



Lassus Masses

Missa super
'Dittes Maistresse'

Missa ad
imitationem moduli
'In te Domine speravi'

The Choir of
St Margaret's Church
Westminster Abbey

Directed by
Simon Over





The Choir of St Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey

Directed by Simon Over

Soprano

Sarah Goodall
Nicola Jenkin
Amanda Morrison
Lisa Wilson
Suzanne Wilson

Alto

Ian Aitkenhead
Andrew Olleson
Richard Wyn Roberts

Tenor

Mark Anderson
Bene't Coldstream
Stephen Douse

Bass

Timothy Brookes
Paul Charrier
Colin Hawke
Stephen Rice

Missa super 'Dittes Maistresse'

Motet: In te Domine speravi

Missa ad imitationem moduli 'In te Domine speravi'

The fame of Orlandus Lassus (1532-94) was unparalleled among musicians of the sixteenth century. At the age of twenty-one he secured the post of Director of Music at the church of St John Lateran in Rome, and began shortly thereafter to embark on an astonishingly prolific publishing career. There survive approximately 450 music prints issued between 1555 and Lassus's death containing his works; a further 80 are known to have existed but are lost. Thus not only did a print with Lassus's music appear on average every month for four decades, but this output comprised almost 50 percent of all music editions in the period.

As well as outdoing any composer before Bach for quantity of composition, Lassus was unique in the sixteenth century in mastering every genre of vocal music practised at the time. In Munich, where he worked for his whole life after 1558, Mass was sung polyphonically every day, hence his sixty-plus settings of the Ordinary. Likewise, his 60 Magnificats and 20 or so other canticles have their place in the daily Offices such

as Vespers. He also wrote over 500 motets, whose liturgical position is more flexible and consequently less clear. Such production of sacred music is unsurprising in a composer employed in an ecclesiastical institution, but to have also written two hundred Italian madrigals and villanelle, and similar quantities of French chansons and German Lieder is remarkable given the differences in style between the various national genres.

One might suppose that such a prolific output indicates a lack of adherence to the highest artistic standards: such a criticism has been levelled at the earlier Flemish composer Jacob Obrecht, for instance (though usually by those seeking to preserve the unique reputation of his contemporary Josquin Desprez). A similar charge was directed at Lassus by the eighteenth-century music historian Charles Burney, who said of the sacred compositions: 'by striving to be grave and solemn they only become heavy and dull; and what is unaffected dignity in the Roman [Palestrina], is little better than the strut of a dwarf upon stilts in the Netherlander'. It should be observed that Burney went on to praise Lassus's lighter compositions for their 'new tints of harmony and modulation'; further, it seems that the quantity of music available to him was a tiny proportion of the whole.

But does Burney's estimation hold water? It would seem from the relative fame of Palestrina, Lassus's successor at St John Lateran, that this might be so. However, it should be borne in mind that Palestrina has been the object of hagiographers' attention since the pioneering biography of Giuseppe Baini in 1828. Furthermore, the extreme orthodoxy of the Roman composer's style has made him the ideal pedagogical model almost since his lifetime: for these two reasons late sixteenth-century music (that of continental Europe, at least) is widely perceived to be embodied by Palestrina. Lassus pursues different compositional goals: his music is a great deal more chordal than that of the Italian style – in one sense more 'modern', therefore – and is noted for its terseness of declamation: the Gloria and Credo of Missa super Dittes Maïstresse in particular demonstrate this. The Duke of Bavaria, Lassus's employer, was not a man to be kept waiting: one mass setting, written for days when the court was at hunt, lasts a mere ten minutes.

One part of Burney's remark rings true, however: he is quite correct in implying that Lassus is far more prepared to juxtapose contrasting sonorities than his Roman contemporary. Consider for instance 'Gratias agimus tibi' in the Gloria of Missa In te Domine speravi. The opening of the Gloria is dominated by C sonorities, based around a scalic figure taken from the motet that gives the Mass its name. But after the triple invocation 'Laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te' the music neatly sidesteps onto a chord of D for the new section of text: harmonic variety serves the expression of the liturgy. It is hoped that far more of Lassus's music will be made available on recordings in coming years: perhaps his fame will one day reach as wide as it did in the 1580s.

This recording is dedicated to the memory of Sir Michael Caine at the request of his widow, Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne. His funeral was conducted at St Margaret's Church by The Rector, Canon Robert Wright. Simon Over directed the choir, Thomas Trotter was the Organist, and the setting was Fauré Requiem. Booker Prize winner Ben Okri, who knew Michael well, wrote and declaimed the following poem:

There are many in this world
Who do the job for which they are called.
They serve themselves and the state
But are indifferent to each human fate.

There are many who to eminence rise
And leave behind them many cries,
Leave behind rage and hunger
That will turn into future thunder.

There are many who only dream of power
And battle grimly on from hour to hour
And with each passing year
Become the monster whom they fear.

There are some who in this life
Maintain some goodness through the strife;
Might lifts them to the high tower
Where they are used like a Spring flower.

But only a few, golden and rare,
Remain human and wise in power's glare;
Their life blessed those they met at life's fair.
Such a one has left us here.

© Ben Okri, March 1999