

PROGRAM NOTES

Advent and Christmas

Whatever the reasons early Christians settled on December 25 to celebrate the birth of Christ, observing the feast just after the winter solstice places it at the moment when the sun begins, imperceptibly at first, to climb again in the sky. The penitential, prophetic season of Advent falls during the darkest weeks of the year, and it is there our program begins.

The plainchant antiphon *O clavis David* is one of a series of seven ancient “O antiphons” sung to the same melody, one for each of the seven days before Christmas Eve. The O antiphons evoke the coming Messiah in various attributes: *O Sapientia* (wisdom), *O Adonai* (Lord), *O radix Jesse* (root of Jesse), *O clavis David* (key of David), *O Oriens* (morning star), *O Rex* (king), *O Emanuel* (“God with us”). The initial letters of each word (after O) spell out the promise in a reverse acrostic, SARCORE, “ero cras”: “Tomorrow I shall be there.” In an eighth antiphon for Christmas Eve, *O virgo virginum*, the daughters of Jerusalem demand of the virgin Mary that she explain the unique wonder of her conception of Jesus. She admonishes them that what they seek to know is a divine mystery.

Obrecht’s *Factor orbis* quotes both *O clavis David* and *O virgo virginum*, along with texts and some tunes from seventeen other liturgical items. The liturgical texts, mostly for Advent, are introduced by a plea to the Maker of the world to hear the cries of his servants “on this day that brings light.” *Factor orbis* is a sort of musical sermon, but to fully comprehend this sermon as it is preached is impossible, for at times five different texts are sung simultaneously. The motet’s continuously shifting textures bring now one, now another text to the foreground. The opening plea, sung in imitative duet by the highest voices, comes to a cadence as a third voice enters with *Veni Domini*, “Come, Lord,” whereupon the duetting voices, joined by the bass, break into the acclamation *Noe!* The entrance of the tenor on the cantus firmus *Canite tuba* is marked by a hemiola in all parts. At the introduction of two non-Advent texts, *Deus qui sedes super thronos* (Epiphany) and *Media vita in morte sumus* (Lent), the texture changes from counterpoint to homophony; the effect is heart-stopping. The homophonic texture is, in turn, swept away by a return to counterpoint that moves twice as fast as anything beforehand in the motet; it concludes the first part. This “double-time” music appears again to wind up the second part, now at a somewhat slower speed determined by a proportional relationship between the sections, gathering all the voices together for the final cries of *Noe!*

Josquin’s *O virgo virginum* sets the O-antiphon complete, quoting the entire plainchant melody in the top voice and alluding to it in the others. Josquin sometimes deploys his six voices in antiphonal groups, for example setting a high trio against a low one. Equally characteristic is the hypnotic overlapping of short motives (as at *fiet istud*). A disorienting metrical shift at *hoc quod cernitis* heightens the sense of mystery.

Emulation and Homage

The composers on our concert represent several generations of musicians from northern France or modern-day Belgium. Du Fay was born near Brussels and trained as a choirboy in Cambrai. Malbecque seems to be from Maalbeek, north of Brussels. Grenon hailed from Paris or nearby, Ciconia was a proud native of Liège, and Cordier proclaimed his birthplace to be Reims. While Regis’s birthplace is unknown, he spent most of his working life in Soignies, about fifty miles northeast of Cambrai. Tinctoris was born in the early 1430s near Nivelles. Josquin was born near St-Quentin in Picardy, Obrecht in Ghent in Flanders, and Brumel possibly near Chartres. The latest of our composers, Willaert, came from the southern Low Countries, perhaps Bruges.

