

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Early Music: *In Paradisum*

Saturday, October 16, 2010, 8:00PM

“Media vita in morte sumus” - “In the midst of life we are in death”

Tonight’s program spans nearly two centuries of music—centuries which witnessed repeated outbreaks of plague, bloody religious turmoil, and destructive warfare. It was an age where death often seemed close at hand, and where to mediaeval Catholics or reformed Lutherans alike, a pious death might be as important as a godly life.

Alonso Lobo’s *Versa est in luctum* was written in 1598 for the funeral of Philip II, King of Spain. It is a plangent expression of mourning perfectly suited to the passing of a great monarch. Yet funeral motets were often more personal, at the behest of their patron. Heinrich Schütz’s *Musikalische Exequien*, of which the motet *Herr, wenn ich nur dich habe* forms part, was commissioned for the funeral of Saxon nobleman Heinrich Reuss Posthumus, using texts inscribed on his coffin. The motet’s text formed the basis of the funeral oration and speaks of faith and hope in God. At the other end of the religious spectrum is Josquin’s *O Bone et dulcissime*, a motet for the annual mass commemorating the composer’s employer, René d’Anjou, King of Sicily. The text adapts a meditation by the 11th-century St. Anselm, and was associated with St. Bernadino of Siena. King René had fought for St. Bernadino’s swift canonisation, and adopted him as his personal confessor, asking for his heart to be buried in the saint’s chapel. In 1330 Pope John XXII declared indulgences for those reciting the text—“for each time they will say this prayer... three thousand days of indulgence for mortal sins and for venial sins one thousand years” — and thus Josquin’s motet was not merely conceived as an ornament to King René’s commemoration, but as an aid to the comfort of his soul.

Composers accustomed to writing for their patrons’s obsequies were no less conscious of their own mortality, and their late music often reflects this. Perhaps the most extraordinary example is Dufay’s *Ave regina caelorum*, composed to be sung around his own deathbed. Its text intersperses the Marian antiphon with a personal plea for mercy. Lassus’s *Vide homo* was written just three weeks before his death, and forms the epilogue to 20 ‘spiritual madrigals’ meditating on St. Peter’s denial of Christ, the *Lagrima di San Pietro*. Each preceding madrigal focuses on the moment where Christ looks at Peter after his final denial, but in *Vide homo*, an anguished Christ speaks directly to the listener. Lassus suffered from ‘melancholy’ throughout his life, and his widow wrote that he often talked of death. His setting is infused with an almost unbearable intensity.

By contrast, Nicolas Gombert’s eight *Magnificat* settings reveal none of the personal trials he was suffering; he was then serving hard labor after being convicted of child molestation. According to Jerome Cadvan, a contemporary mathematician and physician, it was these settings that persuaded Charles V to pardon Gombert, and they are often regarded as his swansong, for he composed little else before his death a decade later. The elderly William Byrd’s final collection, *Psalms Sonnets and Songs* (1611) was also published over a decade before his death, but the text of *Retire my Soul* must have had particular resonance for him; reflecting on his career, he wrote: “I am much encouraged to commend to you these my last labors, for mine ultimum vale”.

At the center of our program, John Sheppard’s epic motet *Media vita* can be regarded as both a memorial and a swansong. Almost certainly one of his last works, recent research suggests it was in memory of his fellow composer, Nicholas Ludford. This extraordinary music uses characteristically dissonant harmony to sustain intensity through a work of unprecedented scale.

notes by Kate Ashby and Andrew Griffiths