76TH SEASON OF CONCERTS
OCTOBER 29, 2017 / NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
Program

Pomerium

Flemish Musical Mastery in the Age of Hieronymus Bosch
Alexander Blachly, Director

Celebrating Bosch to Bloemaert: Early Netherlandish Drawings from the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

OCTOBER 29, 2017 / 3:30
WEST BUILDING, WEST GARDEN COURT

Orlande de Lassus (1532–1594)
O crux splendidior (6-voice motet)

Jacob Obrecht (c. 1450–1505)
Kyrie, Missa Caput (4-voice motet)

Josquin des Prez (c. 1450–1521)
Inviolata, integra et casta es, Maria (5-voice motet)

Guillaume DuFay (c. 1397–1474)
Gloria, Missa Ecce ancilla Domini (4-voice motet)

Alexander Agricola (c. 1450–1518)
Ave que sublimaris (3-voice motet)

Cipriano de Rore (c. 1515–1565)
Agimus tibi gratias (5-voice motet)

Giaches de Wert (1535–1596)
Vox in Rama (5-voice motet)

Intermission

Henricus Isaac (c. 1450–1517)
Reple tuorum corda (3-voice motet)

Nicolas Gombert (c. 1495–c. 1560)
Sanctus, Missa je suis desbéritée (4-voice motet)

Josquin des Prez
Stabat mater (5-voice motet)

Loyset Compère (c. 1445–1518)
Agnus Dei, Missa L’homme armé (4-voice motet)

Orlande de Lassus
Cum essem parvulus (6-voice motet)

The Musicians

POMERIUM

Pomerium was founded by Alexander Blachly in New York in 1972 to perform music composed for the famous chapel choirs of the Renaissance. The name Pomerium—medieval Latin for “garden” or “orchard”—derives from the title of a treatise by the fourteenth-century music theorist Marchettus of Padua, who explained that his Pomerium in arte musice mensurate contains the “flowers and fruits” of the art of music.

Widely known for its interpretations of DuFay, Ockeghem, Busnoys, Josquin, Lassus, and Palestrina, the fifteen-voice a cappella ensemble has performed for numerous international festivals, including the Festival di Musica Sacra Bressanone e Bolzano, the Tage Alter Musik Festival in Regensburg, Germany, the Flanders Festival Antwerp, and the Holland Festival Oude Muziek Utrecht.

ALEXANDER BLACHLY / DIRECTOR

Active in early music as both performer and scholar for more than forty years, Alexander Blachly earned his post-graduate degrees in musicology from Columbia University. He is a recipient of the Noah Greenberg Award given by the American Musicological Society to stimulate historically aware performances and the study of historical performing practices. Prior to assuming the choral music directorship at the University of Notre Dame in 1993, Blachly taught early music and directed collegia musica at Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence College, New York University, Rutgers University, and the University of Pennsylvania, where for eight years he directed the a cappella ensemble Ancient Voices. For fourteen years Blachly directed a summer workshop in Renaissance a cappella performance sponsored by the Syracuse Schola Cantorum; he has also been on the faculties of the Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute and the Amherst Early Music Festival. In addition to Pomerium, Blachly directs the Notre Dame Schola Musicorum and Festival Baroque Orchestra.

Soprano
Kristina Boerger

Martha Cluver
Sarah Hawkey
Chloe Holgate
Dominique Surh

Countertenor
Peter Gruett
Emerson Sieverts

Tenor
Neil Farrell
Patrick Fennig
Michael Steinberger
Christopher Preston Thompson

Baritone
Thomas McCargar

Bass
Peter Becker
Kurt-Owen Richards
Program Notes

The images in the exhibition Bosch to Bloemaert: Early Netherlandish Drawings from the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, currently on view at the National Gallery of Art, initially impress us with their extraordinary precision of detail. Even when the subject is as charming as Hieronymus Bosch’s pen-and-ink drawing Owl’s Nest (c. 1505–1515), our first response is likely wonder at the detailed feathers on the central owl’s wing, rather than appreciation of the picture’s larger subject matter. The artist’s ability to transfer immediate details of our visual experience of the physical world to paper or canvas with such lifelike accuracy was not a talent unique to Bosch. On the contrary, it was a skill possessed by every Northern European artist of the Renaissance, including those featured in the current exhibition.

