

Style Analysis: A Comparison of Byrd's Ave verum Corpus with His Sacred Vocal Polyphony via a Quadrant Framework Analysis

Leslie Clutterham
California State University Los Angeles

The current age of technology and communication may doom forever the mystery which surrounds the lives of many composers of previous ages. Knowledge of the personal habits and lifetime influences of an artist opens many avenues of interpretation and analysis of his or her work. Rather more limited is the way in which one may approach the works of earlier composers about whom little is known. It may be tempting or even necessary to relegate them to two-dimensional characters whose "personalities" may only be abstracted from their work. Into this latter category falls the English composer William Byrd (c. 1543-1623).

The earliest accounts of the young Catholic "Birde" place him in the service of Queen Mary's (r. 1553-1558) Chapel Royal as a chorister during the time in which she energetically reestablished Catholicism after the country's initial foray into Anglicanism under Henry VIII. With this restoration came the "rejection" of the "constrained style of English service music," and the "reinstitution of the tradition of ornate polyphony that distinguished English church music in late medieval times."¹ An entire cadre of composers--William Mundy, Robert Parsons, Robert White, and Thomas Tallis, among them--was available and, possibly, responsible for training the young man into a "crash programme. . .to produce new music, most of it liturgical music in *cantus firmus* style."²

Little is known of Byrd's activities at the beginning of Queen Elizabeth I's reign (1558-1603) and her successful efforts to return Anglicanism to its position as the state religion of England. Byrd is next found as organist at Lincoln Cathedral in the 1560s and finally as organist with Tallis at the Chapel Royal in 1570 where he remained until his death more than fifty years later.³

It is known that Byrd was a devout Catholic. However, his position in the Chapel, his relationship with his celebrated Protestant mentor Tallis, and their joint venture as England's sole authorized music publisher all illustrate Byrd's importance within the musical community of the time and the forbearance he received as a recusant from the Protestant monarch to practice and celebrate his faith. Elizabeth's enlightened rule also was contemporaneous with such literary, military, and political giants as William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, Walter Raleigh, William Cecil and Francis Walsingham.⁴

During this time Byrd's work was published in volumes such as *Cantiones sacrae* (with Tallis' in 1575), *Psalmes, sonets and songs* (1588), *Songs of Sundrie Natures* (1589), two additional volumes of the *Cantiones sacrae* in 1589 and 1591, and *Psalmes, songs and sonnets* (1611). These publications encompassed a diverse repertoire of Byrd's sacred and secular vocal music, some instrumentally-accompanied, and instrumental music. Liturgical and nonliturgical sacred music was included for both the Catholic Sarum rite and service music for Anglican devotions.

Byrd's two volumes entitled *Gradualia and Gradualia II* were published in 1605 and 1607 under the reign of Elizabeth's successor, James (r. 1603-25). This monarch's ambivalence towards Catholicism in the Anglican country may both have allowed Byrd the freedom to continue publishing Papist music while also increasing the aggressive hostility of the Puritans towards the Catholics.

Ave verum Corpus

This Latin motet, the fifth of the four-voice compositions in *Gradualia I*, is considered by many to be Byrd's finest work, a masterpiece of text setting and the uses of compositional devices. Byrd's intent in the *Gradualia I and II* was to provide music for all of the mass Propers of the church year, the first such undertaking since Isaac composed the *Choralis constantinus* about a century earlier.⁵ Byrd was successful although Kerman asserts that there are "some elements missing from the scheme, and others superfluous to it."⁶ *Ave verum Corpus* falls into this latter category; Kerman perhaps provides an explanation in noting that "[t]he declamation 'Ave verum corpus' makes a doctrinal point of great importance to Catholics of Byrd's time, who were locked in controversy over the issue of transubstantiation."⁷ It should be noted that Byrd carefully constructed the "mode, key signatures, and clef combinations" to agree for "each of the main rubrics" in the *Gradualia*; even the non-rubricated Feast of Corpus Christi, to which this motet belongs, is written in G Mixolydian, all for four voices.⁸ *Ave verum Corpus*, however, is in G Aeolian; the significance of this is unknown.⁹

With the realization that one cannot, without countless other details of the man's character and life, humanize Byrd any further, perhaps it will suffice to examine a work, judged among his best, in the context of his other compositions for multiple vocal parts. The mode for such an examination will be modified from that originally proposed by Jan LaRue in his book *Guidelines for Style Analysis* and his subsequent expansions and revisions as published in 1981.¹⁰ While LaRue's work is unparalleled in its guidelines for examination of contributors to shape (form) and movement in form, its under-recognition of musical vocabulary as pointillistic events indicative of prevailing or individual styles is less cogent. Therefore, the style of Byrd's vocal polyphony as per the monumental analysis of H.K. Andrews¹¹ has been reduced to a LaRue-type quadrant framework.

