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WILLIAM BYRD AND THE LIMITS OF FORMAL MUSIC ANALYSIS

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БИЛИЈАМ БЕРД И ОГРАНИЧЕЊА ФОРМАЛНЕ АНАЛИЗЕ МУЗИКЕ

Жарко Цвејић

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ABSTRACT

Writing in 1962, Joseph Kerman was the first to speculate about potentially subversive political meanings in the *Cantiones sacrae* of the English Renaissance composer William Byrd, his two collections of motets published in 1589 and 1591, “voicing prayers, exhortations, and protests on behalf of the English Catholic community”. Subsequent research has corroborated Kerman’s speculations, showing that many of the texts Byrd set indeed feature the same politically charged metaphors that English Jesuit missionaries used to describe the predicament of Catholics living under the Protestant regime of Queen Elizabeth I, as well as that Byrd maintained close ties with many of these missionaries. In our own time, however, those who have analysed these motets, including Kerman, have paid little attention to this, preferring formal(ist) analytical approaches to this body of music. Focusing on *Ne irascaris Domine*, one of Byrd’s most famous “political” motets, and the only two major analytical responses to it, this article attempts to demonstrate the limitations of formalist music analysis when applied to Renaissance sacred music.

KEYWORDS: William Byrd, music analysis, Joseph Kerman, Catholic Renaissance music, motet, Anglican Reformation, Elizabethan England

АПСТРАКТ

У радовима с почетка шездесетих година прошлог века Џозеф Керман (Joseph Kerman) први је изнео спекулације о потенцијално субверзивним политичким значењима текстова мотета из две збирке под насловом *Cantiones sacrae*, енглеског ренесансног композитора Вилијама Берда (William Byrd) из 1589. и 1592. године, у виду 'молитви, захтева и протеста у име енглеске католичке заједнице'. Даља истраживања подржала су Керманове спекулације, показавши да многи од текстова Бердових мотета заиста садрже исте политичке метафоре којима су енглески језуитски мисионари осуђивали страдање енглеских католика под протестантским режимом краљице Елизабете Прве, као и да је Берд одржавао блиске везе с некима од тих мисионара. У наше време, међутим, они који су анализирали те мотете, укључујући и самог Кермана, углавном су мало пажње обраћали на тај контекст, опредељујући се радије за формалистичке аналитичке приступе овом репертоару. Усредсређујући се на мотет *Ne irascaris Domine*, један од Бердових најпознатијих 'политичких' мотета, као и на једине две значајне анализе тог мотета, овај текст настоји да укаже на ограничења формалистичке анализе облика у контексту ренесансне духовне музике.

Кључне речи: Вилијам Берд, анализа облика, Џозеф Керман, католичка ренесансна музика, мотет, англиканска реформација, елизабетанска Енглеска

Almost six decades have passed since Joseph Kerman first made his suggestion regarding the historical social function of a large number of motets by the English Renaissance composer William Byrd (1540–1623): “I believe that Byrd was voicing prayers, exhortations, and protests on behalf of the English Catholic community” (Kerman 1962: 295). This groundbreaking insight was probably provoked – and rightly so – by the difficult question of the practical purpose of composing in what was a distinctly Catholic genre of music within the increasingly anti-Catholic Protestant, that is, Anglican cultural environment of late-16th-century Elizabethan England. Due to Queen Elizabeth I’s initially lenient religious policies and well-documented liking for Latin services, Byrd’s earlier Latin sacred music may have been and probably was performed by the Chapel Royal, the official choir of the Queen’s peripatetic court, where Byrd had been a member since 1572. Most notably, this would have been his collection of motets co-authored and published with his older and, at the time, more esteemed colleague Thomas Tallis (c. 1505–1585) in 1575 under the cautious (and cumbersome) title of *Cantiones quae ab argumento sacrae vocantur* (“Songs that are called sacred on account of their texts”) to celebrate their newly acquired monopoly on printing part music in England and duly dedicated to the Queen, complete with an appropriately patriotic panegyric. As John Harley has written, although Tallis and Byrd’s “choice of title was influenced by the titles of continental collections, their anxiety to emphasize a patriotic purpose is plain in the preliminary matter” of that

collection (Harley 2016: 115). But it would be much more difficult to conceive of any officially sanctioned purpose for Byrd's later Latin sacred music, published in the 1589 and 1591 collections of motets titled simply *Cantiones sacrae* and dedicated to Byrd's powerful Catholic or Catholic-leaning patrons, with his highly idiosyncratic choice of texts, in the midst of increased religious persecution of the 1580s and 1590s.

