

Total performance time: approximately 120 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

The King's Singers and Fretwork: Tom + Will

The King's Singers

Patrick Dunachie countertenor
Edward Button countertenor
Julian Gregory tenor
Christopher Bruerton baritone
Nick Ashby baritone
Jonathan Howard bass

Fretwork

Richard Boothby
Emilia Benjamin
Jonathan Rees
Joanna Levine
Sam Stadlen

Thomas Weelkes (1576–1623)

Hark! all ye lovely saints above 3'

To Adventure!

Weelkes

In nomine 8'

Thule, the period of cosmography 4'

To Spring!

William Byrd (c.1540–1623)

This sweet and merry month of May (a6) 2'

Three 3-part fantasias 5'

No.1 in C – No.2 in C – No.3 in C

Browning: 'The leaves be green' (a5) 5'

To Friendship!

Thomas Tallis (c.1505–1585)

In ieiunio et fletu (Fasting and weeping) 4'

Byrd

Ye sacred Muses 3'

James MacMillan (b.1959)

Ye sacred Muses 7'

INTERVAL

To Friendship!

Thomas Morley (1557–1602)

Nolo mortem peccatoris 4'

(I desire not the death of a sinner)

Weelkes

Death hath deprived me 2'

Roderick Williams (b.1965)

Death, be not proud 8'

Byrd

Prelude and Ground (a5) 'The Queen's

Goodnight' 5'

Fantasia (a5) in C 'The Canon Fantasy' 5'

To Queen!

Byrd

O Lord, make thy servant Elizabeth 3'

Weelkes

As Vesta was from Latmos Hill descending 3'

To Women!

Weelkes

Like two proud armies 2'

Byrd

If women could be fair 4'

Byrd

Praise our Lord, all ye gentiles 3'

Let's raise our glasses to Tom & Will, Weelkes and Byrd, these two great English composers who both died 400 years ago. And we'll drink musical toasts to things that were important to them.

'For Motets, and Musicke of pietie and devotion, as well for the honour of our Nation, as the merit of the man, I preferre above all other our Phoenix, M. William Byrd, whom in that kind, I know not whether any may equall. I am sure, none excell, even by the judgement of France and Italy, who are very sparing in the commendation of strangers, in regard of that concept they hold of themselves. ...and being of himselfe naturally disposed to Gravitie and Pietie, his veine is not so much for light Madrigals or Canzonets, yet his Virginella, and some other in his first set, cannot be mended by the best Italian of them all.

Henry Peacham, 1622

Byrd was 36 years old when Weelkes was born – he had served his apprenticeship with the great Thomas Tallis, singing in the Chapel Royal as a boy, and had already been appointed organist and choirmaster in Lincoln Cathedral, and moved back to his native London to become a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal. He was also joint-organist there with his old teacher Tallis; and they had been granted a monopoly of music printing for 20 years, and published their first collection. All this before Weelkes had even been born.

To Adventure! The Elizabethan era was the great age of exploration. Drake came back from circumnavigating the globe in 1580, bringing enormous wealth and tales of strange and far-off lands. Weelkes set this extraordinary poem, 'Thule, the period of cosmography', which describes some of the wonder at these exotic lands; but finds that, wondrous as these things seem, the inner life of love is yet more so.

To Spring! Weelkes was England's leading madrigalist, yet the form was brought to this island first by the publication of *Musica Transalpina*, Italian madrigals Englished in 1588. Byrd was not drawn to this form, despite having mastered almost all the other musical genres of his time. However, 'This sweet and merry month of May' is one of his few true madrigals, and shows how he could mix it with the best in the field.

There is an earthy side to Byrd, which comes out in both his keyboard and his consort music. Hear how easily he incorporates folksong into what might seem a serious composition in 'Browning'. The tune is 'The leaves be green', yet Byrd subjects this simple melody to an astonishing series of contrapuntal treatments, while the theme sails on, unaffected.

