

NAXOS

Antoine  
**BRUMEL**  
(c.1460–c.1515)

**Missa de Beata Virgine**

**Speculum Ensemble**



## Antoine Brumel (c.1460–c.1515)

### Missa de Beata Virgine

Antoine Brumel was certainly one of the most important composers in his time, mentioned by writers such as Eloy d'Amerval, Ornithoparchus, Heyden, Rabelais, Gaffurio, Glareano, Coclico, Finck, Zarlino, Morley and even the macaronic-goliardic poet Teofilo Folengo. He was probably the most illustrious victim of a musicological discipline traditionally centred on the figure of Josquin Desprez.

Brumel was the first great French rather than Flemish Renaissance composer. It seems that he was born near Nogent-le-Rotrou (the town may have been called “Brumel”), and his name appears for the first time in 1483 in Chartres, where he served as an altar boy at the Cathedral, with the title *horarius et matutinaris*. There can be absolutely no doubt as to how much Brumel was admired if, in 1501, Duke Filiberto il Bello appointed him cantor to the Ducal Chapel, enthusiastically extolling his worth and merits, and confirming this with a very high salary. His fame was increasingly widespread and this is confirmed by the performance of his works throughout Europe: Palestrina ordered his Masses to be sung in Rome and, in 1508, when Luther arrived in Wittenberg, his music was performed with compositions by Desprez and De la Rue, in the Saxony Chapel of Duke Friedrich the Wise.

The most important period in Brumel's life was spent in Italy, where Alfonso I d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, engaged the Frenchman “*per tutta la vita*” (for life). Brumel, then, followed in the footsteps of his predecessor Jacob Obrecht, working there and at the Savoy Court. It is thought that Brumel received up to two hundred ducats a year, with fifty ducats for travel and lodgings in Ferrara, while Willaert only earned seventy ducats a year in Venice in 1527.

There is gap in what history tells us about the composer that musicologists have still not filled. The Court Chapel in Ferrara was disbanded in 1510, and after that date there is no definite information about Brumel's artistic activities: a document dated 11th March 1512 suggests that at that time he was the Archpriest to the united churches of S. Johannes in Libya and S. Sabina in Faenza, and that he also probably went to Mantua. The last traces of the composer are to be found in an essay by Vincenzo Galilei, who recognised

Brumel in Rome amongst all the other French and Flemish composers, at the election of Pope Leo X in 1513. There is no further evidence to confirm it, but in this Roman interlude he could have composed or completed the *Missa de Beata Virgine*.

Brumel's Masses are his most famous works, so much so that in 1503 Petrucci published a whole volume of them. The *Missa de Beata Virgine*, his last work and one of the best, appears in the first edition of *Liber quindecim missarum* (Rome, 1516) by Andrea Antico, a marvellous volume with large pages of a size that was not common at the time (28.8 x 42.8 cm). There may, however, be a previous print dated 1515 (*Missarum decem ... libri* published by Petrucci): the volumes contain both the Brumel and Josquin Desprez *De Beata Virgine* Masses. As it seems that these works were of great interest to his contemporaries, the volumes were probably published in great haste, so they must have been written around 1513 or 1514. What Glareano observed seems to confirm that: he wrote that the Masses must have been composed when the musicians were “both getting old”. Glareano was clearly not indifferent to Brumel's ability as a composer and described him as “deserving of being listed amongst the great polyphonists, but his greatest merit was due more to diligence and technique rather than to natural talent. His *Missa de Beata Virgine* is worthy of mention and worthy of a great man [...]”.

The whole of the *Missa de Beata Virgine* is based on the Medici edition of *Missa IX (Cum jubilo)*, and is a magnificent example of a paraphrase Mass, a compositional technique that reuses the original plainchant both in the *cantus firmi*, if any, and in the more ornamented counterpoint, until it permeates into the shortest melodic fragments in all the voices. This penetration is undoubtedly essential to giving such a vast score an indissolubly unitary character.

