**Program Notes**

The ancestors of many Cape Codders who came here to practice their Protestant faith independent of the state-run Church of England had little in common with the three composers on tonight’s program except for the desire to be free from the government-enforced requirement to attend Anglican church services. In the latter part of the 1500s, for Tallis and Byrd in particular, that desire meant the freedom to practice Catholicism, with support in a limited way from Queen Elizabeth. Both Thomas Tallis and William Byrd, along with John Sheppard, had been raised Catholic, received their musical educations in Catholic establishments, and worked for the crown as singers in the Chapel Royal during portions of the reigns of monarchs Henry VIII, Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth (Sheppard died early in Elizabeth’s reign). Religious and political affairs in England during that time were in constant disarray, as the statewide Catholicism turned to Anglicanism and back and forth depending on the religious persuasion of the king or queen.

Henry, father to Mary, Elizabeth and Edward in that order chronologically, established the Anglican church and dissolved the monasteries during the years surrounding the Act of Supremacy of 1534, in which the king was named the supreme head of the Church of England. Collegiate foundations at Cambridge and Oxford and cathedrals replaced the monasteries – for instance, the cathedral Canterbury where Tallis was employed early in his career. With the influence of Calvinists, church music also changed, becoming more accessible to the common people with English texts and syllabic treatment of musical lines, that is, ideally one pitch per syllable – though as you will hear in our performances tonight, the ideal and reality frequently diverged. Following the brief reigns of Henry’s children Edward (Protestant, 1547-1553) and Mary (Catholic, 1553-1558), during which the future of the Anglican church was not at all assured, Elizabeth came to the throne and reigned for 40 years. Although raised Catholic, Elizabeth re-established the supremacy of Church of England and herself as its protector while preferring the Catholic music for services at the Chapel Royal. New music by composers in the Elizabethan Chapel Royal adhered to the tastes cultivated in the late years of Henry’s reign; use of Latin in services was reserved for the royals and for the scholars in the college foundations, while the use of the vernacular was for the people, empowering them as it had empowered the Germans during their reformation. Where English prevailed, musical settings tended toward the syllabic: Byrd’s “O Lord, Let Thy Servant Elizabeth” is a prime example of the new music. By the late 1590s, Anglicanism was well in force. There remained Separatists, those whose practices and beliefs were too Calvinistic for willing participation in services of the Church of England, some of whom became our pilgrim forefathers, and there remained recusants, Catholics who worshiped in secret. Some Catholic gatherings were clandestine, others, particularly at large family estates (where Byrd found some protection), much less so. Fines, jail times, and occasionally worse awaited those who refrained from attending Anglican services: hence the flight to Holland for the Separatists and many Catholics.

Sheppard, Tallis and Byrd all wrote for the Anglican rite after the Book of Common Prayer was issued in 1547, largely as a matter of political expediency. They are luckier than some of their peers in having significant amounts of their pre-Reformation Catholic music copied and preserved to this day. In addition to his service at the Chapel Royal, Sheppard was active at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he worked on a doctorate in his 40s. His music was not published but survived in manuscript in so-called partbooks, manuscripts containing several pieces of music for an individual voice range such as a tenor, and used in services by one or more singers. By combining partbooks for basses, tenors, and altos and boy sopranos when available, musicians have been able to reconstruct scores of many works by Sheppard and his contemporaries, about 80 of them by Sheppard alone.

Our settings by Sheppard belong to the early years of the English Reformation when the college foundations retained Catholic practice and devotions, and also the dense, somewhat imitative and tenor-heavy polyphony that characterized sacred music of the previous half-century. Sheppard’s music in particular exploits sonorities throughout the vocal ranges, from the very high to the very low. It will appear novel and complex to listeners accustomed to the conventional four-part hymn settings used in churches today, in which vocal ranges are more restricted. Our first piece, two joined settings of the plainsong on the prayer “Libera nos,” is a marvelous example of Sheppard’s deployment of sonority. In the statutes of Magdalen College, Oxford, all residents of the college were to recite the “Libera nos” upon arising and again upon retiring, each day; Sheppard’s 7-part versions are used at Magdalen still and evoke the ornate, intricate and ethereal other-worldliness of English Catholic ritual. Perhaps even more surprising in its use of sonority is the rapturous “Gaude, Gaude, Gaude Maria,” a so-called responsory, for use between the reading of the appointed letter of St. Paul and the reading of the Gospel on the feast of the Purification of Mary (also called Candlemas, February 2nd); it may be difficult to believe, but the elaborate ceremony of the Gospel procession in the old English Catholic rite did indeed permit such a long responsory! Finally, the hymn “Sancte Dei pretiose” is illustrative of the variety of hymn settings in effect from the late 1400s onward, with the hymn plainsong not even present in the second verse. Instead, the bass line is what is called a faburden, a harmonizing line that moves mostly stepwise with the hymn plainsong, and the upper parts move freely overhead, somewhat imitative but otherwise constricted only by the word lengths and stresses.

