

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Early Music: Music for Double Choir

Thursday, April 2, 8:00PM

The term 'Renaissance' is often forgone in favor of 'Early Modern' by historians and some musicologists, as this better reflects how the many changes begun in the 15th century, would form the culture—political, historical, and artistic—that exists today. In music, this happened in a unique way, and in one which tonight's concert explores. So much of our current understanding of music actually began with the 17th and 18th centuries, not the 15th. Renaissance polyphony is still somewhat of an outsider in terms of widespread familiarity. What is at issue tonight is the connection between Renaissance polyphony and Baroque music, exemplified through an important musical form in this development: double-choir music. What differentiates double-choir music from 8-voice polyphony is, as we shall see, the use blocks of sound conceived as such—in essence, the beginnings of orchestration, using vocal timbres instead of instruments. With this comes a tendency toward homophonic, chordal, vertical writing, another feature that came to define the Baroque. An historical progression can be seen here, and The Tallis Scholars' chosen selection of music ranges more than 100 years, allowing us to see how this style developed.

The opening piece sets the scene. Palestrina's ***Surge, illuminare*** is vintage Palestrina double-choir music with its seamless blending of true polyphony (at the very start of the piece) with homophony (at the words 'et gloria Domini'), and the skill with which these two textures are made to flow from one to the other. The end of the piece is a perfect example of this, as the phrase 'et gloria eius' is thrown back and forth before melting into a fully contrapuntal final flourish. This technique, as with so much of Palestrina's music, defined the conventional double-choir style in the late 16th century.

Peter Philips was born 35 years after Palestrina. As a life-long adherent to Roman Catholicism, he fled England in 1582, aged 22, and went to Rome. After traveling for five years, he settled first in Antwerp and then in Brussels in the chapel of the Habsburg Archduke Albert VII, never to return to England. Philips' music exhibits his deep admiration for the Roman masters, Palestrina chief among them. The generational difference between the two men, however, can be seen in the wider range of rhythmic gestures used by Philips, and the startling contrasts between flowing contrapuntal lines and vertical chordal writing, most strikingly displayed in the final 'Alleluia' section of ***Ecce vicit Leo***. A more vivid pictorial representation of text, one of the hallmarks of the coming Baroque, can be seen in ***Ave Jesu Christe*** in the treatment of 'gaudium nostrum' (our joy) chiefly in the contrast between this text and that which surrounds it, particularly 'panis Angelorum' (bread of angels).

Lassus' ***Missa Bell' Amfitrit' altera*** was published in 1610, just three years before Philips' motets. The similarity ends there, however. This mass was published posthumously and represents the work of a previous generation. In fact, Lassus was just seven years younger than Palestrina. Lassus spent some of his youth in Rome, but in 1556, aged just 24, he was invited to join the chapel of Albrecht V of Bavaria in Munich where he remained until his death. In contrast to the Palestrina and Philips motets on tonight's program, this mass contains much more fluid, equal, eight-voice counterpoint. The Venetian homophonic and declamatory rhythmic style and slower harmonic movement, typified in the works of the Gabriellis, with which Lassus was familiar, can be seen in the second *Kyrie*, in many passages in the *Credo*, and at the 'Pleni sunt caeli' and 'Hosanna' in the *Santus*. However, the peculiar setting of 'Et unam sanctam catholicam' in the *Credo*, with its short repeated phrases quickly alternating between choirs would stand as a model for later composers, Hieronymus Praetorius among them. Another stylistic device not often employed by Palestrina was to mix and match voices to create choirs of varying texture, not always sticking to the two choirs set out in the score. This occurs at 'Qui tollis peccata mundi' and 'Cum sancto spiritu' in the *Gloria* and, strikingly, at 'Et in Spiritum Sanctum' in the *Credo*, where a high-voice choir is contrasted with low voices immediately following with 'qui ex Patre Filioque procedit.' While the manipulation of vocal texture and timbre is a feature of all vocal music written in the Renaissance, the conception of these blocks of sound deployed in contrast with one another would form the basis upon which the Baroque sound world would rest.