This framework and a quadrant framework analysis of *Ave verum Corpus* are compared. Also included is a schematic "timeline" of the piece, annotated with the general characteristics found in Andrews' book. It should be conceded that, while of the utmost importance to the characteristic "sound" of the English school of composition then in effect and of Byrd's own inimitable contributions, a detailed analysis of strong- and weak-beat verticalities has been greatly reduced since such a thorough treatment of that subject is beyond the scope of this presentation.

Finally, a discussion of the effect of these musical events will attempt to provide a basis for consideration of *Ave verum Corpus* as one of Byrd's best compositions.¹²

1. Joseph Kerman, *The Masses and Motets of William Byrd* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981), 23.
2. Kerman, 28.
3. Howard Mayer Brown, *Music in the Renaissance* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1976), 324.
4. William Bridgwater and Elizabeth J. Sherwood, eds, *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., (Morningside Heights: Columbia UP, 1950), 608.
5. Kerman, 223.
6. Kerman, 217.
7. Kerman, 288.
8. Kerman, 217.
9. While Kerman states that this motet is in G Dorian, the consistent use of two flats indicates that G Aeolian is the true mode. Additionally, it has been suggested that Byrd simply wrote this motet in the minor mode of diatonicity. In either case the cadences are all customary within either the Dorian or minor framework. The author thanks Dr. Irene Girton and Dr. William Belan for their insights into this transitional stage between modality and tonality.
10. Jan LaRue, *Guidelines for Style Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park P, 1992) and "The Quadrant Framework for Style Analysis in Music," *College Music Symposium* 21/1 (1981), 40-47.
11. See Herbert K. Andrews, *The Technique of Byrd's Vocal Polyphony* (London: Oxford UP, 1966).

Byrd: General Style Characteristics of Vocal Polyphony

parenthetical Arabic numerals refer to pages in Andrews

bold-numbered to be found in the motet

Small-Dimension: Melody

1. use of modal melodic formulae
 - 1A.** outline of modal diapente and diatesseron common (13)
types: (74)
 - 1B. short ascent, gradual descent
 - 1C. gradual descent, climax, precipitate fall
 - 1D.** balanced curvilinear line
 - 1E. specific melodic patterns in Dorian (13, 20)
2. treatment of dissonances (see note page 7)
 - 2A. reflects large variety of figures used (150)
3. development of thematic material via imitation (239)
- 4.** much use of melodic inversion in imitative voices (244)
- 5.** cross-relations (109)
- 6.** long melisma on penultimate syllable (277)
7. uses many leaps in same direction in lower voices-16th-century trait (65)

Large-Dimension: Melody

1. modal framework (7)
2. thematic material unites sections (258, 272)
3. short melodic phrases connect into larger periods (75)

Small-Dimension: Harmony

1. Byrd's "chordal balance" (voice spacing) unique in age (272)
2. consonance only important verticality-dissonances are ornaments (82)
 - 2A.** between bass & superius - P8, U, P5 or 3rds/6ths
 - 2B. less strict with respect to inner voices
 - 2C. between upper voices - P4, 4+/5
 - 2D.** above bass - P5 + M/m3; or M6 + M3; or m6 + m3
 - 2E.** rarely uses direct, consecutive P intervals
 - 2F.** uses indirect, cons. P intervals interrupted by cons. or diss. (92)
 - 2G.** uses consecutives by contrary motion-U-P5, 15; P5-P12 (95)
 - 2H.** often uses outer voices - P8-P12 (99)
3. cadence types formulaic (16)
 - 3A.** equivalent V-I "full close" - for sections

- 3B. equivalent V-VI or IV - "false close"
- 3C. LT in bass 63; LT in an upper vc - "inverted"
- 3D. Phrygian - ii with flatted LT
- 3E. Plagal - IV-I
- 3F. English cadence used a lot in 7 of Gradualia I à 4 (106)
- 4. bass note concludes on final (19)
- 5. voices usually answer @ P8, U, P5, P4 - usually tonal (241)
- 6. cross relations (109)

Large-Dimension: Harmony

- 1. beyond modal tonus commixtus (12)-not always stressing final, tenor, & mediant in each phrase - movement from modalism
- 2. balanced succession of tonal centers leads towards diatonicism (271)
- 3. tonal implications through 65, V7, 64 chords, diminished triad (238)
- 4. cadences on specific modal degrees (in G Dorian) (14)
 - 4A. frequent - G, D
 - 4B. less frequent - C, F, Bb
 - 4C. rare - A
- 5. "modulation" to relative major not uncommon (30)

