

PIERRE DE LA RUE

MASSES



BEAUTY FARM

**PIERRE DE LA RUE** (c. 1460 – 1518)

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**MISSA ALMANA** a 4

1	KYRIE	05:11
2	GLORIA	06:23
3	CREDO	08:17
4	SANCTUS	08:33
5	AGNUS DEI	06:38

**MISSA DE SANCTO ANTONIO** a 4

6	KYRIE	04:05
7	GLORIA	06:06
8	CREDO	07:57
9	SANCTUS	08:17
10	AGNUS DEI	03:37

**BEAUTY FARM**

**BART UVYN** [countertenor]

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**MISSA PUER NATUS EST NOBIS** a 4

1	KYRIE	03:17
2	GLORIA	06:15
3	CREDO	08:51
4	SANCTUS	09:18
5	AGNUS DEI	05:02

**MISSA TOUS LES REGRETZ** a 4

6	KYRIE	03:55
7	GLORIA	05:12
8	CREDO	08:15
9	SANCTUS	08:12
10	AGNUS DEI	03:45

**HANS JÖRG MAMMEL** | **HANNES WAGNER** [tenor]  
**JOACHIM HÖCHBAUER** [bass]

Pierre de la Rue is one of the most fascinating and yet most elusive members of the supremely talented generation of composers from around 1500. Apart from his will tentatively suggesting Tournai as his birthplace, we know nothing definite about his early years; any identification as the singer Peter van der Straten (the Dutch equivalent of the name Pierre de la Rue), active in The Netherlands and Germany between 1469/70 and 1492/93 has been put into question with good reason.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, we know a great deal about the last twenty-six years of his life. La Rue became a member of the Burgundian Habsburg court chapel in service of Philip the Fair and subsequently his widow Joanna of Castile and finally his sister Margaret of Austria, sometime between 1489 and 15<sup>th</sup> November 1492 (the first recorded mention of his name). He passed the final years of his life, from 1516 to 20<sup>th</sup> November 1518 in Kortrijk, where he benefited from an ecclesiastical sinecure.

La Rue's personality also remains elusive; not even the

slightest anecdote gives any hint, unlike the cases of Busnois, Isaac or Josquin. We only know from his epitaph that he was devout, charitable and «chaste and free of the sins of Venus» (*castus et a Veneris crimine mundus*). That may well be true, for La Rue made his name with sacred music and there is no trace of the frivolous, dubious or obscene texts which his contemporaries were wont to set amongst his secular songs. The melancholic tone prevalent in many of his pieces can best be understood as part of the representational politics of his last employer Margaret of Austria, who owed her powerful position as Regent of the Netherlands to her status as a double widow. Margaret consciously emphasised her widowed condition which permeated the whole court with an atmosphere of mourning and melancholy.<sup>2</sup> But there are certainly other aspects to La Rue's music.

In any case «Pierchon», as he was often referred to in court documents, must have emerged as a composer by the 1490's at the latest. Although the earliest sources of

his music date from 1500, they testify to a composer who has already mastered his craft. La Rue never bettered his deeply melancholic chansons such as *Tous les regretz* or *Pourquoy non*, the virtuoso **Missa L'homme armé** or the expressive **Missa Nunque fue pena mayor**. Philip the Fair bestowed an ecclesiastical sinecure on «petri de vico ... musico et capellano nostre capelle domestique» as early as 1501. His nomination as musicus (i.e. a musical authority) rather than as a singer can be considered a testimony to his achievements as a composer.

