1.21: Josquin des Prez

One of the great masters of the Renaissance, Josquin’s music marks the transition from the angular medieval style heard in the early Renaissance to the more serene, flowing style of the late Renaissance.

Introduction

Josquin des Prez (c. 1450/1455–27 August 1521), often referred to simply as Josquin, was a Franco-Flemish composer of the Renaissance. His original name is sometimes given as Josquin Lebloitte and his later name is given under a wide variety of spellings in French, Italian, and Latin, including Josquinus Pratensis and Jodocus a Prato. His motet Illibata Dei virgo nutrix includes an acrostic of his name, where he spelled it “Josquin des Prez.” He was the most famous European composer between Guillaume Dufay and Palestrina, and is usually considered to be the central figure...
of the Franco-Flemish School. Josquin is widely considered by music scholars to be the first master of the high Renaissance style of polyphonic vocal music that was emerging during his lifetime.

During the 16th century, Josquin gradually acquired the reputation as the greatest composer of the age, his mastery of technique and expression universally imitated and admired. Writers as diverse as Baldassare Castiglione and Martin Luther wrote about his reputation and fame; theorists such as Heinrich Glarean and Gioseffo Zarlino held his style as that best representing perfection. He was so admired that many anonymous compositions were attributed to him by copyists, probably to increase their sales. More than 370 works are attributed to him; it was only after the advent of modern analytical scholarship that some of these mistaken attributions have been challenged, on the basis of stylistic features and manuscript evidence. Yet in spite of Josquin’s colossal reputation, which endured until the beginning of the Baroque era and was revived in the 20th century, his biography is shadowy, and next to nothing is known about his personality. The only surviving work which may be in his own hand is a graffito on the wall of the Sistine Chapel, and only one contemporary mention of his character is known, in a letter to Duke Ercole I of Ferrara. The lives of dozens of minor composers of the Renaissance are better documented than the life of Josquin.

Josquin wrote both sacred and secular music, and in all of the significant vocal forms of the age, including masses, motets, chansons and frottola. During the 16th century, he was praised for both his supreme melodic gift and his use of ingenious technical devices. In modern times, scholars have attempted to ascertain the basic details of his biography, and have tried to define the key characteristics of his style to correct misattributions, a task that has proved difficult, as Josquin liked to solve compositional problems in different ways in successive compositions—sometimes he wrote in an austere style devoid of ornamentation, and at other times he wrote music requiring considerable virtuosity. Heinrich Glarean wrote in 1547 that Josquin was not only a “magnificent virtuoso” (the Latin can be translated also as “show-off”) but capable of being a “mocker,” using satire effectively. While the focus of scholarship in recent years has been to remove music from the “Josquin canon” (including some of his most famous pieces) and to reattribute it to his contemporaries, the remaining music represents some of the most famous and enduring of the Renaissance.

Motets

Josquin’s motet style varied from almost strictly homophonic settings with block chords and syllabic text declamation to highly ornate contrapuntal fantasias, to the psalm settings which combined these extremes with the addition of rhetorical figures and text-painting that foreshadowed the later development of the madrigal. He wrote many of his motets for four voices, an ensemble size which had become the compositional norm around 1500, and he also was a considerable innovator in writing motets for five and six voices. No motets of more than six voices have been reliably attributed to Josquin.

Listen: Intervals

Please download and listen to the following audio file to hear a passage from the psalm motet Domine ne in furore (Ps. 37). Three variants of a motive built on a major triad are introduced, each in paired imitation between two voices.

*Domine ne in furore*

Josquin frequently used imitation, especially paired imitation, in writing his motets, with sections akin to fugal expositions.
occurring on successive lines of the text he was setting. An example is his setting of *Dominus regnavit* (Psalm 93), for four voices; each of the lines of the psalm begins with a voice singing a new tune alone, quickly followed by entries of other three voices in imitation.

In writing polyphonic settings of psalms, Josquin was a pioneer, and psalm settings form a large proportion of the motets of his later years. Few composers prior to Josquin had written polyphonic psalm settings. Some of Josquin’s settings include the famous *Miserere*, written in Ferrara in 1503 or 1504 and most likely inspired by the recent execution of the reformist monk Girolamo Savonarola, *Memor esto verbi tui*, based on Psalm 119, and two settings of *De profundis* (Psalm 130), both of which are often considered to be among his most significant accomplishments.

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