Small-Dimension: Rhythm

- 1. careful setting of declamation/word accents, esp. in homophony (285-86)
- 2. half-note suspension prep. lengthened (185)
displacement of weak-strong-weak=unresolved tension
- 3. uses short, fugal rhythmically-imitative motives (241)
- 4. frequent rhythmic alteration in fugal answer (241)
 - 4A. first note of fugal answer often shortened (241)
 - 4B. irregular entries of imitative voices (241)
 - 4C. answers in "equivalent accentual positions" (241)
 - 4D. free augmentation or diminution in fugues (254)
- 5. "off-beat inception of a syllable" carried over to strong - English trait (277)
- 6. last note = last syllable (277)

Large-Dimension: Rhythm (modern transcription)

- 1. quarter note basic unit of harmonic rhythm in C time; sometimes half (276)
- 2. short phrases grouped into periods for sections (75)
- 3. middle sections - rhythmic imitation takes over when more extreme melodic imitation, followed by rhythmic alterations (248)

Small-Dimension: Sound

- 1. two-subject imitation--one long, one short-- common in *Gradualia* (245)
 - 1A. begin together; interchange of subj.; same words
- 2. largest interval usually b/bass and next voice up (85)

3. usually doubles bass in 4-voice part-writing (86)
4. doubling of chromatics only when relevant to melodic progression (86)
 - 4A. not #7 of Dorian in perfect cadence
5. word-painting
 - 5A. uses register for word-painting (88)
 - 5B. sad text=b3rds/6ths harmony, 1/2-steps, long note value (282)
 - 5C. on motion ideas--e.g. falling, faster, etc.--uses appropriate (282) 4
6. suspensions delay resolution of tension (185)
7. often reiterates Latin texts, not always as complete phrases (278)

Large-Dimension: Sound

1. textural diversity most important element contributing to form (258)
2. rarely uses homophony throughout (257)
 - 2A. breaks w/ imitative and free counterpoint
3. uses full cadences with fermata and single bar to demarcate sections (261)
4. uses contrasting of groups of voices in color and density (87)
5. 4-voice writing usually full 3-note chords w/2-note f/relief (86)
6. liturgical and nonliturgical sacred texts often provide form depending on usage in services (260) (affects especially texture and melody)
 - 6A. responsory motet, e.g. ABCB - alternatim style (260)
 - 6B. gradual-alleluia, ABCDC (262)
 - 6C. hymns - through-composed, alternatim, more varied (262)
 - 6D. introit antiphon - ABCA (262)
7. uses wide ranges in vocal parts (80) - esp. in Gradualia and other Latin works

Byrd: Ave verum Corpus Style Characteristics

parenthetical Arabic numerals refer to measure numbers bold-numbered key to general characteristics

Small-Dimension: Melody

- half-step/m3 head motive (1-2); inverted (12-13, 17, 29-31, 36ff)
- 1A. outline of diatesseron (5-8), diapente (1-4, 8-10, 30-31, 39-, 40-43)
- melodic shape:
- 1D. curvilinear melody (5-8)
 - ascending (10-11, 23)
 - descending (8-10, 19-22, 32-35)
 - static (12-15, 15-18, 28-31, 36-43, 44-46)
 - sequences (36-40)
 2. treatment of dissonances*
 5. cross relations (see harmony)
 6. melisma on penultimate syllable (43-45)

*When viewed as having nascent tonal tendencies, AvC's "dissonances" become unaltered members of tonally-correct chords in an acceptable pattern of progression. For that reason, little actual dissonance, other than passing tones and suspensions, has been noted, and no examination of dissonance treatment has been made.

Large-Dimension: Melody

1. outline of phrase temporarily more diatonic than modal (10ff, 19ff)
2. use of head motive and inversion unifies (1-2, 12-13, 17, 29-31, 36ff)
3. periods created by short melodic phrases (1-8, 8-15, 15-22, 22-28, 28-35, 35-43, 43-36)
not derived from cantus prius factus and has no long-note cantus firmus
little contrast between shapes of melodic phrases in and between sections

Small-Dimension: Harmony

3. cadence types: (4) - G - tierce de Picardie
(8) - D - minor plagal (iv-I)
(15) - D - Phrygian
(18) - F - "inverted" (LT in bass)
(22) - Bb - "full close" (extended fr/D) - V-I w/suspension
(28) - Bb - "full close"
(35) - D - Phrygian
(43) - G - "full close"
(46) - G - minor plagal
most chords in 53 or 63 inversion
5. real imitation (19-20, 36, 37-38, 40-41)
6. cross relations (2, 29, 30-31, 37, 41)

Large Dimension : Harmony

1. Aeolian mode transposed to G - fits commixtus variety
3. tonal chord devices (3, 18, 27, 33, 28, 42)
4. cadences on specific modal degrees:
4A. # of frequently-used on G - 3 (4, 43, 46)
on D - 3 (8, 15, 35)
4B. # of less frequently-used on C - 0
on F - 1 (18)
on Bb - 2 (22, 28)
of rarely-used on A - 0
5. "modulation" - g Bb g
Bb is both the relative major of g and the mediant degree in G Dorian

