

PROGRAM NOTES

Music clearly fascinated the great Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450 - 1516); his sketches and paintings are peppered with closely observed depictions of music-making and musical instruments. But these pictures suggest a fraught relationship to the activity: representations of instruments put to lewd use and singers presented as fools or among hell's company far outnumber angelic harpists. A blush of guilty pleasure colors the gaily carousing company of lay and religious men and women in the "Ship of Fools." The Damned, who sing from notes spewed on a man's naked posterior by a monstrous choirmaster in the "Hell" panel from "The Garden of Earthly Delights," do so with gusto. Bosch seems to have experienced music as at once dangerous and delightful.

Indeed, the artist regularly indulged his double-edged interest in music. Bosch, a native of 's-Hertogenbosch in the Duchy of Brabant, was a life-long sworn brother of the city's Brotherhood of Our Illustrious Lady, a large and prestigious organization for which sacred music was an essential and highly valued part of its devotional life. Every Wednesday Bosch could gather with his Confraternity brothers in their opulent chapel in the church of St. John the Evangelist to celebrate a votive Mass in honor of the Blessed Virgin. There he would have heard their choir of men and boys sing not only the ancient plainsong melodies but also the most complex new music of his time, polyphonic Masses and motets by composers of both international and local reputation.

This program aims to capture a sense of the devotional soundscape that Bosch experienced throughout his life as a member of this music-loving Marian brotherhood. Instead of the frightening cacophony conjured by the artist's vision of Hell, we encounter here the joy and serenity of the weekly Marian votive Mass liturgy with its prescribed progression of chants that praise and entreat the Blessed Virgin, the Confraternity's patroness. The opening acclamation of the introit chant *Salve sancta parens* (Salve – Hail!) salutes her as the celebrant enters the chapel, and the ornate polyphony that decorates the melody as it unfolds (the work of a local composer) set the jubilant tone that will pervade the rest of the ceremony.

Confraternity singers could choose from many polyphonic settings of the Mass Ordinary contained in the three manuscripts they commissioned from the illustrious scriptorium of Petrus Alamire (c. 1470 - 1536). From among the several Marian options, we have chosen the *Missa Cum jocunditate* by Pierre de la Rue (c. 1450 - 1518), who was not only the most renowned composer of the Habsburg-Burgundian court but also an external member of the brotherhood from the early 1490s until his death in 1518. Indeed, La Rue may well have had occasion to meet Bosch during these years.

The *Missa Cum jocunditate* is based on the first six notes of the final Vespers antiphon for the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, but the text associated with this short tune (*Cum jocunditate* – With Joy!) made this Ordinary setting suitable for any Mass in praise of the Virgin. As is immediately apparent in the **Kyrie** and **Gloria**, this catchy phrase saturates the musical fabric as a melodic ostinato. Indeed, the tenor sings almost nothing but these six notes, over and over, oscillating happily between statements on G and D in endlessly varied rhythmic designs.

The collect prayer and the Old Testament reading would have followed the Gloria, leading to the gradual *Benedicta et venerabilis es*. Chant manuscripts of the confraternity reveal that local practice generally truncated this chant, omitting the verse—instead, the choir proceeds directly into the ebullient Alleluia: *Ave Maria*, an expansive melismatic plainsong.

Confraternity custom requires the long sequence chant to be adorned with polyphony. Of the three votive Marian sequences provided with polyphony in the confraternity's choirbooks, all by an unnamed and presumably local composer, we have chosen the sequence *Verbum bonum et suave*. Here the odd-numbered verses of the melody's paired stanzas are sung as chant, while a quartet responds with intricate four-voice polyphony on the even-numbered verses.

The sequence prepared the gospel reading, which was then followed by the **Credo**. La Rue's Credo from the *Missa Cum jocunditate* pulls out all the stops, expanding the texture from four to five voice parts and highlighting the Creed's mention of Mary's essential role ("And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, and was made man") with luscious homophonic chords.

Quite exceptionally, no Offertory chant accompanied the preparation of the gifts of bread and wine; the chant books of the confraternity deliberately omit it. But music surely embellished this phase of the liturgy, and we have chosen an anonymous six-voice setting of the brief suffrage prayer *Sub tuum presidium* found in one of the confraternity's *Alamire* choirbooks. Like La Rue's Credo setting, this too highlights a special text phrase ("O Holy Mother of God") with a single long held chord that seems to allow time for the invocation to rise heavenward.

The **Prefatio**, intoned by the celebrant, prepares the ritual solemnity of the **Sanctus** section of La Rue's *Missa Cum jocunditate*, which provided the sonic backdrop for the Elevation of the Host. At the outset La Rue presents a puzzle to the

singers: in the tenor the entire written part of the opening section consists of just the six notes of the “Cum jocunditate” motive followed by a playful profusion of repeat signs suggesting multiple repetitions at different pitches. The tenors must repeat this motive stepping down the scale from D to G, creating an audible descent suggesting the descent of the Holy Spirit to accomplish the miracle of Transubstantiation. Next, lively syncopation and rising motives permeate the three-voice Pleni, the “With Joy!” motive now disappearing as the tenor falls silent.

The first Osanna usually marked the ritual apex of the Mass, the Elevation of the Host. However, confraternity custom permitted the substitution of an Elevation motet for the first Osanna, for which the singers were paid a little extra. Two of the Brotherhood’s three *Alamire* choirbooks include an anonymous setting of *O salutaris hostia* expressly for this purpose. Here we have chosen the four-voice setting with lucid texture and long held chords that seem to suspend the listener in time and space, inviting contemplation of God’s presence at this juncture of the ceremony. La Rue’s intricate polyphony resumes with the three-voice Benedictus, followed by the concluding jaunty Osanna in which the tenor resumes its “Cum jocunditate” ostinato.

After the chant *Pater noster*, embellished here with improvised counterpoint, the choir sings the **Agnus Dei** from La Rue’s *Missa Cum jocunditate*. In the confraternity’s choirbook, the final invocation with the plea for peace appears in the final **Agnus Dei**, coinciding with a change to triple meter that brings this last section of the Mass Ordinary to a joyful conclusion. The simple communion plainsong *Beata viscera* again directs praise to the confraternity’s patroness.

That confraternity members could sometimes enjoy a motet at the close of Mass is suggested by the interpolation of a motet after each Mass setting in one of their *Alamire* choirbooks. Thus we conclude our evocation of the confraternity’s Wednesday votive Marian Mass with La Rue’s motet *Gaude virgo mater Christi*, an exuberant setting of a poem enumerating the Seven Joys of Mary – a most appropriate theme for a votive Mass in her honor, by a composer who was himself a member of the organization.

Except for this final motet, all the music in this program comes from the treasure-trove of extant manuscripts made expressly for the confraternity’s worship services during the first decades of the sixteenth century. Cappella Pratensis sings from the original notation, reading from scale copies of the confraternity’s manuscripts of plainsong and polyphony, and adopts the Brabant pronunciation of Latin those singers surely employed. They also read together from one large music book, like the men portrayed in the *Singers in the Egg* sketch attributed to Bosch. Indeed, one can’t help but wonder whether Bosch modeled the faces in his sketch on the confraternity singers he would have heard at Mass. They seem a merry bunch, but perhaps Bosch had some reservations about them too: they sit in the egg’s yolk, or “door” in Middle Dutch—a word which also meant “fool”!

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