As northern musicians followed their itinerant careers, their paths crossed in one place or another—for example, Malbecque sang with Du Fay in the papal chapel and Du Fay and Grenon worked together at Cambrai Cathedral, which attempted (unsuccessfully) to hire Regis—and the music they composed was disseminated into all the corners of Europe. In such circumstances it is not surprising to come across instances of compositional emulation or rivalry. Regis’s *O admirabile commercium*, Obrecht’s *Factor orbis*, and Brumel’s *Nato canunt omnia* form a trio of works in which Obrecht and Brumel pay homage to Regis. All three motets are for five voices and feature multiple texts and cantus firmi. Reinhard Strohm has described *O admirabile commercium* as a “huge Christmas

pie,” stuffed full of antiphons, gospel texts, plainchant, and popular devotional songs (*cantiones*). Regis, who seems to be reinventing the motet each time he composes one, reserves one of his most genial inspirations for the close of *O admirabile*, a marvelous suspension of motion at the (nonsense?) words *Sus, valla sus in orisus*, as if the jubilant choir falls suddenly into a reverent hush at the cradle of the newborn.

The relationship of *Nato canunt omnia*, in particular, to Regis’s motet is unmistakable. Brumel’s work quotes one of the same Christmas cantiones, the rollicking *Magnum nomen domini Emanuel*—an unusual moment of pure levity in a highbrow genre—and the striking, heraldic fifths that begin the *secunda pars* (*Puer natus est*) are taken directly from *O admirabile*, with more voices thrown in for good measure. Where *Factor orbis* conveys the penitence and prophetic mysticism of Advent, *Nato canunt omnia* is filled with throughout with the high spirits of Christmas, manifested not least in a superabundance of jaunty cross relations (e.g., F-natural and F-sharp sounding in close proximity or simultaneously).

All of the music discussed so far quotes plainchant melodies; so do Du Fay’s settings of *Conditor alme siderum* and *Letabundus* and Willaert’s sonorous *Praeter rerum seriem*. The Du Fay pieces are intended for *alternatim* performance, each verse of plainchant answered by a verse in polyphony in which the topmost voice sings an elaborated version of the chant melody. Willaert’s *Praeter rerum seriem* sets the plainchant in a three-voice canon embedded among four freely composed voices. The rubric *Trinitas in unitate* makes explicit the symbolism of the canon—three parts of one substance. By writing for seven voices Willaert surely intended to surpass, at least in one dimension, Josquin’s six-voice work on the same text.

New Year’s with the Valois

New Year’s was celebrated with peculiar intensity by the nobles of the house of Valois who ruled both France and Burgundy, and members of the courts exchanged precious gifts called *estraines* (or *étrennes*) in enormous quantity. Illuminated books, jewel-encrusted saltcellars, enameled serving vessels, golden cups, reliquaries, pendants, brooches, rings, horses, dogs, hunting falcons: all changed hands in an ostentatious public ritual which honored the chivalric virtue of largesse (liberality, generosity), cemented social ties, established position within the courtly hierarchy, and allowed the rich and powerful to flaunt their wealth. Just as it does today, all this flamboyant materialism sometimes benefitted the artisans and craftspeople who fashioned the sumptuous objets d’art prized by their noble commissioners. The makers of New Year’s gifts included poets and musicians, and it is a small irony that while a single, superb little golden and bejeweled tabernacle is the only known *estraine* aside from manuscripts to have survived—much of the rest having been melted down and sold off to finance the endless wars pursued by a bellicose and perpetually cash-strapped nobility—twenty-seven songs remain to us that commemorate the occasion. In keeping with the conventions of chivalric love, these fifteenth-century New Year’s songs are not boisterous, champagne-inspired toasts. Elegantly crafted and finely wrought, their merit as gifts was measured in part by their ingenuity or *estrangeté* (novelty), and most are marked with a graceful sort of melancholy, for courtly love can never be consummated, only yearned and suffered for.

A Word on Words

It is a bitter truth that some of the most joyous Christmas texts are marred by venomous barbs aimed at Jews and others regarded by Christianity as unbelievers; some of these were set to beautiful music. There is no single or perfect solution to this problem. Our view is that we musicians are not playing roles in some sort of historical drama, nor is it our job in this concert to preserve the historical record by reciting it neutrally. (That is a critical task, but it’s not ours.) We are performers who want to enjoy what we are doing and convey that enjoyment to our audience, and we don’t feel obliged to sing words we find hateful, so our choice on this occasion is to emend the words. If you are interested in the original text of *Letabundus*, you can no doubt find it on the internet somewhere. Or, in the spirit of early music, try a library!

—Scott Metcalfe