

*The William Byrd Festival in Portland is scheduled to present its 23rd annual event in August.*

# *HIDDEN POWER* IN **OREGON**

By **ROSS W. DUFFIN**

Photo by Sarah Wright

Artistic director Mark Williams conducting at the William Byrd Festival



Signature of William Byrd (1623)

I'd never been to Portland, OR, and I confess I was only vaguely aware of the William Byrd Festival there when I was asked to participate in the summer of 2019. Of course, Portland already holds an important place in early music because of the activities of the Early Music Guild of Oregon and the Portland Baroque Orchestra, directed for a quarter century by Monica Huggett. But the roots of the William Byrd Festival go back at least that far, and it has been providing a unique experience in early music for the people of that beautiful city. Like me, however, I'm guessing that most of you know little about its combination of concerts, lectures, and sung liturgy.

How is it that Portland will celebrate its 23rd annual Byrd Festival Aug. 7-23, if the event isn't canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic? The idea goes back to local choir director Dean Applegate, whose conversion to Catholicism while a Baptist divinity student at Oxford in the 1970s was a "road to Damascus" moment in his life, leading to a deep love of Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony, of which Byrd's music was, for him, the epitome. In 1997, Applegate persuaded Richard Marlow, the distinguished music director of Trinity College, Cambridge, to come to Portland for a series of concerts celebrating Byrd, a Catholic during a critically difficult time for Catholics in England. Applegate had met Marlow some years before, and Applegate's son Blake had spent a year singing in Trinity College Choir. But a festival was a new and bold idea. Over the course of about ten late-summer days in 1998, all three Byrd Masses were sung in liturgical context, along with a variety of Byrd's other works in concert. It was a surprising success, and they decided to do it again the following year.



Dean Applegate

By 2002, they had expanded the time to cover three weekends—with a Sunday for each of the Masses—and concerts and lectures in between. It was an irresistible combination, and the model has served ever since, with the faculty returning year after year and visitors contributing in various ways. By 2015, they had sung every single sacred work by Byrd, along with a large number of his secular works, always with the constant of the three Masses.

The directors include founder Dean Applegate, who is still overseeing the festival, although he has stepped back from conducting the choir as he used to do. Blake refers to him as the "beating heart" of the festival, and neither Applegate nor Marlow ever took a fee for their "labor of love." As a Catholic music director and conductor of the professional choir Cantores in Ecclesia, Applegate was ideally situated to use his cadre of singers and the spatial resources of the church to meet the needs of the festival. Applegate founded Cantores in 1983 to sing Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony in liturgical context, so they had already been doing the kind of

singing that the festival required. The conducting of the choral services has been taken over by Blake, who grew up with the festival and who himself became director of Cantores in Ecclesia in 2010. The group sings year-round, so they maintain a high level of preparedness, and the fact that they sing Byrd year after year means they are primed and ready by the time the festival comes around in August.

The artistic director of the festival is Mark Williams, who arrived after finishing his Cambridge undergraduate degree as Organ Scholar under Marlow. It was Marlow's plan for the third festival in 2000 that Williams would play an organ recital before Evensong at the local Episcopal Cathedral. Now director of music at Magdalen College, Oxford, Williams has been coming to his "second home" in Portland every year since, and after his mentor died in 2013 took over as artistic director, shaping the programming, helping to choose visitors, conducting, playing for services and concerts, and continuing the tradition of his featured recital. Williams is one of those musicians who can improvise at the organ as the service requires, keeping an eye on the celebrant and acolytes, all while carrying on a conversation with Blake about what comes next.

Another fixture is William Mahrt, who came to the first festival as a lecturer and has been back every year since. Mahrt is a Professor of Musicology at Stanford University, directing the Early Music Singers there and for 50 years leading Palo Alto's famous St. Ann Choir in chant and Renaissance polyphony for weekly Mass and Vespers. He is also president of the Church Music Association of America and editor of the journal *Sacred Music*. As Williams says, Mahrt's "understanding of music in the liturgy is second to none," and his annual lectures and pre-concert talks about Byrd's music and its context are eagerly anticipated by all.

The last of the Byrd Festival "faculty" is someone who literally grew up in the shadow of the festival and, in a way, has become its most famous "offspring." A Portland native, Kerry McCarthy was an advisee of Mahrt at Stanford at home for the summer and asked to write program notes for the first Byrd Festival in 1998. She had sung with Cantores in Ecclesia as a student at Reed College earlier in the '90s. It was her suggestion that Mahrt be invited to Portland for the first festival, and it was the inspiration of Byrd that ultimately led to her Ph.D. dissertation—later a book (Routledge, 2007)—on Byrd's *Gradualia* (a covert cycle of Propers for the Catholic Church year), followed by a prize-winning biography of Byrd

himself (Oxford, 2013), and most recently a biography of Byrd's teacher, Thomas Tallis. That latest book is due out this year, and it is prompting the next Byrd Festival to feature lots of Tallis in honor of her accomplishment. It also needs to be said that McCarthy is much loved as the local girl who gave up a tenured faculty position elsewhere and moved back to her hometown to sing and to share her knowledge of Byrd and his world. Her annual lectures are packed, and with good reason, since she is so



knowledgeable and such an engaging speaker. She is also a superb cantor, intoning and singing solo portions of the chant with her beautiful reedy alto voice.