The *Kyrie*, with its initial clear citation in which the four voices intone the original plainchant with long notes (the melodic fragment D-F-G-A of the *Kyrie* in the *Missa IX* is very often used at the beginning of a phrase), becomes more

and more ornamental as it proceeds. The initial writing is increasingly compressed and disintegrated, until it is unrecognisable. The *Gloria* and *Credo* (from the Gregorian Credo I) are extraordinary manifestations of the expertise of the Flemish school, where the plainchant is sustained with incredible precision and intoned by all four voices with short melodic fragments closely imitating each other. It is interesting to note that perhaps the most important Marian trope, *Spiritus et alme*, was added to the text of the *Gloria*, becoming widely-known after the Council of Trent, and easily identified by very noticeable changes in writing. In the *Sanctus* the style initially goes back to that of the *Kyrie*, with the tenor voice in its true function as the *cantus prius factus*; then, in the *Benedictus*, it returns to the usual manner of the *Gloria* and *Credo*, in the trope *Benedictus Mariae Filiius*. This *Sanctus* is a rare example of an unusual compositional structure, since “*Pleni sunt caeli*” and “*Et terra gloria tua*”, which are normally together in other Masses, are separate. The *Agnus Dei* has the same metric pattern as that of the *Kyrie*, with the first two sections in duple time followed by a third movement in triple time. The return of the third movement to the same structure as that of the first movement demonstrates a total formal concept of the Mass, like a coherent and unique arch.

Thirteen of the 27 motets attributed to Brumel are dedicated to Marian worship. *Ave, ancilla Trinitatis* (prayer for adoration during private worship) and *Mater Patris et filia* (metric antiphon in rhyme for the *Officium Sanctae Mariae in Sabbato*) are three-voice motets similar to each other both as regards the compositional form (a section in duple time followed by a section in triple time) and the way the music is written: in both pieces a particular predilection can be seen for the I, IV and VII natural degrees of the scale. This closely links the two compositions to the *Kyrie* of the *Missa de Beata Virgine*, which is constructed entirely on the basis of these modes.

*Ave, Virgo gloriosa* (sequence for the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary) is one of the most complex motets by Brumel and is the one in which the synthesis of styles is most successful. Elements of the Italian school – shorter phrases, homophonic episodes and the sections in triple rhythm – harmonize perfectly with the more elaborate Flemish counterpoint, evidence of a superlative technique

that justifies all the veneration the Frenchman received from his contemporaries. The presence of a real *cantus firmus* in the tenor part (B flat - C - A - B flat - G - F, with all the transpositions and variations) is important and is so discretely and delicately written by the composer as to be hardly noticeable. Even though it has not been definitely confirmed, we can attempt a hypothetical derivation from the Gregorian line in the second (and later) verses of the *Magnificat dell'ottavo tono*: the fact that this *Magnificat* was actually sung at the end of the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary seems to prove this theory.

Brumel was one of the few composers who, by a remarkable blending of dissimilar elements, helped create the Renaissance language, in a period in which the influence of the Flemish School on the Italian *frottola* was already evident and the madrigalistic ferment was just beginning. The crystallisation of dissonances and the freedom in writing their resolution, which we nowadays link to the style of Palestrina, were already present and codified in Brumel's compositions.

The fusion of traditional northern contrapuntal excellence (vast melodic lines interwoven with original rhythmic elements; short passages in *fauxbourdon*; sporadic, never-conclusive Burgundian cadences, always written on *repercussio* and never on the *finalis*) and typically Italian elements (formal structure of increasingly defined periods; ample duets with contrasting combinations of voices; sections in triple time that recall dance steps; increasingly functional harmonies; increasing attention to the relation between music and text, which unequivocally brings to mind the marvellous *laude* widespread in Italy) generates a new language that the Franco-Flemish emigrants in Italy developed best, so much so that they created a real *Contenance Italienne*.

There is no doubt that Antoine Brumel was the protagonist of this transformation, exploiting every technical detail and contributing to a musical form always co-determined with the structure of the text, leaving Italian composers an inheritance which they took advantage of for a long time, such that the one century that separates Brumel from Giovanni Gabrieli's *Symphonice Sacrae* (1615) would seem void.