As exciting as it was, Kerman's speculation that the *Cantiones sacrae* of 1589 and 1591 carried thinly veiled subversive political meanings remained just that, dogged, in his own words, by the Elizabethan murk of under-documentation. Thankfully, that murk was scattered in 1997, when Craig Monson published his crucial study of those motet texts that Kerman had labelled "political" (Monson 1997). Having examined the surviving late Elizabethan Catholic and, in particular, Jesuit propaganda, Monson was able to uncover that the motet texts Kerman had speculated about and the propaganda pamphlets and other writings procured by leading English Jesuit missionaries such as Edmund Campion and Henry Garnet (or Garnett), both eventually executed, employed exactly the same Biblical metaphors, such as the Egyptian and Babylonian Captivity of the Israelites and the Second Coming, to refer to the plight of the English Catholics under Elizabeth I's Anglican rule. Philip Brett, one of the foremost scholars and performers of Byrd's music, likewise wrote that the texts Byrd chose to set in the 1589 and 1591 *Cantiones sacrae*, "though innocuous enough in themselves, taken together emphasize so heavily such symbolic matters as the Second Coming and the Babylonian Captivity that it seems clear they were intended to convey a political as well as a musical message" and that, accordingly, it is "hard to escape the conclusion" that this body of music was written "to voice the outrage and despair of the English Roman Catholic community" (Brett 2007, 4). Surviving historical data, such as lists of recusants – those failing to attend weekly Anglican services, a violation punishable by hefty fines in Elizabethan England – and letters written by Byrd's Jesuit friends, heavily implicate the composer in clandestine Catholic activism throughout the 1580s and 1590s and, given the strength of Kerman and Monson's suggestions, it would seem that a large chunk of his music came about as part of those activities.

It is then all the more surprising that those who have analysed this music over the years – including Kerman himself – chose not to focus on these crucial insights, preferring instead to examine "the music itself" rather than shed light on the relationship of that music and Byrd's "political" texts. Even Brett, who was hardly reluctant to discuss political meanings in music, never quite focused on the way Byrd's religious and political allegiances may have shaped his musical structures, save for remarking that his music "has an intensity that appears to stem directly from his religious and political predicament as an outsider on the inside of Elizabethan society" (Brett 2007: 2); "the intense and often extravagantly poignant expression of a 'political' and personal point of view as a Catholic in a Protestant country that characterizes the 1589 and 1591 collections" (Ibid.: 9); and a few cursory remarks about individual pieces. Therefore, in my view, formal music analysis has failed to answer certain glaring questions regarding the structure of these pieces, thereby exposing its limitations; this essay, centring on *Ne irascaris Domine*, one of Byrd's most famous "political" motets, and the only two major analytical responses to it, by Kerman and H.

K. Andrews, is an attempt to expose those analytical silences and to highlight their possible historical and ideological causes.

As mentioned above, *Ne irasaris Domine* was one of the motets published in the 1589 *Cantiones sacrae*, which was dedicated to Edward Somerset (c. 1550–1628), 4th Earl of Worcester, an important figure in English Elizabethan and especially Jacobean politics. On account of its short text, Kerman had included it among Byrd's "political" motets already in 1962 (Kerman 1962: 294).

Prima pars. *Ne irasaris Domine, satis, et ne ultra memineris iniquitatis nostrae.*

Ecce, respice, populus tuus omnes nos.

Secunda pars. *Civitas sancti tui facta est*

deserta. Sion deserta facta est. Jerusalem desolata est.