Precision of detail was also the prominent characteristic of the music by Netherlandish composers of the time. Their music did not take the world of nature as a starting point (there are no bird calls or barking dogs in Netherlandish music), but all of the composers in today’s program shared a mastery of minute details of counterpoint and voice-leading that impresses the listener with moment-by-moment obedience to the musical “laws of nature.” We will not hear in today’s pieces such features of medieval music as clashing dissonances or outré melodic leaps. Nor will we find the music arranged in the abstract rhythmic patterns that characterize polyphony from the thirteenth century. The default melody is flexible and supple, with phrases making an effect comparable to the roundness of a branch or the softness of human limbs defined by light and shadow. Such phrases invite shapely performance.

Significantly, the Netherlandish visual artists were not content simply to mirror nature. Often their drawings and paintings convey a moral message. In the Owl’s Nest, the message seems straightforward: the adult owl in the center of the drawing is teaching a young bird how to fly, and we almost unconsciously make the connection that for the old to teach the young is “natural,” something that adult humans also do for their children. In the famous Haywain Triptych (c. 1485), Bosch conveys a more complicated message. In the first place, this brightly colored painting seems only tangentially related to the real world. It bears, rather, the aspect of a dream or, in the right panel, a nightmare. This is Bosch’s allegory on the destructive nature of greed. The hay piled dangerously high on the cart represents wealth, which people from various walks of life try to pry loose with pitchforks, or try to clamber aboard with a ladder, or claw at with their hands. Ratlike monsters draw the cart toward Hell, which is depicted in the right panel, and away from Earthly Paradise in the left panel. The Pope and an emperor follow directly behind the haycart. They, too, have fallen prey to the hay’s lure. Other people are about to be run over by the cart’s wheels or are being crushed by those desperately grabbing what they can. Only the musicians atop the haystack and the monk drinking wine in the lower right corner seem at peace. The musicians may be captivated by sweet sounds saving them from greed, while the monk doesn’t need to worry because the nuns to his left are filling a sack with handfuls of hay.

One might imagine that vocal music, with its sung text, could convey a narrative message as complex as Bosch’s Haywain Triptych; but only in the last phase of the period in which Netherlandish musicians dominated Europe’s musical courts—when Orlande de Lassus and Giaches de Wert were in their prime in the 1570s and 1580s—had musical style evolved to the point where melodies and harmonies could be directly illustrative of ideas, whether narrative or psychological. The vivid evocation of emotional states by composers active in the later sixteenth century stands in marked contrast with all earlier polyphony (some pieces by Josquin excepted). Most early Netherlandish vocal music not only lacked the stylistic means to yoke musical expression to textual expression (a possibility that composers of the time rarely exhibited any interest), but their sacred polyphony focused almost exclusively on the setting of ritual texts, such as the Ordinary of the Mass: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. Ritual words, whether of the Mass or Office, were heard innumerable times throughout the year and expressed only generalized sentiments, such as Christian dogma in the Credo, or prayers for mercy on joyful or sad occasions.
But the Netherlandish composers had another way of anchoring even a liturgical text to a specific idea: by the use of a preexistent melody (with its associated words) as the foundation for any sort of vocal polyphony, whether Mass Ordinary, Marian antiphon, sacred motet with newly written words, or secular song. The sounding of the two texts at the same time created a commentary on one by the other, prompting nearly the same level of “interpretation” by the listener as that required by the viewer of moralizing Netherlandish visual works of art. In today’s program, three pieces employ preexistent foundation melodies with their own words in this way: the Gloria from Du Fay’s Missa Ecce ancilla Domini (the foundation melody being two Marian antiphons: Ecce ancilla Domini for the Annunciation and Beata es, Maria for the Visitation); Josquin’s Stabat mater (the foundation melody being the rondeau tenor of Binchois’s Comme femme desconsolée); and the Agnus Dei from Compère’s Missa L’homme armé (the foundation melody being the song L’homme armé).

