessarie to be perfectly practised of him who meaneth to be a composer . . .' (p. 121 [215]).⁷ What then emerges from Morley's extensive discussion of descanting? Apart from such straightforwardly technical matters as the control of consonance and dissonance and the avoidance of 'consecutives', there are many fruitful insights into the ways that apprentice composers would have learned to create substantial pieces of imitative polyphony. The great importance that was attached to descanting suggests to begin with that the young composer was likely to have graduated first from cantus firmus *improvisation* to cantus firmus *composition*. Certainly the chronologies established by Kerman and Neighbour⁸ suggest that the young Byrd may have progressed in that way. Indeed it is not too fanciful to suggest that the stages through which Morley takes the reader in the second and third parts of the book were broadly those that any experienced teacher would have

⁵ 'Peroratio', p. 183 [307].

⁶ Entry in *The Old Cheque-Book . . . of the Chapel Royal*, ed. E. F. Rimbault (London, 1872; reprinted New York, 1966), recording Byrd's death in 1623, p. 10.

⁷ Morley's discussion here, however, suggests that practical descanting had by then gone out of fashion.

⁸ MWB 3, especially chapters 2, 3 and 6.

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recommended to an aspiring pupil: first, the development of linear and vertical awareness through the simplest note-against-note improvisation on a slowly moving plainsong; then the creation of more elaborate lines against the cantus firmus (always in unvarying semibreves) in which the concepts of passing and suspended dissonance are explored, together with the nature and function of ‘cadence’ (p. 73 [145]). The reader is then introduced to the principle of ‘formality’ in which ‘meaning’ is given to the added line by shaping it imitatively, the imitation being internal – from point to point in the added line – as well as external, between the improvised line and the cantus firmus (p. 94 [174]). In this context Morley makes the particularly significant observation that important as imitation is in imparting ‘meaning’, on no account should the process involve simple repetition, ‘without any alteration . . . for it is odious to repeate one thing twice’ (p. 84 [162]). In our discussion below of specific compositions there will be constant occasion to recall this crucial observation, for Byrd particularly excelled in the art of imitative *development*.⁹

Exactly *how* the necessary variety could be achieved was a problem that is largely left unsaid, perhaps because it is one that is best demonstrated in notes rather than words. Morley does nonetheless suggest (and the suggestion has very much the flavour of Byrd about it) that melodic activity is best seen as a cumulative process: in Morley’s words, it is desirable that ‘if your descant should be stirring in any place, it should bee in the note before the close’ (p. 81 [158]); cadences, that is, at phrase ends may well be preceded by an increase in melodic activity.

It is a natural step from imitation to canon and to invertible counterpoint. These subjects lead conveniently from improvisation to the business of writing music, the subject of the third part of the book: ‘treating of composing or setting of Songes’. There is comparatively little purely technical information here that has not been touched on in the second part. Although the section title implies that word-setting is to be the main topic, words are not discussed until the very end. Instead, Morley retraces a good deal of what has already been said about wordless descanting in two and three parts, observing that such additional rules of setting as are necessary for composition are ‘fewe and easie to them that have descant’ (p. 126 [222]). Further advice is given on how to write mellifluous polyphony, and examples of harmonic crudities are cited from pre-Reformation works

⁹ In much mid-century English polyphony there is much almost mechanically repetitive imitation: even Byrd’s master Tallis was not wholly immune from it, nor young Byrd himself; see for instance Tallis’s *Absterge Domine*, TCM 6, p. 180, and Byrd’s *Laudate pueri*, BE 1/7.

by English composers. More is said about texture and the need to avoid large gaps between one part and the next: as Morley put it, ‘the best maner of composing three voices or how many soever is to cause the parts go close’ (p. 126 [222]), a point that is restated later, thus: ‘for the closer the partes goe the better . . . and when they stande farre asunder the harmonie vanisheth’ (p. 146 [248]).

The important question of ‘key’ was left almost wholly unexplored in the descanting section, perhaps because the attendant plainsong supplied the basis of a tonal framework. Morley’s comments here are very much in line with compositional procedures that are clearly evident in Byrd’s music, if we only take the trouble to look for them. There is to begin with the question of ‘key’, and the emotive quality of ‘key’:

you have in the closing [Philomathes’s master declares] gone out of your key, which is one of the grosest faults which may be committed . . . for every key hath a peculiar ayre proper unto it selfe, so that if you goe into another then [than] that wherein you begun, you change the aire of the song, which is as much as to wrest a thing out of his nature, making the asse leape upon his maister and the Spaniell beare the loade.¹⁰