As a visitor last summer, I was flattered to be the latest in a long line of musicians and scholars invited to participate. Byrd aficionados will know names like Philip Brett, Joseph Kerman, Richard Turbet, Jeremy Summerly, and Dana Marsh. As performing musicians as well as scholars, they lectured, directed, and sang. One visitor who became a fixture was David Trendell of King's College, London, who arrived in 2002 and stayed—singing, directing, lecturing, and charming everyone with his good humor until his death in 2014. A volume of collected lectures from the first ten festivals was edited by Turbet and published in 2008. As

part of that distinguished tradition, I was asked to curate the 2019 opening concert with local professional singers, give a lecture on a topic of my choice (just intonation in the music of Byrd), and sing with the Festival choir in performances and services. My wife, Beverly Simmons, former executive director of both EMA and Quire Cleveland, was welcomed to come and sing as well. What could be nicer than a late-summer sojourn in a beautiful city with dedicated performers and enthusiastic audiences for the music of William Byrd?

There were lots of attractions in Portland outside of the festival as well, including beautiful scenery, one of the last great brick-and-mortar bookstores in the country—Powell’s—and great restaurants. But we had come for early music, and central to that at the Byrd Festival was Cantores in Ecclesia, which furnishes the outstanding core of singers for liturgical services at the festival. Sharing some of those same



singers, another professional choir in Portland that does early music among other repertoires is Cappella Romana.

At the festival’s opening concert, moreover, we got to meet Timothy Swain, an early-music pioneer in the area who had been the mentor of Mack Ramsey and Phil Neuman. Ramsey is famous as a bass sackbut

player based in Boston and with groups all over the country, and his high-school buddy Phil was known for years to *EMAg* readers for his inimitable cartoons. Still living in the Portland area, Neuman and his wife Gayle teach and perform early music as De Organographia, and they also make early instruments, including Renaissance reeds (played by groups like Ciaramella and Piffaro, and by polyreed virtuoso Debra Nagy). They also make, play, and perform on ancient Greek and Sumerian instruments that they have reconstructed from paintings and tomb artifacts.

Another Portland attraction is the early-music women’s choir In Mulieribus, led by Blake Applegate’s wife Anna Song, choral director at nearby Linfield College (Dean Applegate’s alma mater). Clearly, by not knowing Portland, we’d been missing out.

The structure of the Byrd Festival last year was typical. Rehearsals for the opening concert began a few days before the Friday performance at Portland’s Old Church concert hall. Saturday was the first public lecture and an opening luncheon hosted by Marian Hill, a long-time and generous supporter of the Festival. Sunday saw the first Mass celebrated at Holy Rosary Church with Byrd’s music, then Compline in the evening. The weekdays following had evening rehearsals for the upcoming concerts and services, with Mass for the Assumption celebrated on Thursday. My own lecture was Saturday morning, and there was a Mass that evening as well. The next day, Sunday, was busy: Mass in the morning, then the organ recital by Williams followed by Choral Evensong at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral.

After that flurry of activity, a break seemed necessary, and we discovered that it was already built into the schedule for the faculty: three days at Oregon’s picturesque coast. After that it was back to Portland for evening rehearsals, one more Saturday lecture and Mass, and the final concert and reception on Sunday afternoon. Whew!

Portland has embraced the Byrd Festival in the same way that Bethlehem, PA, has embraced the Bach Festival there. Volunteers work behind the scenes to make the concerts and other public events happen. Donors give generously to pay expenses of personnel, production, programs, and publicity (though more support is always welcome). And Portland residents show up for the concerts and choral services in large and enthusiastic numbers. In a way, the Byrd Festival is a secret everywhere but in Portland, and that’s a shame, because it deserves to be better known in the



Photo by Beverly Simmons

An ensemble performing at the 2019 William Byrd Festival

Northwest and across the country. With the exception of the opening and closing concerts, everything is free, and even for the ticketed events, the cost of admission has remained the same for years.

So, how could someone who doesn't live in Portland take advantage of this annual homage to William Byrd? Granted, it's complicated when the festival stretches over three weekends. Being there for all of it would be ideal, perhaps with weekday trips to the coast or nearby Mt. Hood. An alternative would be choosing a single weekend based on the concert and liturgical service offerings posted on the festival website. It would be wonderful if this event, described by so many people in Portland as "life-changing," could be enjoyed by a wider community of music lovers. And next time, with special consideration to Byrd's teacher and colleague Thomas Tallis, there will be the opportunity to hear—live!—the older composer's motet *Spem in alium*, a stunning tour de force with 40 voices intertwining in glorious polyphony.

In the dedication to his 1605 *Gradualia*, Byrd said (as translated from the Latin in 1923 by Edmund Fellowes):

*there is a certain hidden power, as I learnt by experience, in the thoughts underlying the words themselves; so that, as one meditates upon the sacred words and constantly and seriously considers them, the right notes, in some inexplicable manner, suggest themselves quite spontaneously.*

Lauded by his contemporaries as the greatest composer in England, Byrd attributes his success to a kind of divine inspiration, based on contemplation of the words he was setting to music. Having sung, conducted, edited, recorded, broadcast, and listened to Byrd's music over many decades, I know just how successful he was. And I like to think that—besides the fact that Catholic services were illegal in England at the time—his statement helps to explain why Byrd composed only three polyphonic Masses while his near-contemporary Palestrina composed more than a hundred. Each of Byrd's three-, four-, and five-voiced settings is a gem, conveying what he felt needed to be said in music. He didn't need to compose any more than these. It's gratifying to know that all three are sung each August in Portland, and that his many good works are celebrated at the Byrd Festival there. Byrd deserves that recognition, and so does the festival bearing his name.

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