To Friendship! Byrd's relationship to Thomas Tallis was long and full of mutual respect and affection. They first met, it seems, when Byrd joined the Chapel Royal as a choir boy, where Tallis was organist. After his spell in Lincoln, Byrd rejoined the Chapel Royal as joint organist with Tallis, after the death of Robert Parsons in 1572. Three years later their first publication appeared – *Cantiones*. Byrd had witnessed Tallis's will, and when he died in 1585, Byrd composed one of the most heartfelt tributes to his friend and mentor. And, in 2021, James MacMillan has used these same words, in his own tribute to Byrd, substituting 'Will' for 'Tallis'.

Although Weelkes was greatly influenced by Thomas Morley's madrigals, it is not known when they met or how they became friends. Weelkes spent most of his life in Winchester, then Chichester; while Morley came from Norwich but lived in London, working at St Paul's and then at the Chapel Royal, for most of his life. But there is no doubting the evident affection with which Weelkes sets this tender elegy.

Roderick Williams has taken the tenth of John Donne's 'Holy Sonnets' to mourn the loss of Weelkes.

Both Byrd and Weelkes composed striking *In nomines* – instrumental works based on an underlying plainchant – taken from John Taverner's mass 'Gloria tibi trinitas'. In this six-voice mass, the plainchant is heard in its entirety only in the Sanctus, in the section of four voices setting the words 'Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domine', hence the title.

Even though Byrd wrote seven fine *In nomines*, he was equally at home with free fantasy – as in the wonderful Canon Fantasy, or, as Byrd entitles it, 'Fantasy, two parts in one the 4th above'. So the top part is same as the 2nd part down, but played a few beats later and a 4th higher. This artful device is hidden initially with Byrd's usual technique of starting his viol fantasies in a serious, motet style, before transforming the material, almost imperceptibly into bouncy dance forms, in this case, with a few folksongs thrown in for good measure.

In matters of religion, we find the starkest distinction between these two composers. Byrd was Catholic and Weelkes Anglican, at a time when Catholics were under intense suspicion. Yet it was Byrd who was the pre-eminent court composer, sanctioned by the Queen, while Weelkes's career in Chichester, as chorus master, can be said only to have declined rapidly. He was reprimanded for being drunk, and then for not attending services. Finally, in 1617, he was sacked as organist and choirmaster. Even then his behaviour didn't seem to improve, as it was reported two years later that:

dyvers tymes & very often come so disguised eyther from the Taverne or Ale house into the quire as is much to be lamented, for in these humoures he will bothe curse & sweare most dreadfully, & so profane the service of God ... and though he hath bene often tymes admonished ... to refrayne theis humors and reforme hym selfe, yett he daylye continueth the same, & is rather worse than better therein.

To Queen! Byrd's relationship with his sovereign was remarkable: she protected him from being fined for recusancy, which enabled him to compose and publish overtly Catholic music, such as the Masses and Gradualia. He returned the favour with works praising the Queen, such as 'Look and bow down', after the defeat of the Armada in 1588.

Weelkes's 'As Vesta was from Latmos hill decending' is part of the *Triumphs of Oriana*, published in 1601 – 'Oriana' being, of course, the Queen. It was a collection of madrigals by the leading composers of the day (though not by Byrd), all in hyperbolic praise of the ageing monarch, and heard by her as part of the May Day celebrations in 1601. They all conclude with the lines: 'Then sang the shepherds and nymphs of Diana: / long live fair Oriana.' Two years later the Queen was dead.

To Women! Despite the seemingly endless and extravagant praise heaped upon the sovereign, there was a deep well of misogyny in Elizabethan attitudes to women that is often difficult for contemporary listeners to stomach. Byrd's setting of the Earl of Oxford's poem 'If women could be fair' interprets it as a comic song, a light, inconsequential piece of 'banter'. Yet the dark undercurrent is plain. On the other hand, Weelkes's 'Like two proud armies' restores the balance, with unfeigned tender passion framed in a delightful conceit.