

# Miller Theatre Program Notes

Early Music: Josquin's Mass for the Virgin Mary

Saturday, December 12, 2009 at 8:00PM

The term 'Renaissance polyphony' is applied to an enormous amount of different kinds of music. Of course, we only have other terms, such as 'Baroque' or 'Romantic', to compare it with, but it is the great breadth and variation of style, aesthetic, and—of course—historical and cultural background exhibited by different types of 'polyphony' when compared with other, later styles that makes the term only a blunt categorization tool at best or a colloquialism at worst. During the last 150 years of the Renaissance, the pace of cultural change, and the intensity of the cultural conflicts which resulted, increased remarkably and the musical manifestations of these changes and conflicts necessarily reflected this.

Josquin des Prez was one of the most famous composers of his day. Today, he overshadows completely his contemporaries from the final third of the 15th century and is mentioned in the same breath as Palestrina or William Byrd as one of a handful of composers who defined 'Renaissance polyphony'. Born in the early 1450s, however, he lived most of his life free from the religious turmoil of the 16th century which would have such a great influence on later music. He brought late-Medieval music very much up to date, pioneering most of the major genres which followed and bringing both an intense clarity and passionate humanity to music in a way unknown to his predecessors. His *Missa de Beata Virgine* displays all of these characteristics; it appears, either whole or in part, in no fewer than 69 different sources—in manuscripts originating in five countries, eight printed publications spanning nearly 30 years, two theory treatises, and 15 tablatures. Compared with his contemporaries, this is an enormously varied and thorough distribution, indicating that Josquin's fame had spread completely throughout Europe by the beginning of the 16th century and that both his individual reputation and that of this piece in particular continued long after his death. The regular singing of the Ordinary of the Mass (the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus movements with which we are familiar) to a polyphonic setting was only just becoming commonplace during Josquin's lifetime and that fact is reflected in this mass; from examining the many sources, it is apparent that Josquin wrote it—and that it was distributed—as separate movements and not as a group of five. Unlike most mass settings written in the Renaissance which were based on a single model—either a melody drawn from plainchant or a secular song or an entire polyphonic framework taken from a motet—this 'chant paraphrase' mass takes as its inspiration the collection of plainsong melodies associated with the *Mass Ordinary* texts. The movements lack the characteristic unity of melodic theme and sonority found in later masses but because of this they stand on their own as individually conceived and performed works. The absolute clarity so characteristic of Josquin's music is apparent from the start, imitative passages worked so thoroughly that it is often difficult for the listener to distinguish imitation from canon. Strict canon, a favourite of Josquin, does indeed appear in the Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus movements of this work. Austerity, logic, and Josquin's complete command of compositional form and contrapuntal symmetry permeate this music, suggesting a purity of conception meant to please God in its perfection, not excite the passions of men.

There is a good chance that John Nesbett was older than Josquin. However, so little is known of his biography, other than that he was an English composer active in Canterbury in the 1470s and 1480s, that any meaningful description of his temporal or musical relation to the Flemish composer is impossible. Only two pieces of music by Nesbett survive, but his *Magnificat* survives in the two most famous musical sources of the first decade of the 16th century in the British Isles, the Carver Choirbook compiled in Scotland and the much more important Eton Choirbook compiled at Eton College in Berkshire, England. As a member of the 'Eton Choirbook composers', Nesbett is considered part of a unique musical tradition, the 'florid English style' identified as a self-contained musical movement which differed greatly from continental music written at the time. This contrast is immediately obvious here when comparing Nesbett's *Magnificat* with the Josquin mass which precedes it on tonight's program. This music blasts sound at the listener, rhythmically overwhelming the Josquin in terms of exuberance and flare. The pre-meditated predictability of the Josquin is nowhere to be found here; this music impresses and shines with an energetic pomp and swagger.