As Kerman and Neighbour have amply demonstrated, Byrd certainly thought in terms of ‘key’, using this as the basis for grouping together collections of pieces – notably those in the Latin publications. This is all obvious enough. What may be overlooked, though, is Morley’s rider, to the effect that during the course of a composition the home ‘key’ may well be left temporarily for one (or more) adjacent keys. He writes:

and though the ayre of everie key be different one from the other, yet some [keys] *love* [italics mine] (by a wonder of nature) to be joined to others so that if you begin your song in *Gam ut*, you may conclude [i.e. cadence] it either in *C fa ut* or *D sol re*, and from thence come againe to *Gam ut*: likewise if you begin your song in *D sol re*, you may end [again the implication is ‘cadence’] in *A re* and come againe to *D sol re*, etc. (p. 147 [249])

The presence in so many of Byrd’s compositions of significant areas of ‘key’ change, a quality that is not nearly so apparent in the music of his elders and immediate contemporaries, suggests that this idea too may have come from Byrd himself.

The lengthiest section in part three is the one devoted to cadence, a compositional element that is closely associated both with ‘key’ and with

¹⁰ pp. 146–7 [249]. Here Morley refers particularly to Glareanus’s *Dodecachordon* (Basle, 1547); tr. Clement Miller, *Musicological Studies and Documents* 6 (Rome, 1965): see especially book two.

word setting. It was a topic that Morley only touched on briefly in his instructions for descanting. Morley supplies well over a hundred examples of cadences.¹¹ 'Without a Cadence in some one of the parts, [Morley wrote] either with a discord or without it, it is impossible formallie to close' (p. 127 [223]). The strongest form of cadence is the one in which the root-position triad on the tonic is preceded by the root-position dominant chord. In the discussion of word-setting, Morley observes that this kind of cadence has such a quality of finality that it should only be used when 'the full sence of the words be perfect' (p. 178 [292]). The cadence in other words was felt to articulate the music so strongly that it was the musical equivalent of the full stop; it had the nature of a highly conventional formula, offering only limited opportunity for variation. Indeed, Morley likened it to the 'Amen': 'I find no better word to saie after a good praier, then [than] *Amen*, nor no better close to set after a good peece of descant, then a *Cadence . . .*' (p. 82 [160]). Morley goes on to give examples of all forms of cadence, including 'passing closes', commonly called 'false closes', which 'shun a final end and go on with some other purpose' (p. 127 [223]). Whilst he does not define what these purposes might be, he would surely have been thinking of textual situations in which some perceptible, if not final, articulation was required – a comma or colon perhaps, rather than a full stop. Further on Morley recommended the use of 'passing closes' for the purely musical reason that the syncopations and dissonances help to 'drive' the music forward (p. 152 [256], and p. 160 [267]).

In one further respect Morley seems to be echoing what Byrd must have taught him (if with Zarlino's help), namely a sensitivity to word rhythms. 'We must also have a care [he pointed out] so to applie the notes to the wordes, as in singing there be no barbarisme committed: that is, that we cause no sillable which is by nature short be expressed by manie notes or one long note, nor no long sillable bee expressed with a shorte note . . .' He laments the fact that 'in this fault do the practitioners erre more grosselie, then [than] in any other, for you shall find few songes wherein the penult sillables of these words, *Dominus, Angelus, filius, miraculum, gloria*, and such like are not expressed with a long note, yea many times with a whole dossen of notes . . .' (p. 178 [291]).

Among the more important matters that Morley discusses, then, are the function of descanting in music instruction, the relationship between

¹¹ Harman (*Introduction*, p. 241, fn. 1) examines the question of Morley's indebtedness here to Orazio Tigrini's *Il compendio della musica* (Venice, 1588), and draws attention to the fact that 53 of the 108 examples in Morley are identical to ones supplied by Tigrini.

descanting and the writing of polyphony upon a plainsong, the further extension of compositional techniques into freely imitative polyphony, and finally, techniques of word-setting. Important aspects of Morley's discussion cover key, key interrelationships, dissonance control, cadence, melodic structure, processes of imitation and principles of underlay. In what respects is all this relevant to Byrd's cantus firmus music?

The first full-scale cantus firmus composition that Byrd published was the Respond from the Office of the Dead, *Libera me, Domine, de morte* – no. 33 in the 1575 *Cantiones Sacrae*. Kerman has drawn attention to the existence of other settings of this text by Byrd's contemporaries, notably the one by Robert Parsons, who is best known today for his arresting setting of *Ave Maria*.¹² The opening and closing sections of Parsons's *Libera me, Domine, de morte* (transcription from *GB-Lbl* R.M. 24.d.2; words supplied from *GB-Och* 979–83) are shown in Example 1.1. Since, as Morley observed, 'imitation' gives meaning to the music, one of the principal characteristics of a satisfying cantus firmus composition would undoubtedly have been its imitative structure. How did the two composers set about organising this? The first task would surely have been to divide the text and its plainsong into suitable units. The two settings of *Libera me* follow a fairly similar plan, so similar indeed that it is difficult to believe that one composer was not working in the knowledge of what the other had done – and since Byrd succeeded Parsons, who was tragically drowned in the river Trent in 1570, the inference must be that the younger musician was emulating, and even commemorating, the elder.¹³ Both composers set the same portions of the Sarum text, leaving out the verses 'Quid ergo' and 'Nunc Christe'. Both, oddly enough, cadence conclusively at 'tremenda' and 'terra', making it possible for the plainchant verses 'Tremens factus sum ego', 'Dies illa, dies irae' and 'Requiem aeternam' to be inserted, and thus suggesting that both composers had the possibility of liturgical performance in mind. On the other hand, the traditionally liturgical way of beginning the respond would have been for the choir to begin at 'de morte aeterna', the incipit being sung to its plainchant by a solo voice. Both settings, however, begin at the beginning. Despite these similarities, there are nonetheless two small but significant structural differences that already mark out Byrd as the more perceptive composer. Parsons divides the

