

Project Report ‘The Honour of William Byrd’

Chelys Consort of Viols with Helen Charlston (mezzo soprano)

The Honour of William Byrd – honouring his faith, his Queen, his country, and his friends.

The grant from Angel Early Music enabled us to mark the 400th anniversary of this most significant composer with a recording that we simply could not have contemplated otherwise. We have an ongoing relationship with BIS records who were happy to release the disc, but the full cost of recording falls to us, and to do it properly makes for a sizeable budget that is only achievable with the invaluable support of organisations like Angel. Thank you!

About the disc

In this 400th anniversary year of the death of William Byrd, his extraordinary output will be celebrated in many and diverse recordings. He is such a key figure in musical history that one might think it rather unnecessary to add yet another disc to the already extensive catalogue, but what we and many others find intriguing about Byrd is not just the music, but also the man behind it. If musical output gives us an indication of the person within, then who is this man who is both devoutly Catholic yet clearly a favourite of the Protestant Queen who made his faith illegal, a serious character capable of weighty contemplation but also sharp wit and humour, and the loyal friend who wrote so personally and touchingly of the loss of his teacher and friend Thomas Tallis? The Honour of William Byrd explores the proud Englishman, devoted friend, loyal subject, and faithful servant who was William Byrd.

Choosing the exact repertoire for this was somewhat of a challenge, but a very nice one! What do you leave out when every piece you consider is brilliant and deserves to be included? It was very refreshing to be able to discuss exactly how we wanted to portray this idea of ‘honour’ in all its forms, and to make a (very) long list of all the things that could be included, and then cherry-pick together, based both on text and music. What a luxury!

Recording

Recording took place in a new venue for us, the church of St Martin’s East Woodhay. We were delighted to be working again with our regular team of Matthew Bennett (producer) and Dave Rowell (sound engineer) who were both rather enjoying immersing themselves in the wonderful music on this disc! Dave has a knack for representing our ‘real’ sound so faithfully in recording, and Matthew’s expertly observant and patient guidance sets us up to play with complete confidence.

Working with Helen is truly inspiring. A singer who shapes and inflects every word and nuance of the text makes the consort come alive in response, and the consort song sessions were really the epitome of what it is to combine the human voice with the voices of the viols, and tell entrancing stories together.

Reception and going forward

The disc has been released, though not yet in the UK, but it was recently featured as a pick of the week in ‘The Guardian’:

The Honour of William Byrd, a collection of songs and viol music on BIS, offering a rounded portrait of this complicated composer – sombre and witty, Catholic yet a favourite of Elizabeth I. Songs lamenting the deaths of the courtier Philip Sidney and Byrd’s mentor Thomas Tallis stand out amid a consistently intriguing programme. Played by the Chelys Consort and flawlessly sung by the mezzo-soprano Helen Charlston, the whole thing is beautifully done.

We have several performances of this programme planned for the end of 2023 and early 2024, so the grant has really enabled far more than the CD itself. It has expanded our discography, given us the opportunity to really work on some of the repertoire we love, and allowed us to seek performances of a new programme. We are hugely grateful for the support!

Chelys Consort of Viols – Ibi Aziz, Jenny Bullock, Kate Conway, Alison Kinder, Sam Stadlen. Harry Buckoke joined us for two fabulous 6-part fantasias.