Even in works on today’s program that do not employ multiple sets of words sounding simultaneously—works which therefore require no bitextual “interpretation” by the listener—we still hear the primary defining feature of Netherlandish music from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: the skillful manipulation of melodies interacting in a web of counterpoint to create richly inventive polyphony. Two of today’s pieces were originally composed as abstract instrumental studies without words, to which sacred words were added early in the sixteenth century: Isaac’s Reple tuorum corda (transmitted in most sources as the instrumental carmen La Morna) and Agricola’s Ave que sublimaris (a polyphonic study, wordless in most sources, based on the tenor of Binchois’s Comme femme desconsolée—the same melody that Josquin uses as foundation melody in his Stabat mater). In music by Du Fay, the technique of pervading imitation, whereby all voices of a piece engage in singing the same melodic motifs at different times, often starting on a different pitch of the scale, was just emerging. It would soon vie with the related technique of canon, whereby more than one voice reads the same notated music, but each interprets it differently, following some verbal or other clue. Josquin was the first master of both canon and pervading imitation, the hallmarks of his works in all genres. Some notable earlier examples had appeared sporadically prior to him, but his consistent approach served as the model for serious composition throughout the remainder of the sixteenth century. Martin Luther marveled at Josquin’s ability to execute contrapuntal feats, and his assessment still rings true: “Josquin can make the notes do as he wishes, while other composers must do as the notes demand.”

The two works by Josquin in today’s program illustrate his unusual ability to create emotional effects with music composed to a slow-moving foundation melody. His Stabat mater, as just mentioned, has the tenor of Binchois’s chanson Comme femme desconsolée sounding throughout. The chanson’s words express a lover’s extreme pain at losing her lover: “I am like a woman in agony, who has no further hope in life and cannot ever be consoled, but wishes for death night and day.” Josquin’s setting thereby casts Mary as the forlorn lover, whose loss of her beloved son Jesus causes her unbearable pain. In Inviolata, integra et casta es, Maria, the foundation melody comes from the chant sequence Inviolata, integra et casta es, Maria. Josquin has it sounding in canon at the upper fifth, with the temporal distance between “dux” (leading voice) and “comes” (companion voice) shrinking in each successive large section of the work, from three breves (whole notes) in Part I, to two breves in Part II, to one breve in Part III. The listener, however, hardly notices this rigidly architectonic ground plan, finding his or her attention drawn instead to the beguiling melodic fragments chasing each other throughout the piece in the foreground. Thus, the canon remains largely inaudible though controlling the work’s harmonies, while the elaborate pervading imitation that attracts our attention in the foreground has so graceful and elegant a profile that it seems to unfold independently of the ground plan.

The prize for Netherlandish contrapuntal acrobatics in today’s program goes to Loyset Compère, whose entire L’homme armé Mass has the famous L’homme armé tune (the foundation melody of over forty polyphonic Masses during the Renaissance) sounding in the “wrong” mode on E (the Phrygian), rather than on F (modified Lydian with B-flat) or G (Mixolydian, modified by many composers by the addition of B-flat). In Agnus I the tune appears in canon at the half-step, with Final on E and Final on F. The verbal instruction for how the “comes” is to read the notes differently from the “dux” typically requires some thought to decipher, challenging the performers to transform the apparent meaning of the notation as it appears on the page. The instruction in Agnus I is “Canon in e la mi,” with the tune notated on F for the “dux.” The “comes” is therefore to read the tune a half-step lower, as if notated on E. In Agnus III the instruction is “Fuga unius temporis in epithono,” with the tune notated on D. Again the “comes” is to read the tune as if the Final is on E, but now a whole step higher than notated. Once the puzzle of the instructions has been solved, the musical effect of consonant canons at such close pitch proximity seems almost miraculous.

Netherlandish contrapuntal virtuosity stands as the musical counterpart to the Netherlandish visual artists’ virtuosity in the realm of drawing and painting. Especially in the period under investigation, the more closely we examine Northern art, whether visual or sonic, the more admirable and thought-provoking it appears.