¹² ed. John Milsom, Oxford, 1988 (no. 115 in Oxford University Press series *Tudor Church Music*).

¹³ Morley describes (p. 115 [202]) in another context how Byrd 'contended with' Alfonso Ferrabosco [the elder] in canonic settings of the 'Miserere'; and Kerman has drawn attention to several compositions of Byrd's that seem to be based, however loosely, on pieces by his contemporaries.

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Li - be - - ra me, Do - - - mi - ne,
 Li - be - -

5
 Li - be - - ra me, Do -
 li - be-ra me, Do - mi - ne, li - be-ra me, Do -
 ra me, Do - mi - ne, li - be-ra me, Do -
 Li -

9
 - mi - ne, li - be - - ra me, Do -
 - mi - - - ne, li - be - ra me,
 - mi - - - ne, li - - be-ra me, Do - mi - ne,
 Li - be -
 - be - - ra me, Do - mi - ne, -

Example 1.1 Parsons, *Liberate me, Domine, de morte aeterna*

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mi - - - ne, li-be-ra me, Do-mi-ne, Do-mi-ne, Do - - - mi -
 Do - mi-ne, li-be-ra me, Do-mi-ne, Do - - - mi -
 Do - mi-ne, Do - li - - be-ra me, Do - mi - - -
 - ra me, Do - li - - be-ra me, Do - mi - - -
 li - be - - - ra me, Do - mi -

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ne, de mor - te ae - ter - na, de mor - te ae -
 - ne, de mor - te ae - ter - - - na,
 - - - ne, ne, de mor - te ae - ter - na, de mor - te
 mor - - - ne, de mor - te ae - ter - na,
 - ne, de mor - te ae - ter - na,

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ter - na, de mor - te ae - ter - - - de mor - te ae - -
 de mor - te ae - ter - na, de mor - te ae -
 ae - ter - na, de mor - te ae - ter - - -
 - - - te ae - ter - - -
 de mor - te ae - ter - na, de mor - - te ae - ter -

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- na, in di - e il - la tre - men - da,
 ter - na, in di - e il - la tre - men - da,
 - - - na in - - - na, di - e - - - na,
 - - - na, in di - e il - la

56

dum ve - ne - ris iu - di - ca - re sae - cu - lum,
 sae - cu - lum, sae - cu - lum, dum ve - ne - ris iu - di - ca - re
 - lum, dum ve - ne - ris iu - di - ca - re, iu - di - ca - re sae - cu -
 (ve) - - - ne - ris iu - di - ca - - - lum, dum ve - ne - ris iu - di - ca - re sae - cu -

60

dum ve - ne - ris iu - di - ca - re, iu - di - ca - re sae - cu -
 sae - cu - lum, dum ve - ne - ris iu - di - ca - re sae - cu - lum, iu - di -
 - lum, iu - di - ca - re sae - cu - lum, iu - di - ca - re
 - lum, dum ve - ne - ris iu - di - ca - re sae - cu - lum,

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lum, iu-di-ca-re sae-cu-lum,
ca-re sae-cu-lum, iu-di-ca-re sae-cu-lum,
sae-cu-lum, iu-di-ca-re sae-cu-re,
iu-di-ca-re sae-cu-lum, iu-di-

68

iu-di-ca-re sae-cu-lum per ig-nem, dum
lum, sae-cu-lum, dum ve-ne-ris, dum ve-ne-ris,
lum per ig-nem, dum ve-ne-ris,
sae-cu-lum, dum ve-ne-ris,
ca-re sae-cu-lum per ig-nem, dum ve-ne-ris,

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ve-ne-ris, dum ve-ne-ris, dum ve-ne-ris iu-di-ris,
ris, dum ve-ne-ris iu-di-ca-re, iu-di-ca-re
ris iu-di-ca-re, dum ve-ne-ris iu-di-ca-re sae-cu-lum
lum per, dum ve-ne-ris, dum ve-ne-ris