

PROGRAM NOTES

Impassioned love songs proclaiming her incomparable beauty; contemplative motets pondering the mystery of a humanity touched by the divine; fantastical tales recounting her miraculous powers of intervention in everyday life: followers of the Virgin Mary in medieval and Renaissance Spain expressed their devotion in music and poetry as multifaceted and colorful as the most highly esteemed lady herself. Mary's devotees knew her as a mother and yet a virgin, meek and modest yet courageous, existing on both earthly and celestial planes. This wonderful paradox was rooted in her capacity to contain the divine within a human form as the Mother of God. As His most excellent creation, she was eminently relatable in her humanity, and yet without peer.

In Catholic Spain, the cult of Mary had its first great artistic blossoming in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, produced in the 13th century by a creative team lead by King Alfonso X of Castile. These songs of devotion, numbering over four-hundred, are all dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The majority of these works are known as the *cantigas de miragro*; they narrate miracles that she performed on behalf of her devotees. The cantiga *Ben pode Santa Maria* depicts Mary as a courageous healer who comes to the aid of a pilgrim threatened by a fearsome dragon. As the refrain proclaims, "Well can Holy Mary cure all poison, for She is Mother of the One who trampled the basilisk and the dragon!"

The remaining cantigas are *cantigas de loor*, songs that praise Mary in language strongly influenced by the troubadours. In the 11th and 12th centuries the troubadours of southern France developed the concept and vocabulary of courtly love, which emphasized worshipful service to a noble lady of great virtue and beauty. The creative tension inherent in the courtly love paradigm was a result of the lady's unattainable status; it produced a desire that rarely found satisfaction in love's consummation however eloquently the troubadour begged his lady for mercy. Yet this unsatisfied longing was ultimately an end in itself, ennobling the troubadour through tests of loyalty.

Wherever the troubadour tradition spread, the tropes of courtly love were transferred to Marian devotional song. The final verse of the cantiga *Rosa das rosas* makes the connection explicit: "This Dame I have as my Lady, and Her troubadour I would be. If I can somehow win Her Love, I consign to the devil all other loves." As the Queen of Heaven, Mary was the ultimate courtly lady, a paragon of virtue believed to be totally free from the stain of sin. Mary's virginal purity blessed and made chaste the fervent desire expressed in the *cantigas de loor*.

The language of courtly love continued to permeate Marian devotional songs in later generations of Spanish poetry. One of the primary sources for the repertory is the *Llibre vermell*, a late 14th-century manuscript created at the monastery of Montserrat. Strikingly situated on a mountaintop, the monastery was one of Spain's great pilgrimage sites; it attracted worshippers with its statue of the Black Virgin, to whom many miracles were attributed. *Stella splendens in monte* picks up on the Marian trope that compared her to a day star illuminating the path to salvation, an image also employed in the *cantiga de loor Santa maria stella do dia*. In *Stella splendens*, Mary is described as a "star burning brightly as a sunbeam," guiding pilgrims from all walks of life up the mountainside to the monastery. The final verse speaks to the elevating effect that devotion to Mary promised: "Thus by our prayers, we, of both sexes, purify our souls, devoutly invoking the Glorious Virgin, mother of mercy, full of grace, may we truly gaze on her in heaven!"

The late 15th-century *Cancionero de Palacio*, palace songbook of the fervently devout monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, is a treasury of polyphonic love songs called *villancicos*, both secular and devotional. In *En el servicio de vos*, the singer declares his intention to dedicate his life in service to the Virgin. Philosophical reflections on the path to virtue are set to sinuous melodic phrases inflected with expressive chromatic coloration. The texture of solo voice with instrumental accompaniment provides an ideal platform for the deeply personal nature of the singer's musings. Though dating a century earlier, *Mariam matrem virginem* from the *Llibre vermell* employs a similar strategy of matching sacred texts to a traditionally secular musical background. This polyphonic type of refrain-song known as a *virelai* was more typically set to courtly love poetry. Instead of praising an earthly lover, however, here Mary is hailed as an "asylum" and "safe haven from the world."

Mystical contemplation was another common preoccupation of Spanish poets of the period. While Mary was not considered a divine being, her status as simultaneously a perpetual virgin and a mother signified a holy mystery for her devotees akin to Christ's dual status as both man and God. This beautiful paradox deepens with Mary's roles as both daughter and mother of God. In the polytextual motet *O maria, virgo davitica/O maria maris*

stella/IN VERITATE, one of the two voices implores: “By your pious prayer, soften your son, whose daughter you are by miraculous means.” A second polytextual motet, *Iam nubes/Iam novum/SOLEM*, picks up on the same theme using enigmatic imagery. “The heavens open to reveal the galaxy,” “Christ comes to give us joy in his heavenly court,” and “thou art his daughter and his mother, Mary.” Both motets are contained in the *Huelgas Codex*, a manuscript copied in the early fourteenth century but containing monophony and polyphony spanning at least one-hundred years. The music was likely sung by the sisters in the convent of Santa Maria la Real de Las Huelgas in Burgos where the manuscript was compiled.

The 16th-century composer Francisco Guerrero composed a number of polyphonic settings of Marian devotional texts for high voices that remained popular in Spain and the New World well into the 18th century. His harmonic language was unusually forward-looking, which helps explain his prolonged appeal. *O Virgen, quand’os miro*, opens with an exclamation of wonder: “O Virgin! When I look upon you, there is no room in my soul for any more joy.” Eventually the three voices begin eagerly tumbling over each other in breathless imitation: “For this I sigh, searching for the happiness that only you can give it to my soul.” In Guerrero’s *Pastor, quien madre virgen*, deceptively simple vocal lines elegantly intertwine; the singers once again marvel at the seeming contradiction posed by Mary, at once a virgin and a mother, and her Son, at once human and divine. Such realities are too wonderful for the mortal mind to comprehend.

Very little music survives from before the 15th century that was written explicitly for instruments. However, there is strong evidence to support the adaptation of vocal repertory for that purpose. The primary source manuscript for the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* contains detailed images of a wide array of musical instruments, including percussion, vielles, harps, and a variety of winds. The cantigas are very well adapted to instrumental dances, particularly because the ambiguous rhythms of the manuscript’s notation allow performers a great deal of flexibility in their interpretation. The texted monophonic and polyphonic repertory contained in the *Llibre vermell* is similarly well-suited for instrumental performance.

Francisco de la Torre’s *Danza alta* from the *Cancionero de Palaciò*, is an elaboration of “La Spagna,” a common 15th-century *tenor* or simple musical line meant to be paired with a more florid improvised line on top. It includes a second simple *contratenor* line to strengthen the *tenor* and add harmonic context. This texture of florid *descant*/simpler *contratenor*/simple *tenor* was the 15th century’s dominant musical texture for official public music-making and the dance music of the upper class.

“Passamezzo Antico” is not so much a specific piece of music as it is a chord progression to improvise upon. Included in Diego Ortiz’ 1553 improvisation treatise *Tratado de glosas*, this ground bass is one of the most versatile chord progressions in the Renaissance improvisational tradition. Ortiz includes a written example of a possible improvisation over this progression, which performers are free to sample from at will.

—Elena Mullins and Niccolo Seligmann