

**PIERRE DE LA RUE
MASSES**

the sound and the fury

Ⓐ **PIERRE DE LA RUE** (c. 1460 – 1518)

MISSA PASCHALE a 5

1	KYRIE	04:41
2	GLORIA	06:51
3	CREDO	09:13
4	SANCTUS	08:45
5	AGNUS DEI	04:06

MISSA ISTA EST SPECIOSA a 5

6	KYRIE	04:43
7	GLORIA	06:39
8	CREDO	08:25
9	SANCTUS	09:17
10	AGNUS DEI	06:01

THE SOUND AND THE FURY

ALESSANDRO CARMIGNANI [countertenor]

JOHN POTTER | **CHRISTIAN WEGMANN** [tenor]

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MISSA L'HOMME ARMÉ a 4

1	KYRIE	03 : 26
2	GLORIA	05 : 22
3	CREDO	09 : 25
4	SANCTUS	07 : 28
5	AGNUS DEI	05 : 37

MISSA PRO FIDELIBUS DEFUNCTIS a 4 et 5

6	INTROITUS	03 : 42
7	KYRIE	02 : 41
8	TRACTUS	04 : 19
9	OFFERTORIUM	05 : 34
10	SANCTUS	04 : 23
11	AGNUS DEI	03 : 32
12	COMMUNIO	03 : 13

CHRISTIAN M. SCHMIDT [bass]

WILHELM SCHWINGHAMMER [bass]

The Pierre de la Rue masses on this recording have one thing in common: they are all based on monodic models, thus in keeping with the most traditional of cyclic mass composition models, the cantus firmus mass. Yet in their individual construction they could not be more different. Two of these masses employ just one single cantus firmus. The one based on the secular melody **L'HOMME ARMÉ** is the earliest of them all; it already appeared in the collection of La Rue's masses that Ottaviano Petrucci printed in Venice in 1503 and with which La Rue burst onto the musical scene (there must have been earlier sources of his music, but the greater part of musical sources from north of the Alps have not survived). As is generally known, *L'homme armé* was the most common secular cantus firmus of all and composers who wrote a mass based on it were well aware of competing with almost all their contemporaries and predecessors. La Rue's work, probably composed in the 1490's, is no exception and displays an exuberant, almost unashamed

virtuosity which only a young and extremely self-confident composer is capable of producing.

In his mass, La Rue refers to an earlier work of a contemporary colleague, the *Missa L'homme armé super voces musicales* by Josquin Desprez. Josquin's composition is in itself a tour de force, yet La Rue attempts to surpass it, as is particularly evident in the Kyrie and Agnus. In the Kyrie, Josquin creates a proportional canon between soprano and tenor, i.e. the tenor repeats the soprano melodic line in double note values, in other words at half speed. La Rue also writes a canon, but in different mensurations (which can be roughly compared to presenting the same melody in different time signatures) so that the note lengths are not simply in a 1:2 relationship. And he always allows the three canons to start simultaneously (albeit at different pitches) rather than widely-spaced as Josquin did to simplify things somewhat. La Rue's answer to Josquin's second Agnus is even more complex. Josquin writes a three-part mensuration canon of exemplary clarity and elegance. La Rue out-

does this by writing one in four parts and at the same time attempting to include at least some echoes of the *L'homme armé* melody, something that Josquin prudently avoided. Writing in 1547, the music theorist and humanist Heinrich Glarean already suspected that La Rue had tried to outperform Josquin here – whether or not he was musically successful remained open.

But demonstrative dexterity is only part of this piece's particular appeal – it also displays boundless energy. One just has to listen to the soprano line of the first Kyrie – the only voice which does not participate in the cantus firmus here – to experience the young La Rue's vibrant musical language, pulsating with leaps, syncopations and *ostinati*. Only seldom did he later evince such rhythmic and melodic verve, reminiscent of Busnois and Obrecht. The soprano voice mentioned above is in this sense exceptional, since elsewhere La Rue more or less continually deploys cantus firmus material for the remaining voices; note how the signal-like falling fifth, a fragment of the melody, rings out in the

Gloria at the word «(magnam) gloriam (tuam)». A clear compartmentalisation of the movements with a great deal of text, achieved by cadences and other decisive points such as change of mensuration, as well as occasional homophonic passages (markedly in «Et homo factus est») are also somewhat untypical for later La Rue. This remains the highly attractive work of a composer abounding in technical adventurousness and ambition who has not yet quite found his own style.