Representing a completely different national tradition and born almost 60 years after Palestrina, Orlando Gibbons shows us a more sophisticated, later example of double-choir writing. In **O Clap your hands**, probably written around 1620, Gibbons explores virtually every possibility afforded him by both eight-voice counterpoint and poly-choral homophony. He does this, however, with such ease, variation, logic, and flourish that it is no wonder this has become one of his most popular pieces. It is conventional wisdom that this piece was written to obtain a doctorate at Oxford University and therefore leans more toward the contrapuntal than the homophonic, but in passages like 'O sing praises' and 'For God which is highly exulted', the old technique of choruses echoing one another is used to great effect.

Dominique Phinot is not a name with which many listeners might be familiar. Not much is known of his life; it appears he spent time in Urbino and Lyon but details are scarce. Phinot was born near the end of the first decade of the 16th century and therefore represents yet another, earlier generation of composers. However, a small collection of his music, of which this **Lamentations** setting was a member, was very famous in its day and known by many, including Palestrina and Lassus. This work contains again a mixture of varying textural devices, but the ingenuity with which the horizontal and vertical writing styles are blended gradually increases over the course of each section and of the entire work, the final 'Jerusalem' section bringing the two together fully.

The next two works on tonight's program form a pair. This said, Alonso Lobo and Jean Mouton never met, as Lobo was born more than a century after Mouton. Mouton is the earliest composer whose music appears on tonight's program, a contemporary of Josquin des Prez. As with many of these earlier composers, Mouton was a master of elaborate counterpoint, especially canon technique. Nowhere is this more obvious than in **Nesciens Mater**. Alonso Lobo, a century later, would return to precisely this technique in his *Ave Maria*. Both works consist of four strict canons at the fifth, four voices repeating what the other four just sang a fifth higher. This music is less an exercise in arranging blocks of sound and more a stunning display of canonic virtuosity. Mouton's work is a masterpiece. His ability to create such an inviting sonority, maintain it for what seems like vast expanses of time, and slowly increase the intensity of the music through first subtle variations in texture and then exploring the upper extremities of vocal ranges is absolutely astounding given the contrapuntal demands of these four simultaneous canons. Lobo's work is no less astonishing, but here he manages to pay homage to the predominant double-choir style of his time, as the first few phrases are homophonic and alternate between choirs. Lobo is also, impressively, able to incorporate passages of plainsong cantus firmus material and, crucially, some of the more exotic sonorities characteristic of late 16th-century Spanish style.

Tonight's concert rightly closes with a piece by Hieronymus Praetorius. Praetorius, a direct contemporary of Peter Philips, wrote an enormous quantity of double-choir music, most including the more modern approaches heard in tonight's concert. This **Magnificat** setting comes from a volume of nine published first in 1602 but again in 1622 with, importantly, the addition of a *bassus continuus* part. Here is the last piece in the gradually forming Baroque puzzle. Instrumentation aside, to experience Praetorius' distinctive double-choir style, one need only listen for the striking gesture at the words 'dispersit superbos'. Praetorius' use of this technique, foreshadowed in Lassus *Missa Bell' Amfitrit' altera*, represents probably the most extreme form of this rapid repetition and wild rhythmic contrast. Another unique passage occurs at the text, 'implevit bonis' where the Choir 1 soprano sings a fragment of the Magnificat psalm tone in long notes accompanied by a thick, overlapping, wash of seven-voice accompaniment. The poise and balance with which repeated phrases are passed from choir to choir and subtle control over long-term harmonic progressions as well as this rhythmic audacity and ingenuity is what places this sort of music just at the cusp of the coming Baroque.

While many look to the developments of opera, secular, and instrumental music to find the birth of the Baroque, it is possible to find hidden in much earlier music these proto-Baroque experiments with rhythm, texture, harmony, and orchestration. It is not difficult to understand the appeal of the grand and exiting music that resulted.