

PROGRAM NOTES

Jacob Obrecht was born in the Flemish city of Ghent in 1457 or 1458 to one of the city trumpeters. During his eventful career, he held a succession of posts as choirmaster throughout the Low Countries. In 1487 he spent a year in Ferrara at the invitation of the music-loving duke Ercole I d'Este. He returned nearly twenty years later in 1504 as the duke's chapelmaster, but the following winter Ercole died unexpectedly and Obrecht was dismissed; by the end of the summer he too had died, but of the plague. The bulk of Obrecht's surviving output consists of thirty-odd mass cycles, nearly all based on known *cantus firmi*. Obrecht's ingenuity in reworking these materials makes fascinating study. But in his lifetime, he was mainly famous for the melodic fluency of his compositions (he is reputed to have composed an entire mass in a single day).

When Obrecht composed *Missa Maria zart* isn't known, but there are good reasons for thinking it one of his very last masses. Its use of a monophonic German devotional song as cantus firmus is unique in his mass *oeuvre*, and its only surviving source is a print issued in Basel within a few years of his death. All this suggests a Germanic origin. As it happens, Obrecht stopped at the court of Maximilian I at Innsbruck on his last journey to Ferrara and was paid for composing at least one mass, likely at Maximilian's request. Although that mass was probably not *Maria zart* (the equally impressive *Missa Sub tuum presidium* being a more likely candidate), this stay is nevertheless the most plausible known context for its composition.

Missa Maria zart is one of the longest cantus firmus masses that survives, lasting nearly an hour. Even by Obrecht's standards it is unusually ambitious, complex, and inventive. Using a procedure peculiar to Obrecht, the *Maria zart* tune is broken up into segments, to which the tune naturally lends in itself due to its short phrases and simple note values. The tenor voice (in the middle of the texture) presents these segments gradually throughout the Mass, a few in each section but always in their correct order, first in long note values and then speeding up gradually during each section. The last segment is reached in the Hosanna, coinciding with the elevation of the host. The entire tune is stated in long notes in the Agnus Dei, first in the bass (Agnus I) and finally, most audibly of all, in the top voice (Agnus III). But even in the sections where the tenor is silent (the Christe, the two central duos in the Gloria, and the central trios in the last three movements), the tune appears in different disguises, some clearly audible and others cunningly hidden.

Since the Basel partbooks are somewhat problematic for practical use, Cappella Pratensis sings from a newly commissioned copy in choirbook format, handmade by bass singer Marc Busnel. The singers' preparation of the very complex notation took place under my guidance as part of a project in collaboration with the Alamire Foundation (University of Leuven, Belgium).

—Fabrice Fitch

For this performance, Cappella Pratensis is evoking the liturgical form of a mass by presenting the *Missa Maria zart* in the context of the plainsong propers appropriate for a Marian feast. The choice of these chants has a special meaning for Cappella Pratensis as we are singing them from facsimiles of a manuscript that forms part of a music collection in our "home town" of 's-Hertogenbosch (The Netherlands). This manuscript, a choirbook known as the *Codex Smijers*, is held in the archives of the Confraternity of Our Illustrious Lady, a paraliturgical organization that has formed part of the Church of St. John in that city for more than 700 years. The music collection represents one of the rare cases where musical sources are still held by the institution for which they were made. The *Codex Smijers*, made in the early years of the 16th century, is unusual because it contains both chant and polyphony. The splendid calligraphy and illumination of this source make it a valuable part of the musical heritage of the province of North Brabant. Cappella Pratensis is proud to share this heritage with the wider world on this tour. In accordance with the formulary as presented in this source, we will sing the Introit, Gradual, Alleluia, and Communion, but there is no Offertory.

—Stratton Bull