The difference to the other masses composed considerably later could hardly be greater – according to Honey Meconi's research these were copied into the sources between 1509 and 1516¹. In any event, the **MISSA ISTA EST SPECIOSA** is completely different to the older work, not least in how it sounds. It is a five-part mass whose low and thus dark register – which indeed already characterised the *Missa L'homme armé*, which lies a good fifth lower than Josquin's work – is emphasised by its thicker part-writing. Additionally, the underlying cantus firmus is almost never taken up

by any of the other voices (the opening of the *Christe eleison* providing a slight exception). *La Rue* follows the almost outdated practice by this time of using the *cantus firmus* purely as a scaffold rather than integrating it into the whole texture, thus also renouncing musical unification – with the exception of the freely-varied head-motif at the beginning of each movement.

The *cantus firmus* employed here is the Song of Songs antiphon «*Ista est speciosa inter filias Jerusalem*», prevalent in the late Middle Ages. «*Ista est speciosa*» was associated with many different liturgical feasts in choral sources, predominantly however with the Feast of the Assumption and the *Commune virginum*, i.e. the feast of a virgin saint without a specific proper. *La Rue* divides the melody into three sections which structure each of the five movements. He seems to have altered older melody somewhat, better to suit the overall modality: the *cantus firmus* is actually in Phrygian mode, typical for a series of Song of Songs antiphons, yet melodically he begins with the notes C and B.

La Rue probably left out the first note deliberately so that he could begin with the Phrygian sound on E.²

The low register and idiosyncratic Phrygian sound lend an almost melancholy effect, especially as the work largely renounces the rhythmic brilliance of the *Missa L'homme armé*; ostinati are rather seldom. Like many works of the older La Rue, it looks more inwardly, spins out its melodic lines longer and often avoids clear structuring and divisions. Yet, as in Brahms, the apparent reticence encompasses increased technical sovereignty and restrained abundance of expression. The fourth section of the mass demonstrates La Rue's diversity of means. The Sanctus displays a conscious tonal architecture: widely sweeping melodic duos and trios unfold, block-like five part sections alternate with cantus firmus passages; the «Domine» is solemnly highlighted. The Benedictus, a duo between soprano and alto, is the only entirely imitative movement, setting off at the challenging interval of a sixth. Untypical for La Rue, the Osanna relies on a full, almost homophonic sound with long, powerful bass

notes. And in the four part Benedictus, La Rue manages to write coherent two and three part passages without resorting to imitative technique – only towards the end does the alto imitate the soprano, a procedure that is taken up in the first Agnus where the two voices seems to sing a kind of canon in unison that is not exactly maintained however; an example of La Rue's interest in creating symmetry only to destroy it.

The famous requiem **MISSA PRO FIDELIBUS DEFUNCTIS** begins in the lowest register, descending to bottom B flat. As in almost every Renaissance requiem, it follows the plainchant melody prescribed for each movement (although the well-known Dies irae sequence, which had not yet generally established itself, is missing here). Yet La Rue does not simply write music for liturgical use but rather points up the text's affect with unusual emphasis: the four-part opening seems literally to implore God from the depths but when the issue of «eternal light» (et lux perpetua) arises, the movement suddenly becomes declamatory and clearer