Part One. Be angry no more, O Lord, and remember our iniquity no longer.

Behold, see, we all are thy people.

Part Two. Thy holy city is become a wilderness. Zion is become a wilderness. Jerusalem is forsaken.

As Monson showed, the Babylonian captivity and Jerusalem laid low were indeed among the favourite metaphors used by English Jesuit missionaries to refer to the plight of their fellow Catholics under the Protestant rule of Elizabeth I. Henry Garnet, Jesuit superior for England, thus wrote to his fellow activists: "We have to conceal the fact that we are members of the Society [of Jesus], lest the whole of Jerusalem be disturbed" (Monson 1997: 349). It appears as though the metaphor was so widely used to refer to England under Elizabeth I that Garnet could apply it almost half-consciously as he did.

As presented in *The Masses and Motets of William Byrd* (1981), Kerman's seminal study of Byrd's Latin sacred music, his analysis of the motet fails to take any of this into account. Instead, we are offered an analytical account only of the motet's music with next to no discussion of the text and its structuring power – all that coming from the man who first considered the motet a politically conceived work of music. Though arguably more systematic, the only other detailed analysis of the motet, offered in *The Technique of Byrd's Vocal Polyphony* (1966) by H. K. Andrews, proceeds along essentially the same lines. To do justice to Andrews, I should point out that his book presents a meticulous study of the inner workings of Byrd's contrapuntal writing that covers aspects ranging from voice leading to large-scale structure, rather than an assembly of analyses of individual pieces, like *The Masses and Motets of William Byrd*. Yet Andrews does provide a full-blown analysis of *Ne irasaris Domine*, which clearly qualifies his work for the purposes of this text (Andrews 1966: 257–259). In his analysis of the motet's form, Andrews proceeds along the lines of contrapuntal analysis, rightly stressing the inseparability of musical structure and polyphonic texture in 16th-century vocal music. He devises three main textural types and applies them to *Ne irasaris Domine*, which results in a clear and systematic account of the motet's polyphonic construction.

Most significantly, in my view, neither Kerman nor Andrews deal with a seemingly simple yet glaring issue: the sheer size of the motet. For a mere total of 29 words, Byrd supplies no fewer than 152 breves of music (or 152 bars, in most modern

transcriptions).² Even a cursory survey of Byrd's motet output as a whole as well as those of his European contemporaries and friends, such as Alfonso Ferrabosco (1543–1588), Orlande de Lassus (Orlando di Lasso, 1532–1594), and Tomás Luis de Victoria (c. 1548–1611), many of whose works Byrd knew and sometimes emulated, reveals that such expansiveness was far from the norm. However, a comparison of *Ne irascaris Domine* with other Byrd motets that Kerman labelled “political” suggests that, within that repertory, this motet's size should strike no one as a surprise. Curiously enough, Kerman himself made the same observation on more than one occasion, yet failed to make anything out of it in his analysis of *Ne irascaris Domine*.³ Likewise, Andrews is also completely silent on the matter, writing four years after Kerman first publicly suggested a political purpose for these motets, in his crucial 1962 “The Elizabethan Motet”, with which he must have been familiar.

I should like to make it clear why I find Kerman and Andrews's silence on the unusually expansive size of *Ne irascaris Domine* so significant. In their respective analyses, they both ignore what is arguably the most striking feature of the motet. Consequently, they fail to provide an analytical explication for it. Inasmuch as formal music analysis is, for better or worse, a positivistically inclined intellectual discipline, thus predicated on the scientific view that all phenomena must be understood causally, that is, by revealing their causes, answering the question “Why is this motet so big?” should be near the top of any analyst's agenda.⁴ Its size is what makes this motet stand out and it is surprising that neither Kerman nor Andrews sought to offer an answer as to how and why its most striking feature came about. I believe that a close reading of *Ne irascaris Domine*, albeit one predicated on its text, may both shed further light on its musical construction and offer a plausible cause for these silences in Kerman's and Andrews's respective analyses of the work.

