

Jacob Obrecht at 500 - a tribute

(Ghent, 1457/8 – Ferrara, shortly before 1 August 1505)

Early Music Ensemble, David Nutter, *director*

Alta Sonora, a Renaissance wind band on shawms and sackbut

Program

Kyrie from Missa Salve diva parens Jacob Obrecht

Alta Sonora Meiskin es u (Maiden, is your...)
 Lacen Adieu (Alas farewell)
 Waer sij di han (Where are you Han?)

Alma Redemptoris mater

Si sumpsero

Omnis spiritus

Alta Sonora Ave regina celorum Walter Frye
 Ave regina celorum Obrecht

Beata es Maria

Salve Regina

Alta Sonora Tousjours me souviendra Johannes Martini
 Per faire toujours (ca 1440–1497)
 Des biens d'amours

A Madrigal on Mercy (1st performance) for Sarah Eyerly and the EME

Nathan Kroms Davis
(1980 –)



The Early Music Ensemble

Soprano

Margaret Grayden, Carole Hom, Elise Keddie, Kami Koldewyn, Jocelyn Olander, Jane Wong

Alto

Jacki Amos, Helen Nutter, Jocelyn Olander, Ashley Richardson

Tenor

Brook Ostrom, Neil Willits

Bass

Jeffrey Hockenson, Richard Mix, Robert Pearson

with Sarah Eyerly, *soprano*

Alta Sonora

John Harris, *sackbut*

Robin Houston, *alto shawm*

Peggy Murray, *soprano shawm*

Karen Nebelkopf, *alto shawm*

Program note

The year 2005 marks the quincentenary anniversary of Jacob Obrecht's death. Tonight's concert is in part a celebration of this important event and offers an interesting opportunity to rethink what Obrecht means to the twenty-first century. An international Obrecht conference will be held in Antwerp later this year to discuss this matter.

Obrecht's musical career is characterized by unusually frequent changes of position. Like most composers during the Renaissance, Obrecht was always hoping for a job-offer in Italy, where the most money and prestige were to be found. Indeed, Obrecht eventually landed a job working for Duke Ercole d'Este as *maestro di capella* in Ferrara. Ironically, only months after securing his dream job, Obrecht became infected with the bubonic plague and died in 1505.

Obrecht generally preferred to build his masses and motets over a cantus firmus (a pre-existing melody). This compositional technique is made interesting because of the variety of ways in which he employs it. In Obrecht's three-voice motet, *Alma Redemptoris mater*, there is much imitation between soprano and alto voices, immediately establishing a playful dialogue that continues throughout the entire motet; meanwhile the bass moves much more slowly beneath, paraphrasing the chant melody. In the freely-composed *Si sumpsero* Obrecht uses a highly imitative technique (the work was often arranged for instruments). *Omnis spiritus* is not a motet in the usual sense but a collection of prayers and acclamations that could end an Office or a paraliturgical occasion, such as the blessing and thanksgiving before and after the repast in a religious community. The supplication "for our king" may point to Cambrai or Bruges, both under French royal rule. *Beata es Maria* opens with fragmentary statements of the cantus firmus in each voice. In this motet, Obrecht draws from the opening motive—a minor third between G and B-flat—to create a structure for the entire piece. Obrecht not only uses this particular interval throughout *Beata es Maria*, but G and B-flat are also the tonics of the two conflicting tonalities throughout the piece. The main cantus firmus *Beata es* has been identified as the *Repetitio* of a Marian *cantio Virgo Galilea* and as the *ripresa* of a monophonic lauda. In the *seconda pars* this cantus firmus is combined with the text and melody of some verses of the sequence *Ave Maria*. Obrecht's setting of *Salve Regina* alternates plainsong and polyphony, the latter subjected

to great variety of scoring from full-throttle to the most transparently delicate.

In 1503 Ottaviano Petrucci published a collection of masses by Obrecht, the *Misse Obrecht*. Among these was *Missa Salve diva parens*. The cantus firmi of most of Obrecht's works come from easily identifiable chant or chanson sources, but the origin of the cantus firmus for *Missa Salve diva parens* still remains a mystery. There is reason to believe that Duke Ercole d'Este may have had access to this piece, perhaps inclining him to hire Obrecht several years later.

Playing vocal works on instruments was common in a period when idiomatic instrumental music was in the process of emerging. French chansons, such as those of Martini, were the most popular (beginning in 1501 Petrucci published whole collections of textless French chansons). Obrecht's Middle-Dutch songs are lively pieces in a style using frequent homophonic declamatory passages, modest use of imitation, and a generally simple harmonic style with regular cadences apparently articulating the phrase structure of the text. Although few of these pieces survive with any text beyond the incipit and several may well have been conceived for instruments (Obrecht's father Willem was a town trumpeter), the lighthearted nature of the opening words confirms that we may be in the realm of popular urban entertainment (the text of "Meiskin es u" is obscene). Obrecht's setting of *Ave regina celorum* is based on that of the English composer Walter Frye (? - d before 1475), hence their conjunction in the program.

