

The Compositional Innovations in Josquin's *Ave Maria...virgo serena* and Their Influence on  
Later Renaissance Composers

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The onset of the Renaissance in 15th-century Europe brought with it a rebirth of Greek and Roman culture, a trend which greatly influenced musicians and artists of the day. It was an era of utmost importance in the evolution of polyphonic music as composers sought to put more emphasis on their music rather than the text it was set to<sup>1</sup>. One such composer was Josquin des Prez, who made great strides in the development of the motet. His sacred motet “*Ave Maria...virgo serena*” is regarded today as a “textbook example of pervasive imitation”<sup>2</sup>. Josquin also employs such compositional techniques as antiphonal and homorhythmic setting and text painting in his motet to make it one of the most influential musical works to come out of the 15th century.

### **The Evolution of the Motet**

The motet originally evolved from the discant clausula, a form of trope that was traditionally placed at the bottom of a piece of organum as a performance option for well-trained vocalists. For much of the Middle Ages, the motet was regarded as a sacred genre. Its three- or four-voice texture was founded on the tenor line, in which was placed a cantus firmus. Over time, composers began to integrate other Latin or vernacular (predominantly French) texts into the upper voices, developing the motet as a secular genre as well<sup>3</sup>. The onset of the Renaissance brought a return to frequent composition of sacred motets, though this time without an emphasis

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<sup>1</sup> Leeman L. Perkins, “Josquin’s *Qui habitat* and the Psalm Motets,” *The Journal of Musicology* 26 (2009): 513.

<sup>2</sup> Miranda Stanyon, “Pervasive Imitation in Senfl’s *Ave Maria... Virgo Serena*: Borrowing from Josquin in Sixteenth-Century Augsburg,” In *Identity and Locality in Early European Music, 1028-1740*, ed. Jason Stoessel (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 155.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Macey and Leeman L. Perkins, “Motet,” Oxford Music Online, Accessed September 5, 2013, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/>.

placed on the importance of the cantus firmus. Thus, the role of the tenor was diminished and it became more equal in complexity and significance with the soprano, alto, and bass voices<sup>4</sup>.

### **The History and Context of Josquin des Prez's "*Ave Maria...virgo serena*"**

Josquin des Prez (c. 1450-1521) was a Franco-Flemish composer from northern France. A singer by profession, he was employed by multiple French noblemen and also spent a significant portion of his career working in Italy in Milan, Rome and Ferrara<sup>5</sup>. He finally settled at the collegiate church of Notre Dame, where he was appointed to the positions of canon and provost in 1504 and stayed until his death<sup>6</sup>.

Composed in the latter half of the 15th century, "*Ave Maria...virgo serena*" is one of Josquin's earliest dateable works<sup>7</sup>. There is some discrepancy, however, as to the exact year of its composition, with some sources claiming 1476<sup>8</sup> and others 1485<sup>9</sup>. There were many changes in musical attitudes and styles during this time period as the Renaissance blossomed around Europe<sup>10</sup>. The humanist movement and secular culture rose to prominence and with them an

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Des Prez, Josquin, "*Ave Maria...virgo serena*," In *Oxford Anthology of Western Music: MUH 3211/3212 (Custom Edition Florida State University)*, ed. David J. Rothenberg, Robert R. Holzer, Klara Moricz, and David E. Schneider (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 110.

<sup>6</sup> John Milsom, "Josquin des Prez," Oxford Music Online, Accessed September 5, 2013, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/>.

<sup>7</sup> Music History Resource Center, "Josquin des Prez, *Ave Maria* (c1485), Accessed September 25, 2013, [http://www.cengage.com/music/book\\_content/049557273X\\_wrightSimms/assets/more/21\\_Ave\\_Maria.html](http://www.cengage.com/music/book_content/049557273X_wrightSimms/assets/more/21_Ave_Maria.html).

