

Program Notes

Josquin Desprez is for many musicians the finest and most influential composer of the Renaissance before Lassus and Palestrina. For one so admired and researched to this day, it is remarkable how little of his early life is known. Born in or shortly after 1450 near Condé-sur-l'Escaut on the border between what is now France and Belgium, he may have been a boy singer in St. Quentin or Cambrai. Still young, he appears to have traveled extensively in France, singing in places as far apart as Anjou, Aix and Paris, and establishing a special relationship with, or admiration for Ockeghem, as reflected in some of his early works. In the south of France he appears to have built strong relations with the Sforza dynasty of Milan and moved to Italy by the 1570s. His first sure post was as a member of the Papal Chapel from 1489 to 1494. In 1503 he was appointed *maestro di cappella* at the magnificent court of Duke Ercole 1st d'Este in Ferrara. One year later he returned to his roots as provost at the Church of Notre Dame in Condé, where he died on August 21, 1521.

There is little evidence of the later awe in which he was held before the year 1500. As were many of the Franco-Flemish composers who helped to craft the Italian musical Renaissance, he was employed primarily as a singer who also composed works wherever he was employed. Perhaps the most telling quote comes from when Ercole was advised to employ him rather than the famed and reliable Heinrich Isaac, in spite of asking almost twice the salary: "(Isaac) seems well suited to your Lordship, more so than Josquin...and will compose new works more often. It is true that Josquin composes better, but he composes when he wants to and not when one wants him to, and he is asking 200 ducats in salary while Isaac will come for 120." Ercole wanted only the best.

This apparently well-known reputation as a perfectionist, perhaps also influenced by the attributed works in Petrucci's first ever printed and widely distributed music publications of 1501 in Venice, secured his fame while he continued to compose in Condé. So many lesser lights "borrowed" his name, even after his death, in the hope of getting noticed, that it has taken modern scholars years to agree on those works that are really his. Dating many of them is even more difficult.

The regrettably limited number of works included in our program contains at least one sample of each genre for which he has been acknowledged as the master – sacred motets, masses and secular chansons. We open with the undated but splendidly exuberant "Dominus regnavit – the Lord reigns." The chanson "Mille regrets" was the Holy Roman Emperor Charles 5th's favorite chanson and thus probably dates from his later years back in Condé, as does the "Missa Pange Lingua," Martin Luther's favorite. His best-loved Marian motet, the "Ave Maria," is definitely an early work, a copy of which was first discovered in a document dating from 1484. It was chosen by Petrucci to stand at the head of his first motet collection - arguably the perfect model for the High Renaissance. Just as Josquin had penned the famous tribute to his mentor Ockeghem, 'Nymphes des bois,' his friend Ludwig Senfl, built a magnificent memorial for him in his "Ave Maria".

Gombert's tribute, "Musae Jovis" was frequently arranged for instruments and is played today on the organ in our own tribute.

Ian Capps