The main tool with which Byrd achieves the monumental size of *Ne irascaris Domine* is word repetition. Even the text on its own already exhibits some redundancy and repetitiveness, employed, no doubt, for rhetorical purposes or emphasis: all three verses of *Secunda pars* convey one and the same scriptural and, in this context, political message: Jerusalem (i.e. Catholic England) is forsaken. Upon a closer look, it

2 A fine recording of the motet by the Choir of Durham Cathedral (*Prima pars*) and the King's Singers (*Secunda pars*), complete with scores, is available (as of 14 March 2020) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTDXVGNAXQ> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pySTHOJKIIA>.

3 One of the places where Kerman makes this general remark about Byrd's “political” motets is his article on the composer published in the 2001 *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Kerman 2001: 719). See also his discussion of *Deus venerunt gentes*, the motet widely believed to have been composed as Byrd's musical reaction to the brutal execution of the English Jesuit priest Edmund Campion, who was hanged, drawn, and quartered in 1581, in Kerman 1981: 142–4, where he rightly notes that the motet is by far the longest one in Byrd's output despite its relatively short text, but fails to make any suggestions as to why that may be the case.

4 For general views of formalist analysis, see, for instance: Everist 1992. There is a useful discussion of positivism in general and in music historiography in particular in Treitler 1989: 79–94.

turns out that there is a pattern to word repetition in this motet: certain words and verses receive conspicuously more music than others. Thus the mere three words of the motet text's final verse, which is the only one to spell out the name of the holy city and its plight, receive no fewer than 37 breves of music – more than a fifth of the motet's entire duration. By contrast, the opening two verses receive no more than 32 breves, even though in terms of the number of syllables, they are almost three times longer than the final verse. The relative immediacy of Byrd's delivery of the opening two verses fully comes to light when compared to the closing verse of *Prima pars* and the opening verse of *Secunda pars*, both almost twice as short as the opening two verses of the motet's text (combined) but respectively provided with longer musical settings. The metaphorical meaning of the text strikes one as the only plausible explication for these large-scale structural discrepancies: the first phrase, “Ne irascaris Domine, satis, et ne ultra memineris iniquitatis nostrae”, is the only sentence in the entire text that does not refer to Jerusalem, a metaphor for Catholic England, as Monson crucially informed us. The remaining verses, including the closing verse of *Prima pars* that metaphorically refers to England's Catholics as Israelites, can be construed to have borne metaphorical political meanings for Byrd's fellow Catholics who would have sung and probably taken solace from this piece. Arguably, that is why Byrd spared no effort to provide the politically charged segments of the text with as much music as he could, in order to hammer down as hard as possible the political message of the text in those who sang and listened to this motet and took comfort from it.

Admittedly, there is one politically charged verse in the motet that is not furnished with an extended musical setting: the central verse of the *Secunda pars*, “Sion deserta facta est” (breves 106–115 in modern transcription). And yet, it is arguably this verse or, rather, Byrd's setting of it, that has made the motet so famous. Indeed, Andrews rightly praised it “one of the most beautiful things in all sixteenth-century polyphony” (Andrews 1966: 258). It is the only segment of the motet set in strict homophony and clearly delineated from its adjacent phrases; the entire textual-musical phrase are repeated and the two invocations are likewise clearly separated from each other, in contrast to Byrd's liking for overlapping textual-musical phrases in his normally florid polyphonic style, adopted from his Continental models. Thus this verse and its message – that Mount Zion is deserted – assume a central place in the motet. However, by no means does that suggest that the remaining verses in Byrd's setting are inferior in terms of intelligibility – just that Byrd rendered them equally intelligible in a different way. To that end he deployed his customary florid imitative technique, providing the most significant words (e.g. “Jerusalem”) and word groupings (e.g. “desolata est”) with instantly recognisable motives that migrate in imitation from one voice part to the next, commonly reinforced by voice doublings (breves 115–152). As usual, Byrd's imitation points are hardly ever strict, but he ensures the recognisability of his motives by providing them with memorable rhythmic patterns and making sure to maintain them in his otherwise liberal imitative writing.