Two of the masses on this recording – **Almana** and **Puer natus est** – survive in the printed edition *Misse Petri de la Rue* published by Ottaviano Petrucci in Venice on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1503, the only edition dedicated solely to this composer at the time. The **Missa Almana** is possibly the earliest of La Rue's surviving masses for it is also preserved in a somewhat retrospective manuscript of the time, the Chigi codex, and is the only mass of his to have two «Christe» sections, one four-part, the other three-part,

suggesting a different liturgical context to that of the Habsburg court. In any case, the work throws up several questions. The *Almana* appellation has still not been deciphered; if it refers to a model, then a particularly enigmatic one. Typically for a mass setting of the time, each movement begins with a musical motif, here consisting essentially of a series of ascending fourths and descending seconds as follows: c – f – e – a (and sometimes additionally g – c'). Such angular voice-leading makes any reference to a hymn melody highly unlikely and suggests a secular composition instead. This motif is outlined in several or all voices at the opening of a movement and is invariably heard in the first tenor entry, traditionally the principal melodic axis. The development however is treated very freely and subsequently it becomes increasingly difficult to recognize whether any correlations exist between the tenor melodies. The tenor occasionally highlights a few notes in long-held tones (usually a sure indication of a model) only to intertwine in free motive play with other

voices once more; finally, the third Agnus Dei begins as a kind of fantasia on the ascending fourth motif. If La Rue did employ a melodic model throughout the work, he certainly hid it well.

It may be of some consolation (or concern) to us today as we worry over the **Almana** title to know that it also caused puzzlement to his contemporaries and was occasionally replaced. The piece is entitled **Missa Pourquoi non** in a manuscript in the Cappella Sistina because the first three notes of the characteristic main motif (but only these) recall the opening of La Rue's chanson of the same name; Petrucci gave the mass the business-like title **Sexti. Ut fa** in his edition, naming its key (6<sup>th</sup> mode) and opening interval. But what can *Almana* mean? Could it be a corruption of the dance term *Allemande*? («La allemande» was first mentioned in 1521 in an English dance treatise, but a «saltarello tedesco» – a German leaping dance – was already alluded to in the 1480's). Yet La Rue's material does not obviously display the regular, often repeated, phrase



structure that characterised the earliest allemandes. Or is the Spanish *alemana* behind the title? In that case «the (female) German» could refer to Margaret of Austria's time in Spain as the wife of Prince Juan of Aragón and Castile who died in 1497. Strikingly, the Hebrew *almānâ* means widow – but how would that have occurred to La Rue? So the mystery remains, as with Jacob Obrecht's **Missa graecorum** or Antoine Brumel's **Missa de dringhs**.

Unless we are completely mistaken, the **Missa Puer natus est nobis**, which appeared together with the **Missa Alman**a in Petrucci's 1503 edition, is the somewhat later and more mature work. In any case, it shows a greater equilibrium between the different compositional ideas that were to mark La Rue's work: in the way his characteristic love of rich texture (no movement employing less than three voices) is achieved through the imitative play of motives between the voices, and how his tendency toward imitation (typical of the time) and frequent ostinato passages is contradicted by his gently subversive interest

in unexpected asymmetry and especially in sweeping lines and developments.

The mass has a brighter sonority than the **Missa Almána**; it is generally pitched about a fourth higher. Its model is easily identifiable as the Introit to the Christmas Day mass. La Rue cites the hymn in its entirety and largely note-for-note; the two distinctive ascending fifths which open the first and second lines play a prominent part in the mass and often open important sub-sections, dramatically so at «Et resurrexit» in the Credo. (In the following «Et ascendit», Christ's ascension is symbolised by ascending scales). The music theorist Heinrich Glarean remarked upon a particularity of this work, namely that whereas the Introit is in Mixolydian mode (sounding «major» to our ears) it is transposed to Dorian mode (with its «minor» third) in the mass. La Rue liked to play with modal ambiguity; the Mixolydian «flair» of the original melody is preserved in our recording through the major 6<sup>th</sup> above the tonic.

The use of a Christmas melody immediately allows us to

place the mass in a liturgical context; this is true of many of La Rue's masses, including the **Missa de Sancto Antonio**, primarily sung on 17<sup>th</sup> January, the saint's day. The veneration of this particular saint was common however; Guillaume Dufay also dedicated a mass to him. Incidentally, he was also the patron saint of Margaret's confident (and perhaps lover), the courtier Antoine de Lalaing. The Anthony mass was probably written a few years after the other masses discussed above; since one of its sources (Brussels 9126) was destined for Margaret's brother Philip, it must anyway have been composed before his death in September 1506.