## Performance Notes

For various reasons this recording uses our transcriptions only. Apart from allowing us to check the original sources more closely, we have been able to keep some of the fundamental characteristics of these compositions: abolition of the bar lines permitted us to preserve the rhythmic asymmetries recurrent in the melodic lines, typical of the more natural Flemish style. The homophonic passages are already divided by the text, without using the bars or measure used later. We have kept the time signatures (*proportiones*) from the original music, and decided to adopt an approach that was not strictly mathematical, but expressive and of use to the formal structure. As regards the principles of *musica ficta*, we have limited its use as much as possible at the main cadences (in a section) and in the passages that, for contrapuntal reasons, obviously required it. When this music is performed, the text underlay is always an issue. It seems evident that with the performing technique at the time, the position of the words could be decided upon fairly freely. Considerable differences are seen in the placement of syllables in various sources of the same composition. Here, again, compositional principles informed our artistic decision. We kept to the formal structure and the imitative counterpoint as much as possible.

## Sources

*Missa de Beata Virgine: Liber quindecim missarum electarum quae per excellentissimos musicos compositae fuerunt*, Andrea Antico da Montona diocesi di Porenzo, May 1516, RISM B1 15161, ff. 2v-19r (Bologna, Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale) • *Ave, Ancilla Trinitatis: Canti B. numero cinquanta*, Ottaviano Petrucci, Venice 5th February 1501, RISM B1 15022, ff. 41v-42r (Bologna, Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale) • *Mater Patris et Filia: Harmonice Musices. Odhecaton A*, Ottaviano Petrucci, Venice 15th May 1501, RISM B1 1501, ff. 67v-68r (Bologna, Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale). Manuscript Q18, Bologna c. 1502-1505, ff. 75v-76r (Bologna, Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale) • *Ave, Virgo gloriosa: Motetti libro quarto*, Ottaviano Petrucci, Venice 4th June 1505, RISM B1 15052, ff. 2v, 66v, 34v, 98v (Milan, Biblioteca del Conservatorio di Musica “Giuseppe Verdi” [T, B]; Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana [C, A, B]).

All notes by **Roberto Di Cecco**  
English translation by Priscilla Worsley

## Speculum Ensemble

Founded in 2003, Speculum Ensemble devotes itself to the study and performance of vocal polyphony from thirteenth to early seventeenth century, and has collaborated with such renowned musicians as Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini, Francesco Tasini, Adriano Guarnieri, among others. Upcoming activities include the concert première of *Tetèlestai*, a new work by Francesco Tasini, and new projects to explore fifteenth century music and unknown Italian madrigals.  
[www.speculumensemble.it](http://www.speculumensemble.it)

From left to right:

Nicola Bonazzi, Roberto Di Cecco,  
Stefano Scialè, Cristiano Vavalà

Photo: Paola Bergamelli (Spazio Comunicazione)





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Playing Time  
59:44

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Antoine Brumel was among the most distinguished composers of his time, the first great French rather than Flemish Renaissance composer. He served as master of choristers at Notre Dame in Paris and then was employed at the d'Este court in Ferrara, where he succeeded Obrecht. After the disbandment of the court chapel Brumel may have spent time in Rome, where it is thought his *Missa de Beata Virgine*, his most famous composition, may have been written.

Antoine  
**BRUMEL**  
(c.1460–c.1515)

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|---|--------------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | <b>Ave, ancilla Trinitatis (a 3)</b> | 3:55  |
|   | <b>Missa de Beata Virgine</b>        | 41:09 |
| 2 | <b>Kyrie</b>                         | 5:45  |
| 3 | <b>Gloria</b>                        | 10:04 |
| 4 | <b>Credo</b>                         | 10:46 |
| 5 | <b>Sanctus</b>                       | 8:29  |
| 6 | <b>Agnus Dei</b>                     | 5:53  |
| 7 | <b>Mater Patris et filia (a 3)</b>   | 3:16  |
| 8 | <b>Ave, Virgo gloriosa</b>           | 11:12 |

**Speculum Ensemble**

**Roberto Di Cecco, countertenor • Cristiano Vavalà, tenor**  
**Nicola Bonazzi, tenor • Stefano Scialè, bass**

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Producer: Roberto Di Cecco • Engineer & Editor: Luca Fabbri • Booklet notes: Roberto Di Cecco  
All modern editions are by Speculum Ensemble, in particular: Roberto Di Cecco (1–6), Roberto Di Cecco/Nicola Bonazzi (7–8) • Sung texts may be accessed at [www.naxos.com/libretti/570535.htm](http://www.naxos.com/libretti/570535.htm)  
Cover image: Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris (Sebastien Windal/Dreamstime.com)

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