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## Ensemble Plus Ultra Records Selections from Byrd's "Gradualia"

William Byrd: *Gradualia* (1607); Ensemble Plus Ultra, Michael Noone, dir., Robert Quinney, organ; [Musica Omnia](#) MO0302, © 2008, 77:00, \$13.99.

When William Byrd died in 1623, at 83, someone at his funeral might have muttered: "He was a lucky devil!" He was the greatest English composer of the 16th and early 17th century, and wrote madrigals, pieces for harpsichord, and, most magnificently, music for services in the Chapel Royal of Elizabeth I. Meanwhile, he was leading a dangerous life. He was a devout Catholic in a Protestant country and, for a while, consorted with the Jesuits sent by the Vatican to win England back to the Roman church, a crime for which a lesser man, or a greater one, might have been hanged. Byrd survived by shrewdly modifying his court music to the demands of the times, disguising his pro-Catholic music, and currying favor with the Queen, for whom he wrote many celebratory anthems. He made himself indispensable, and died rich, famous... and Catholic.

His early religious music was in the rich polyphonic style of Thomas Tallis, his master and later colleague. As a court composer to Elizabeth, Byrd simplified his music and often used English texts, while continuing to write music in Latin for some of the Catholic families in whose households he was a frequent guest. Then, in his later years, when he had left the court for his native Essex in eastern England, he also returned to his older polyphonic style, setting three Masses and other Latin texts, in some of which scholars hear a pro-Jesuit agenda. The *Gradualia* of 1607, for example.

These are "Mass Propers," the parts of the Mass that changed with the feast day, written for the major holidays celebrated by the Catholic family of his patron, Sir John Petre. While "Mass Ordinaries" had fixed texts (Kyrie, Sanctus, etc.), there was more freedom in the choice of texts for Propers. In the *Gradualia*, Byrd picked (or was given) texts that suggest a community "in captivity" under an Anglican regime.

This is difficult music, sung a cappella and stretching over wide intervals. The Ensemble Plus Ultra, founded in 2002, is a group of eight excellent British singers. They sing, one voice to a part, as Byrd intended, in these four- and six-part works, with good intonation and a beautiful blend. The recorded sound is excellent, and we get a generous 77 minutes worth. One glorious piece, "Jesu nostra redemptio," stands out for its variety of color, texture, and range, with a hint of a madrigal's lightness at one point. Otherwise, Byrd is "naturally grave and pious," as a friend said, and there is a harmonic and structural sameness to these pieces that may become tiring; they weren't meant to be listened to straight through, or without the rest of the Mass, and you may want to dip into this collection one piece at a time. Or, if you're clever with your player, you can drop them into one of Byrd's late Masses, which they seem to have been written to accompany. (This isn't addressed in Michael Noone's otherwise full, interesting liner notes.)

Ensemble Plus Ultra has made several recordings of little-known Spanish Renaissance music under Noone, a well-known Renaissance music specialist who now teaches at Boston College. This is the Ensemble's first venture into the English repertoire. It won't be its last.

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