The conversion of England from the Roman Catholic church to the Church of England by King Henry VIII (and later Queen Elizabeth I) forced those who wished to practice Catholicism to do so covertly, as penalties included fines, scrutiny, torture or death. All vestiges of the “old religion” were summarily prohibited, including the use of Latin (only English was permitted). In this highly volatile and oppressive atmosphere, Byrd played a dangerous game. Refusing to conform to the new religion, he composed music for use in Catholic services (held secretly in private residences), more often than not in Latin. He managed this rebellion without loss of life or livelihood, due in part both to his exemplary musical skill and by frequently dedicating publications to the Queen.

It is widely accepted that Byrd intended his Latin motets for use either in these underground Masses, or for publication in books for use in homes, much like madrigals. Either way, the music was most likely performed 1 or 2 singers/players per part, and with female sopranos.

Some of Byrd's contemporaries:
- William Shakespeare (1564-1616)
- Galileo Galilei (1564-1642)
- John Donne (1573-1631)
- G. P. da Palestrina (c1525-1594)
- Thomas Morley (1558-1602)
- Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)
unde flu-xit sanguine, san-gui-ne. Es-to no-bis prae-gu-de flu-xit sanguine, san-gui-ne. Es-to no-bis prae-gu-
unde flu-xit sanguine. Es-to no-bis prae-gu-

sta-tum in mor-tis ex-a-mi-ne. O dul-cis, O pi-e, O Jesu Fili Ma-ri-ae; pi-e, O Jesu Fili Ma-ri-ae;
TEXT and TRANSLATION:

Ave verum corpus, natum de Maria Virgine,
Hail true body, born of the Virgin Mary.

vere passum, immolatum in cruce pro homine:
Truly suffering, was sacrificed on the cross for all,

Cujus latus perforatum, Unde fluxit sanguine.
From whose pierced side flowed blood,

Esto nobis praegustatum in mortis examine
Be for us a foretaste in the final judgment.

O Dulcis, O pie, O Jesu fili Mariae,
O sweet, O merciful, O Jesus, Son of Mary,

miserere mei. Amen.
Have mercy on me. Amen.

-Pope Innocent III or IV
(Sequence Hymn for the Feast of Corpus Christi)