Therefore, as it turns out, the text of *Ne irascaris Domine* and especially its political metaphorical meanings – belonging to the domain of the “extra-musical” – can

help us understand both the large-scale structure of the motet and its inner workings, in other words, can tell us how and why this music “works” the way it does. However, there is none of that in either Kerman’s or Andrews’s respective analyses. The desire to enhance the appreciation of Byrd’s genius was near the top of both authors’ analytical agendas and neither Kerman nor Andrews were shy to admit that. Thus Kerman wrote in the preface to *The Masses and Motets of William Byrd*: “Most important, we all believe strongly that great music of the relatively distant past deserves the same degree of critical attention regularly accorded to that of the recent past or present. That Dufay, Josquin, Byrd, and Monteverdi are on a plane with the greatest masters of later years is a commonplace in the history books, but one that can have little meaning unless the music is more widely heard and understood” (Kerman 1981: 9). Their work was therefore an effort to justify the inclusion of Byrd the man and his music in the musical canon. But on what grounds and why?

As for the music itself, it is only ironic enough that Kerman’s own famous critique of formalist analysis, “How We Got into Analysis and How to Get Out”, can serve here as a viable starting point (Kerman 1994). The gist of the matter is that both Kerman and Andrews analyse Byrd’s music with the implicit aim of demonstrating its aesthetic autonomy, as unified, coherent, internally meaningful, self-referential and self-sufficient on strictly musical terms, regardless of the text or any other “extra-musical” factors. That is why there is no consideration of the motet’s text and its impact on the structure of the music. To admit that the music of *Ne irascaris Domine* cannot be fully understood on its own and on its own terms, without reference to its historical, cultural, and political environment communicated by its politically charged text, would amount to relegating it to the inferior domain of “applied” music as opposed to the supposedly autonomous and aesthetically disinterested “great” musical works as creations of their equally heroic creators. In that way, they force upon Byrd’s music at least two concepts that would have been entirely anachronistic in Byrd’s time and as such entirely foreign to him: the idea that all true art, and especially music, must be aesthetically autonomous, that is, make sense on its own and obey only its own rules and concerns, and the primacy of music without words, that is, instrumental music, as the only type of music that is fully abstract and self-referential and, as such, aesthetically autonomous, indeed, the most aesthetically autonomous of the arts.

But while these constructs could be traced all the way back to the early German Romantics such as E. T. A. Hoffmann and his famous review of Beethoven’s instrumental music and even to Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, in Byrd’s time they still lay ahead in the distant future and, as such, would have been entirely incomprehensible to him. Hoffmann thus memorably wrote that when “music is spoken of as an independent art the term can properly apply only to instrumental music, which scorns all aid, all admixture of other arts, and gives pure expression to its peculiar artistic nature” (Hoffmann 1989: 236); similarly, in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant makes it clear that he only regards instrumental music as a prime example of “free beauty” (Kant 2000: 114). But such pronouncements came almost two centuries after Byrd. The qualities that both Kerman and Andrews construct and then celebrate in Byrd’s music – its unity, coherence, self-sufficiency, and aesthetic autonomy

– are exactly those that Kerman rightly exposes as ideological in “How We Got into Analysis”: constructions whose sole aim is to perpetuate the supremacy of a particular repertory of music at the expense of all other repertories that fail to conform to the same aesthetic ideology. In one of his most memorable passages, Kerman writes: “In fact, it seems to me that the true intellectual milieu of analysis is not science but ideology. [...] From the standpoint of the ruling ideology, analysis exists for the purpose of demonstrating organicism, and organicism exists for the purpose of validating a certain body of works of art” (Kerman 1994: 14–15). Somewhat guilty of these charges himself, Kerman analyses Byrd’s music so as to make it fit that aesthetic, upholding the same ideology he so rightly criticises elsewhere in his work.