The mass is based on an antiphon for the holy abbot Anthony, an ascetic and founder of monasticism in its original form, the so-called Desert Fathers. These facts are sketched in the antiphon *Sanctus Anthonius habitans in abditis inter primos heremi cultores inventus est in egipto*, whose melody – sometimes ornamented beyond recognition – underlies the mass. The cantus firmus also

survives with other texts: it is entitled *O sacer Antho- ni precibus pro nostra salute* in a manuscript from Petrus Alamire's atelier (Vienna 1783) and *Agnosce O vincenti* in another source, Verona 756. The manuscript's (unknown) recipient evidently worshipped St. Vincent, a popular saint in Italy, so the Anthony mass was unceremoniously «rededicated». The mass has aroused much appreciation; the musicologist André Pirro admired La Rue's melodic gift in the work: «In one single breath the soprano unfolds a rising vocalise in the opening Kyrie». <sup>3</sup> Theodore Karp has demonstrated the complexity of La Rue's treatment of rhythm and metre in the same movement. <sup>4</sup> Yet these two qualities are by no means confined to this movement or this work. The Benedictus is just as original; here just one melodic phrase (which is hardly related to the hymn at all) is heard in turn in the bass, tenor and soprano, constantly decorated by the other voices.

La Rue's **Missa Tous les regretz**, one of his most popular mature works, dates from a significantly later period,

perhaps around 1515 and is linked to the aforementioned chanson (from before 1500) of the same name, incomparable in its dense interweaving of expressive, melancholic turns of phrase. Unlike the other three masses, this is a «parody» or «imitation» mass (as was customary for secular polyphonic models), i.e. it uses material from all voices of the model, varying, expanding and combining it, seeming to lose its relation to the chanson in some passages before finding it again, often for only a few bars. Throughout this process the *Kyrie* remains closest to the old chanson and its succeeding motives whilst the following movements treat the material ever more freely. But La Rue not only reconfigures this material so familiar to him, he also filters it through an innovative musical approach – the presentation of the text in declamation and imitation results in a rare concision. Here and there La Rue's mass loses its lamenting, melancholy character in favour of a new, almost euphoric clarity and brightness. Yet the supplication for divine mercy («miserere nobis») in the *Gloria*

– with a surprising and strikingly deep sonority at «suscipe deprecationem nostram» – and the poignant sonority of the first *Agnus* prevail.

Wolfgang Fuhrmann  
translation : Roderick Shaw

<sup>1</sup> Honey Meconi, *Pierre de la Rue and Musical Life at the Habsburg-Burgundian Court*, Oxford – New York 2003, p. 10-19.

<sup>2</sup> see Vincenzo Borghetti, *Trauer, Hoffnung der Frauen. Tod, Leiden und Macht in Margarete von Österreichs Chansonnier Brüssel*, BR 228, in: *Die Tonkunst* 11 (2017), Heft 2, p. 159-166.

<sup>3</sup> André Pirro, *Histoire de la Musique de la fin du XIVe siècle à la fin du XVIe*, Paris 1940, p. 231.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Karp, *Mensural Irregularities in La Rue's Missa de Sancto Antonio*, *Israel Studies in Musicology* 5 (1990), p. 81-95.

## **BEAUTY FARM**

founded 2014 by Markus Muntean and Bernhard Trebuch is a vocal group focused to the Franco-Flemish polyphony of the renaissance. The international ensemble is based in the carthusian monastery at Mauerbach (Austria). The singers are members of well known ensembles like «Capilla flamenca», «Huelgas Ensemble», «Vox Luminis», «Collegium Vocale Gent» and «Graindelavoix». Beauty Farm exclusively records for frabernardo.

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 colophon 

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