While Tallis' earliest music doesn't quite reach these heights of exuberance, he wrote much which can easily be traced to its Eton Choirbook influences. Tallis, however, is the perfect example of a composer caught in cultural chaos. Born around 1505, living 80 years, and almost always employed

by the English crown, Tallis sang and wrote music under four monarchs and—crucially—two warring religious ideologies. His **Tunes for Archbishop Parker's Psalter** were included in a book published in 1567 of all 150 psalms translated and versified in English by Matthew Parker, the first Archbishop of Canterbury appointed by Elizabeth I. These versified psalm books were common in Elizabethan England, but a remarkable feature of Parker's book was that he divided the psalm texts into eight groups, based on the emotional moods of their texts, said to be inherent in each of the eight musical modes. Tallis wrote a simple tune for each of these eight groups. Printed in the book are the words sung tonight, but it is clear that many different psalms could be sung to each tune, depending on the emotional character of the words. The ninth tune was written to provide a musical setting for a few other texts which appear after the psalm texts in the volume. These include translations of the Te Deum, Benedictus, Magnificat, Nunc Dimitis, and other service texts. This ninth tune, as well as the eighth, are popular hymn tunes today and the third tune, 'Why fumeth in fight', was immortalised by Vaughan Williams in his 'Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis'.

The relationship between Tallis and William Byrd, some 35 years his junior, was a remarkable one. Byrd was very close personal friends with Tallis, undoubtedly his life-long mentor; they were constant musical colleagues and business partners and Tallis was godfather to Byrd's son Thomas. In 1583, Byrd witnessed Tallis's will. It is no surprise, then, that when Tallis died in November of 1585, Byrd wrote a lament on his mentor and friend's death. **Ye sacred muses** is a short piece, originally conceived as a consort song—a simple melody sung by one singer, in this case the soprano, and accompanied by instruments, usually viols or perhaps a lute. The intimacy and simplicity of the top line, colored with slight madrigalian touches giving each individual word attention and care, displays the deep, tender, and personal connection Byrd felt with this text. Byrd's ability to wrap woe and misery in such beautiful polyphonic packages is here displayed with poignancy and sincerity.

If *Ye sacred muses* represented a personal expression of grief for a lost friend, **Tribulationes civitatum** is much more like what we're used to from Byrd; a politically charged lament for the state of Protestant England. Byrd remained a Catholic throughout his life and the large number of anguished works bemoaning the plight of the Catholic recusancy in England has come to virtually summarize for many Byrd's entire life and work. It is indeed impossible to truly understand Byrd's music without understanding his political affiliations and the real oppression he no doubt experienced in his life and that of his friends. Byrd's political audacity is sometimes overlooked, however, as he would choose specific and often obscure texts, such as *Tribulationes civitatum*—drawn from four responsories of the old Sarum rite, the English Catholic liturgy—tailor them as he saw fit to exaggerate their political significance (the term 'civitatum' and all the derivations of civic imagery that occur in this collection and his work as a whole are largely believed to refer to England as a state), set them to music, and then publish them using the monopoly on music printing granted to him by Queen Elisabeth herself! Both *Tribulationes civitatum* and *Vigilate* come from his first published collection of music after Tallis's death, his *Cantiones Sacrae* of 1589. Indeed, this was his musical debut, in a way, showing to the wider musical world (these publications were largely intended for a continental audience) that Byrd was no longer Tallis' protégé, that he had firmly grasped the torch from his mentor.

Byrd's political audacity is perhaps best summed up in the character and mood of **Vigilate**. Here, Byrd abandons his usual pleas to God for mercy and instead goes on the offensive. This piece sets a passage from Mark's gospel in which Jesus charges his disciples to keep watch for the coming End Times. All who knew this passage, as all of his listeners would have done, would know it comes as the final punctuation to a chapter describing the cultural degradation, falsity, and, specifically, oppression and strife preceding the triumphal return of the Messiah, who would judge the evil doers and restore righteousness. The subtext here is that Byrd implies to his listeners that the Protestant political climate in England, and the oppression of the Catholic faithful, are precisely what was being prophesied. Byrd warns both his Catholic brethren and English society at large that their judgment is just around the corner and that a vengeful God is watching! The forthright, energetic, and powerful setting of these words makes Byrd's intentions clear. Watch out! Your time is coming.

Comparing this tortured, passionate, and vivid music with the serenity and undisputed confidence of Josquin's mass highlights precisely the sort of contrasts in 'Renaissance polyphony' which make listening to and understanding this music and its culture so richly rewarding.