Tallis and Byrd were more fortunate than Sheppard in disseminating their compositions, owing to longer lives in the service of Elizabeth. The year 1575 marks the beginning of a 21-year patent – a monopoly -- on publishing music granted by the Queen to Byrd and Tallis, Byrd’s teacher. With 1575 being the 17th year of Elizabeth’s reign, each composer contributed 17 works to a volume called *Cantiones Sacrae*, perhaps the first published sacred music in England. More volumes of *Cantiones Sacrae* by William Byrd appeared in 1589 and 1591. Our program tonight contains five works from the 1575 volume, three by Tallis and two by Byrd. Each composer contributed a “Miserere” setting meant to demonstrate mastery of canon. We include Tallis’ masterful double canon – a canon at the octave for sopranos, easily heard, over a simultaneous quadruple canon for the men not only inverted, but augmented doubly, fourfold, and even eightfold, and not surprisingly quite difficult to hear! – as well as Byrd’s impressive double canon, perhaps offered in deference to his teacher, Master Tallis. It was common practice for student composers to develop their mastery of counterpoint in pieces based on established plainsong, but “Miserere mihi, Domine” was one of the hardest as it is almost completely stepwise. In Byrd’s setting of “Miserere mihi, Domine,” he overcomes the stepwise limitation by positioning the plainsong in the outer voices, in a slow canon at the unison. At midpoint, Byrd’s genius emerges in two simultaneous canons, one for soprano and countertenor on plainsong fragments, and the other for baritone and bass on original counterpoint, yet nothing is at all tedious. Rather, there is a marvelous and expressive, earnest elegance to the piece, driven from the outset by use of the plainsong in the bass. Two other motets from the 1575 edition of the *Cantiones Sacrae*, “Salvator Mundi II” by Tallis (with a canon for the top voice and the fourth line down) and “Laudate Pueri Domine” by Byrd, were written for viol consort originally and then texted, apparently another common practice among English composers of the day. “Honor, Virtus et Potestas,” written during Elizabeth’s reign for use in the Chapel Royal, revives a practice we hear in Sheppard’s “Gaude, Gaude, Gaude Maria” with plainsong introduced by the tenors which then continues in long notes steadily throughout the piece. It too is a responsory, with repetitions at the phrase “in perenni saeculum tempore,” forever and ever, perhaps tongue-in-cheek for Tallis? Dissonance occurs every other beat with few exceptions, and at one point in the “in perenni saeculum tempore” section the notes G, A, B, and C sound simultaneously yet all seems harmonious, one particular instance of Master Tallis’ famed and marvelous mastery in composition and of why Queen Elizabeth enabled his Catholic-leaning works, both in publication and performance.

The listener can hear, particularly in the music by Sheppard and Tallis, a practice called “cross relation,” in which two adjacent parts sing the same pitches that clash, for instance F natural against F#. Fifty years ago, many directors performing these works tried to alter the offending pitch to conform to twentieth century expectations, but the British scholars active in reviving the music of Tallis, Sheppard, and their peers found sufficient evidence for the practice of cross relation in manuscripts both here and abroad, with additional evidence from European composers who copied their British friends. The rule for singers reconstructing performances of these works is that the linear logic of individual lines demands the cross relation, and the clash works because of the differing timbres of the voices even though it would sound quite offensive on a piano. Rarely do voices in the same part, especially in the top line, sing a cross relation.

Byrd’s “Christe, qui lux es et dies,” a hymn for services held at the end of the day, and Tallis’ “If Ye Love Me,” written during Edward’s reign, are both predominantly syllabic and represent well the post-Henrican style of music written for the general public. The former, however, is by no means easily accessible to untrained singers. It is written in Latin, is in five parts and is unmeasured, contains cross relations, and hides the hymn plainsong in the lower voices – in fact moves it up by one voice part for each verse until the final one – and harmonizes the tune differently for each verse, yet remains simple and sincere in affect. The anthem (for so it was called in the new Anglican rite in opposition to the term “motet” for a Latin-texted piece, implying Catholic associations) “If Ye Love Me” is a staple of English and Episcopal choirs in a higher key, but we present it in its original version for men’s voices. Even this fairly simple setting would have offended Puritan sensibilities, not only being a setting of a New Testament text and harmonized, but also containing the imitative and polyphonic section at the words “that He may abide with you forever.”

The work last on our program, William Byrd’s “Infelix Ego,” a motet published by him in the 1591 edition of *Cantiones Sacrae*, sets a portion of a lengthy meditation on the penitential psalm 51, “Miserere mei,” by the 15th-century Italian friar Savonarola, whose initial pleasant welcome in the houses of the Medici soon ran out and he was imprisoned, tortured and forced to recant his beliefs, and finally burned at the stake. His meditation, written and published while he was in prison, circulated widely around Europe and was set to motets by Josquin and Lassus, among others, which in turn were circulated in printed collections in England. A setting in the vernacular by Byrd’s contemporary William Mundy appeared in the late 1500s as a verse anthem for countertenor and viols, “Alas, poor wretch,” but Byrd’s motet on the Latin version of the text, written even later, clocks in more than twice as long as Mundy’s. The difference lies in Byrd’s use of polyphony to express the text as opposed to the stricter solo/refrain structure of Mundy’s verse anthem. There is more than musical reason for extending the length of this motet, for a text such as “Infelix Ego” reflected the despair of the persecuted Catholic population and singing it, Byrd’s setting in particular, allowed collective expression of feelings of exile and hope for deliverance. Byrd employs counterpoint and homophony, vocal register, canon, and block chords for various expressive ends, but there is also a masterful control of harmonic broadening to characterize a sense of impending doom in the third portion of the piece, culminating in the plea for mercy uttered by those about to be executed, “Miserere mei!” For Byrd the devout Catholic, a reminder, though not assurance, of salvation is appended in one of the most surprising and moving moments of *Cantiones Sacrae*, over the word “misericordiam,” God’s loving-kindness.

-- Cheryl K. Ryder