- Robert Pearson (with additional information from the editors of The New Obrecht Edition and Rob C. Wegman)



Pl. 11. Kyrie of *Missa Salve diva parens* (VienNB Mus. 15495; used by permission of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna)

Texts and translations

Alma Redemptoris mater

Alma Redemptoris mater
quae pervia caeli porta manens.
Et stella maris, succurre cadenti
surgere qui curat populo.
Tu quae genuisti natura mirante
tuum sanctum genitorem.
Virgo prius ac posterius,
Gabrielis ab ore sumens illud
ave, peccatorum miserere.

Mother benign of our redeeming Lord,
Star of the sea and portal of the skies,
Unto thy fallen people help afford -
Fallen, but striving still anew to rise.
Thou who didst once, while wondering worlds adored,
Bear thy Creator, Virgin then as now,
O by the holy joy at Gabriel's word,
Pity the sinners who before thee bow.

- Marian antiphon sung from Advent to Purification

Si sumpsero

Si sumpsero pennas meas diluculo,
Et habitavero in extremis maris:
Non timebo mala, quoniam tu mecum es.

If I take the wings of the dawn,
if I settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
I fear no evil, for you are at my side.

- Psalm 138 (139): 9 and Psalm 22 (23):4; unknown liturgical function

Omnis spiritus

Omnis spiritus laudet Dominum,
tu autem Domine miserere nobis.
Deo gratias.

Let every spirit praise the Lord,
but do thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us.
Thanks be to God.

Agimus tibi gratias, rex omnipotens Deus,
pro universis beneficiis tuis,
qui vivis et regnas Deus,
per omnia secula seculorum. Amen.

We thank thee, Almighty God, for all the
good things thou hast done unto us,
who livest and reignest God
for ever and ever. Amen.

Pro rege nostro.
Dominus conservet eum et beatum faciat
eum in terra. Et non tradat eum in manus
inimicorum eius.

For our King.
May God preserve him and make him
blessed upon earth and not deliver him
into the hands of his enemies.

Fidelium anime per misericordiam Dei
requiescant in pace. Amen.

May the souls of the faithful rest in peace
for God's mercifulness. Amen.

Et beata viscera Marie virginis, que
portaverunt eterni Patris Filium. Amen.

And blessed is the womb of the virgin Mary,
that bore the Son of the Father everlasting. Amen.

Beata es Maria

Beata es Maria,
Virgo clemens et pia,
Candore vincis lilia.
Es rosa sine spina,
Sanctorum melodia.
Kyrie eleyon.
Christe eleyon.
O Christe audi nos.

Blessed art thou, Mary,
Merciful and piteous virgin,
In whiteness thou surpassest the lilies,
Thou art a rose without a thorn,
the melody of the saints.
Lord, have mercy upon us.
Christ, have mercy upon us.
O Christ, hearken unto us.

Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis ad Dominum.
Ave Maria, gratia plena,

Holy Mary, pray for us unto the Lord.
Hail Mary, full of grace,

Dominus tecum, virgo serena.
Benedicta tu in mulieribus,
Et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus.
Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis peccatoribus.
O Christe audi nos.

The Lord is with thee, thou calm maiden,
Blessed art thou among women,
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, pray for us sinners.
O Christ, hearken unto us.

Salve Regina

Salve, Regina, mater misericordiae:
Vita, dulcedo, e spes nostra, salve.
Ad te clamamus, exsules, filii Hevae,
Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes,
in hac lacrimarum valle.
Eia ergo, advocata nostra, illos
tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte.
Et Jesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui,
nobis post hoc exsilium ostende.
O clemens, O pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria.

Hail, O Queen, mother of mercy
Our life, sweetness and hope.
We banished children of Eve call to thee,
To thee do we sigh, mourning and weeping
In this vale of tears.
O you, our advocate,
Turn on us thy merciful eyes.
And after this our exile show unto us Jesus,
the blessed fruit of thy womb.
O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.

- an alternatim setting (odd verses in plainsong) of the Marian antiphon sung from Trinity to Advent

A Madrigal on Mercy

Adapted by the composer from William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes;
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst this merchant there.

Adapted by the composer from Clarence Darrow's summation of *The State of Illinois vs. Leopold and Loeb*:

If these two boys die on the scaffold, it will enter every home and every family. Will it make men better or make men worse? Would it harden the heart of man or would it soften it? How many men would enjoy the details? And you cannot enjoy human suffering without being affected for the worse.

The easy thing and the popular thing to do is hang my clients. I know it. I know the easy way. I know your honor stands between the future and the past. I know the future is with me, and what I stand for here. I am pleading for the future; I am pleading for a time when hatred and cruelty will not control the hearts of men. When we can learn that mercy is the highest attribute of man.