Small-Dimension: Rhythm

1. word accents observed throughout (stressed syllables underlined in schematic)
2. lengthened suspension preparations (2, 6, 10, 12-13, 20, 27, 43-44)
3. rhythmic imitation (40)

4. fugal rhythmic alteration
 - 4A. first note shortened (39)
 - 4B. irregular entries (19, 31)
 - 4C. answers in "equivalent accentual positions" (13, 20, 29, 37)
 - 4D. free augmentation/diminution in fugues (13, 32)
5. syllable inception on weak beat. . . (8, 10, 15, 18, 23, 25, 32, 41) 5
 various eighth-note rhythmic figures occur before every cadence
 rests sharpen presentation of inverted thematic material (30, 31)
 hemiola (22-25)
 dotted eighth-sixteenth figure on tenor "fluxit" before unusual repetition of text ("blood") (21)
6. last note on last syllable (43)

Large-Dimension: Rhythm

1. C time signature throughout, with half-note governing pulse
 rests used as surface articulations help define sections:
 A (mm. 1-15) rests in text and period cadences
 B (mm. 15-28) rests only at period cadences
 C (mm. 29-46) rests in text, none at cadences or phrases overlapped
 numerous weak-beat suspensions unify all three sections
 harmonic rhythm in:
 homophonic sections - generally half notes (1-9)
 imitative sections - varies, including over barlines (11-12, 13-14)
 at end of homophonic section, speeds (17-18)

Small-Dimension: Sound

- close texture - ranges of medius and tenor are identical
 range of superius is plagal (down)
2. largest intervals usually between bass and tenor (5, 11, 12, 16ff, 30, 38)
 3. bass note usually doubled
 voice crossing on "Maria" (6), "O Jesu Fili Mariae" (33-35), "miserere" (38)
 highest superius range on "Maria" (6) and "Jesu" (32)
 - 5A. word painting on "true" (2-3), "sweet" (30), "holy" (31-32), "miserere mei" (37, 40-41)
 - 5B. much use of flatted third, half-step
 7. "sanguine" and "miserere mei" repeated (22, 40ff)
 pedal point only on ultimate cadence (45-46)

Large-Dimension: Sound

1. & 2A. texture alternates between chordal homophony and imitative polyphony, then solo with accompaniment (29)
4. voice pairing texture (10); at (36), then followed by regularly-spaced imitative entries (37-39)
 dynamics static - except for increase with rise in superius register
5. full three-note chords with two-note relief
- 6C. (see LD Shape)
7. contrary to expected technique, uses short range - largest P11 - in bassus where most extreme at voice crossing (31-32)

Small-Dimension: Shape

1. changes of texture within section agree with text phrases
2. correct text declamation helps to unify each phrase
3. suspensions delay tension resolution, also making it more emphatic
4. two most important words have highest superius notes - highest implied dynamics (6, 32)
5. voice crossing added to cross relation on "Jesu" (32) intensifies effect

Large-Dimension: Shape

1. equal duration of sections (1-15; 15-29; ||:30-43:||43-46) confirmed by agreement of text, key centers, surface articulations of rests, melodic outlining of mode only in sections A & C, texture (each section begins with homophony)
2. imitative polyphony breaks up homophony, defining phrases/periods
3. suspensions unify shape throughout
4. cadences with quarter note movement tend to unite previous and following sections more (18, 28)
5. each sentence ends with a half note followed by a quarter rest except for the phrase elisions at (28) and at (43) before "Amen."
6. each section ends in a different, if transitory, texture: A-imitative polyphony, B-mostly chordal homophony, C-homophonically-accompanied melody
7. except for dotted quarter/eighth rhythmic motive, all eighth-note activity reserved for the cadences - increases expectation of pause
8. through-composed form typical of some Byrd hymns

Small-Dimension: Movement

1. resolution of half-step chromaticism provides interest and movement through static melodic phrases
2. motion to and from high notes (5, 32) gives periods (1-8, 29-35) more urgency - coincides with importance of the text
3. harmonically-unexpected cadence tends to increase tension (22)
4. continuation immediately after cadence increases motion (18, 28)
5. motion slows when static melody is coupled with slower harmonic rhythm (1ff, 12ff, 16ff, 24ff, 36)
6. extended cadence (from 20 to 21) confirms movement from g to Bb
7. dotted-quarter/eighth rhythm "upsets" smooth rhythmic flow

Large-Dimension: Movement

1. repetition of half-step chromaticism throughout demands resolution
2. harmonic rhyth