Similarly, Byrd the composer is likewise made to conform to our 19th-century conception of the true artist as a heroic, autonomous, Beethovenian figure, who produces ever-new masterworks, in splendid isolation and against all odds. Kerman’s Byrd is such a hero who “is no longer bound by liturgical or technical considerations. He takes texts as he wants them” (Kerman 1981: 38–39), even though it was Kerman himself who first suggested that Byrd chose his texts with guidance from his Catholic patrons and Jesuit activist friends rather than on his own (Ibid.: 48).

To conclude: the main reason why Kerman’s and Andrews’s respective analyses of *Ne irascaris Domine*, the only two major analytical responses to that remarkable work, are inadequate and fail to do justice to Byrd’s music appears to be their own ideological limitations, based on the concepts of aesthetic autonomy as the *sine qua non* of all great music (and art) and the primacy of wordless or instrumental music over vocal music, which have shaped Western musical thought since at least the late 18th century but would have been entirely foreign to Byrd. Of course, none of that is to condemn either the composer himself or the two authors’ insightful discussions of him and his music. Both Kerman’s and Andrews’s respective works on Byrd provide invaluable insights into the inner workings of his style, vital to a more intimate understanding of it just as they are to such an understanding of any musical style. Yet, instead of misconstruing Byrd as a late-Renaissance Beethoven and his motets as aesthetically autonomous works of music, perhaps we should rather appreciate and embrace them for what they truly are: cultural products conceived with the noble aim of providing comfort to a social group under oppression and a man of integrity, who used the dazzling wealth of his talent to provide much needed solace to his beleaguered community. In Byrd’s music, to quote Philip Brett’s elegant wording, “we can sense the kind of commitment that stops at nothing, even persecution and death, in pursuit of a faith that can never be taken for granted. This music retains its poignancy nearly four hundred years later” (Brett 2007: 7). Indeed it does.

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ЖАРКО ЦВЕЈИЋ

ВИЛИЈАМ БЕРД И ОГРАНИЧЕЊА ФОРМАЛНЕ АНАЛИЗЕ

(РЕЗИМЕ)

За мотете енглеског позноренесансног композитора Вилијама Берда (William Byrd) с текстовима на латинском језику, објављене у два збиркама под насловом *Cantiones sacrae* ("Духовне песме") 1589. и 1591. године, дуго се сумњало да крију субверзивне политичке поруке намењене припадницима енглеске католичке заједнице који су живели под притиском протестантског режима краљице Елизабете Прве. Такве сумње први је изнео Џозеф Керман (Joseph Kerman) још 1962. године, а касније су их додатно документовали Крејг Монсон (Craig Monson), Филип Брет (Philip Brett) и други музиколози, показавши да се у текстовима Бердових мотета налазе исте политичке метафоре које су користили енглески католички и нарочито језуитски мисионари попут Едмунда Кемпиона (Edmund Campion) и Хенрија Гарнета (Henry Garnet) не би ли указали на страдање енглеских католика под Елизабетом Првом. Осим тога, додатним истраживањима је утврђено

да је и сáм Берд био дубоко умешан у те потајне радње, при чему је његова музика, иначе неприхватљива у јавној сфери Енглеске с краја XVI века, по свој прилици играла важну улогу, нудећи енглеским католицима попут Берда преко потребну утеху и осећај заједничке припадности. Упркос свему томе, ни у једној модерној анализи ових дела не поклања се довољно пажње текстовима Бердових мотета и њиховом суштинском упливу на његову музику. Подробнија анализа мотета *Ne irascaris Domine* (“Не срди се, Господе”), једног од Бердових најпознатијих “политичких” мотета, показује да се структура тога дела не може довољно разумети уз пренебрегавање текста мотета и његовог повесног политичког контекста, те да је било какав аналитички приступ који почива на појму естетске аутономије музике и повлашћеном положају инструменталне наспрам вокалне музике, што датира тек с краја XVIII века и стога је сасвим анахроно у односу на Берда, неизбежно ограничен и да, као такав, може да понуди само неадекватна аналитичка тумачења Бердове музике.

Кључне речи: Вилијам Берд, анализа облика, Џозеф Керман, католичка ренесансна музика, мотет, англиканска реформација, елизабетанска Енглеска

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