and the urgency of «be a light to them» (*luceat eis*) seems further heightened by the change into triple metre. It is moving that La Rue departs from the exact wording of the liturgical formula to repeat with more urgency the plea that eternal light may illuminate the departed. The Kyrie I with its repeated antiphonal calling out and above all the *Christe*, in which an A flat in the bass is followed several times by an A in the superius, are also more directly expressive than usual. The number of voices in the third Kyrie suddenly increases to five, an expansion of tonal range that La Rue strategically employs time and again later. A further, more dramatic expansion of tonal range occurs in the following *Sicut cervus* tract: here all voices move up a sixth, the very low notes giving way to previously unheard higher, brighter notes, as if a candle has been lit. This dramatic confrontation between low and high dominates what follows in direct relation to the text: once again, the Offertorium *Rex gloriae* pleads from the depths of despair for mercy for the departed («lest hell engulf them, lest they be plunged into dark-

ness»). And the recollection that God once promised deliverance to Abraham and his seed («Quam olim Abrahae») stretches the limits of the entire tonal range of over three octaves for the first time. This dramatically effective handling of tonal resources and the solemn gravity of the often stark declamation combine to make the *Requiem* La Rue's most famous work. Friedrich Blume summed it up in the first modern edition of 1931: «Everything is both deeply, intimately felt and yet monumentally displayed like the agony of a mourner on a Burgundian duke's tomb».

The **MISSA PASCHALE** is also based on liturgical plainchant. This piece is exceptional even in La Rue's technically richly experimental output, as it involves the use of two different cantus firmi throughout. The ordinary melodies liturgically assigned to the Easter mass (Kyrie I, Gloria I, Credo I) are paraphrased in the upper voice and sometimes in the other voices too, whilst a proper melody, matching in tonality in each case, lies in the tenor (as for example in the «Resurrexit» of the first Kyrie).³ The ordinary melodies pertai-

ning to the Sanctus and Agnus have not yet been identified. The simultaneous paraphrasing of two different melodies naturally creates a real Procrustean bed for the composer. It leaves very little room for musical elaboration – at best in those movements with the most text (Gloria and Credo) with their many cantus firmus-free passages. Occasionally La Rue departed from the rather formulaic ordinary melody, above all in the Credo, in order to create musical variety and highlight particular text passages (such as the long melodic line of «et unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam»). Or he renounces both cantus firmi entirely after a few bars, as in the Christe (he could treat those movements with little text such as the imaginative Pleni and Benedictus with complete freedom, again playing with rather than deploying the imitative principle.) On the other hand, the Osanna is almost opaque in its density. La Rue clearly attempted to respond to the greatest feast of all, Christ's resurrection, with the greatest possible compositional challenge. The result may not be completely convincing, but

in the slackening close of the second Agnus with its falling triad motifs one might almost be forgiven for hearing the relief the composer must have felt in fulfilling this task.

Wolfgang Fuhrmann

translation : Roderick Shaw

¹ Honey Meconi, *Pierre de la Rue and Musical Life at the Habsburg-Burgundian Court*, Oxford – New York 2003, p. 98f.

² cf. John Evan Kreider, *The Masses for Five and Six Voices by Pierre de la Rue*, Diss. Indiana University 1974, vol. 1, pp. 31–36.

³ This double cantus firmus technique was demonstrated by Wolfgang Fuhrmann, Work discussion 2: Pierre de la Rue, Missa pascale, in: David Burn/Honey Meconi (ed.), *The Mechelen Choirbook*, Leuven (in print).

The ensemble **THE SOUND AND THE FURY** (an idea by Muntean/Rosenblum and Bernhard Trebuch) quickly developed an exemplary sound-concept of structural refinement. The Salzburger Nachrichten appreciated their style of singing as «being extraordinary sensitive and full-sounding.» Amongst others the group recorded masses and motets by Nicolas Gombert, Johannes Ockeghem, Guillaume Fauges, Jacob Obrecht, Firminus Caron and Matthaëus Pipelare.

further information (sleeve notes in **german** etc.) on **frabernardo.com**

 colophon 

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PIERRE DE LA RUE c. 1460 – 1518

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[1-5] **MISSA PASCHALE** a 5

[6-10] **MISSA ISTA EST SPECIOSA** a 4

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[1-5] **MISSA L'HOMME ARMÉ** a 4

[6-10] **MISSA PRO FIDELIBUS DEFUNCTIS** a 4 et 5

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