Program notes by Alexander Blachly
O crux splendidior
O crux splendidior cunctis astris, hominibus multum amabilis, sanctior universis, quae sola fuisti digna portare talentum mundi. Dulce lignum, dulces clavos, dulcia ferens pondera, salva praesentem catervam in tuis laudibus congregatam. Alleluia.

Kyrie eleison

Inviolata, integra et casta es, Maria
Inviolata, integra et casta es, Maria, que es effecta fulgida celi porta. O mater alma Christi carissima, suscipe pia laudum preconia.

Nostra ut pura pectora sint et corpora Que nunc flagitant devota corda et ora. Tua per precata dulcisona Nobis concedas veniam per secula.

O benigna, o regina, o Maria, Que sola inviolata permansisti.

Gloria in excelsis Deo

Vox in Rama
Vox in Rama audita est, ploratus et ululatus multus, Rachel plorans filios suos, et noluit consolari, quia non sunt.

Ave que sublimaris
Ave que sublimaris ad sidera notureris, Virgo polo sumpta, Fac nobis procula cuncta dilue peccata, Virgo super astra levata, Regnans in celis potentiibus Ore fidei eterna tribue polo Consendere sedem ac requiem Prelii fessis in arce summo.

Agimus tibi gratias
Agimus tibi gratias, rex omnipotens Deus, pro universis beneficis tuis, qui vivis et regnas per omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen.

A voice in Ramab
In Ramab a voice was heard, weeping and loud lamentation: Rachel weeping for her children; and she cannot be consoled, because they are no more.

Tenor:

Vox in Rama
Vox in Rama audita est, ploratus et ululatus multus, Rachel plorans filios suos, et noluit consolari, quia non sunt.

Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus

Hail, who have risen
Hail, Virgin, known for having risen to the stars, raised up in heaven: quickly cause us to be cleansed of all sin, Virgin, you who have been lifted above the stars, reigning now at the gate in the mighty skies of heaven eternal. Let the faithful gain a seat, and grant to those weary in battle peace in the highest citadel.

We give thanks to you
We give thanks to you, O God, omnipotent King, for all your blessings; you, who lives and reigns forever. Amen.

A voice in Ramab
In Ramab a voice was heard, weeping and loud lamentation: Rachel weeping for her children; and she cannot be consoled, because they are no more.

Holy, holy, holy
Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of Your glory. Hosannah in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosannah in the highest.
Stabat mater dolorosa
The sorrowing Mother stood
Weeping near the cross on which her Son hung.

O quam tristis et afflicta
Who is the man who would not weep to see the Mother of Christ in such agony?

Quis est homo qui non fleret
She grieving and mourning and trembling when she saw the sufferings of her glorious Son.

Quis non posset contristari
Who would not be saddened to contemplate the holy Mother grieving for her Son?

Pro peccatis sue gentis
For the sins of His people she sees Jesus in torment, subjected to a scourging.

Virgo virginum preclara,
Oh, Mother, fount of love, make me feel the strength of grief, that I may grieve with you.

Agnus Dei
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Tenor:
Comme femme desconfortée, distraught above all others, who has no further hope in life and cannot ever be consoled, but is ever more aggrieved by her misfortune and wishes for death night and day.
Tenor:
L’homme armé doit on doubter,
On a fait par tout crier
Que chacun se vigne armer
D’un haubregon de fer.

The man at arms ought one to fear;
One hears cried out everywhere
that all should arm themselves
with breastplates of iron.

Cum essem parvulus
Cum essem parvulus, loquebar ut parvulus,
sapiēbam ut parvulus, cogitabam ut
parvulus, quando autem factus sum vir,
evacuavi quae erant parvuli: videmus nunc
per speculum in aenigmate, tunc autem
facie ad faciem. Nunc cognosco ex parte,
tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum.
Fides, Spes, Charitas: tria haec: major autem
horum est Charitas.

When I was a child
When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I knew like a child, I thought like a child.
But when I became a man, I put away
childish things: for now we see through
a mirror unclearly, but then
face to face. Now I know in part,
then I shall know even as I am known.
Faith, Hope, Charity, these three: but the
greatest of these is Charity.