<sup>8</sup> Des Prez, "*Ave Maria*," In *Oxford Anthology*, 110.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua Rifkin, "Munich, Milan, and a Marian Motet: Dating Josquin's *Ave Maria*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 56 (2003): 244.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Bent, "The motet around 1500," *Oxford Journals* 35 (2007): 684.

emphasis on the power of the individual rather than total devotion to the Divine<sup>11</sup>. Such trends are evident in Josquin's motet. While the text is sacred, there is no cantus firmus in the tenor line; rather all four voice parts have equal prevalence. Though the five-stanza text is instrumental in determining the structure of the motet, Josquin employs numerous compositional techniques which exemplify his attention to the music as an art, and not necessarily just a means for worship.

The text of the piece is taken from a five-stanza antiphon about the Virgin Mary<sup>12</sup>. It begins, however, with a quatrain containing the words that the archangel Gabriel allegedly spoke to Mary as he descended from heaven to tell her that she would give birth to Jesus<sup>13</sup>. The following stanzas chronicle the five major events that thereafter occurred in Mary's life, each of which merited liturgical feast days in the Church: the Immaculate Conception, the Nativity, the Annunciation, the Purification, and the Assumption. The piece then closes with a brief prayer directed to the Virgin Mary ("O mother of God, remember me. Amen.")<sup>14</sup>.

### **Analysis of Josquin's "*Ave Maria...virgo Serena*"**

The text-based structure of Josquin's motet is clearly constructed through the use of changing textures. The most notable compositional technique employed by Josquin is pervasive imitation, immediately recognizable within the first few measures. At m. 1, the superius voice enters with a chant-based melodic motive, followed by the altus in m. 2, the tenor in m. 3, and

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<sup>11</sup> Steven Kreis, "Renaissance Humanism," The History Guide: Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History, Accessed October 9, 2013, <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/humanism.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Music History Resource Center, "Josquin."

<sup>13</sup> Des Prez, "*Ave Maria*," In *Oxford Anthology*, 110.

<sup>14</sup> Music History Resource Center, "Josquin."

the bassus in m. 4<sup>15</sup>. After this, each line of the opening quatrain is introduced along with a new melodic motive through the staggered entrances of the four voices, in this same order every time. This downward progression of the entrances is an instance of text painting in which Josquin attempts to evoke an image of Gabriel's descent from heaven. Imitation is also apparent during the setting of the second stanza from measures 64-69, during which the four voices enter in the same order as before with the text "Ut lucifer, lux oriens..."<sup>16</sup>. Just as with the quatrain, they all introduce the same motive, though this time it is transposed down a perfect fifth in the altus and bassus<sup>17</sup>. Josquin's constant use of motives adds an extra layer to his use of pervasive imitation, ensuring "maximum permeation of a polyphonic complex"<sup>18</sup>.

Another prominent technique that Josquin employs throughout the piece is the use of antiphonal texture. He often pairs the superius and altus voices and tenor and bassus voices, most notably in the third stanza (m. 78-93), which has an entirely antiphonal setting. In this case, the tenor and bassus voices imitate exactly the pitches and rhythms of the superius and altus voices in previous measures, differing only in text<sup>19</sup>. This same antiphonal setting and pairing of voices is also used in the first half of the second stanza (m. 54-65). Additionally, Josquin plays a lot with the juxtaposition of staggered entrances and homorhythmic sections. In the first stanza, in measures 40-41, all four voices are in homorhythm on the text "solemni plena..." ("full of solemn...") then quickly break off into four distinct polyphonic lines on the word

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<sup>15</sup> Des Prez, "Ave Maria," In *Oxford Anthology*, 111.

<sup>16</sup> Des Prez, "Ave Maria," In *Oxford Anthology*, 112.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

<sup>18</sup> Joshua Rifkin, "Miracles, Motivicity, and Mannerism: Adrian Willaert's *Videns Dominus flentes sorores Lazari* and Some Aspects of Motet Composition in the 1520s," In *Hearing the Motet: Essays on the Motet of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Dolores Pesce (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 244.

<sup>19</sup> Des Prez, "Ave Maria," In *Oxford Anthology*, 112-113.

“gaudio” (“joy”) and for the remainder of the stanza<sup>20</sup>. This juxtaposition serves as a form of text painting for the “joy” and “renewed gladness” brought about by the Conception. Such juxtaposition is evident again in the fourth stanza, during which the superius, altus, and bassus voices are almost completely homorhythmic. The tenor, however, has the same rhythm but continuously enters one half note behind the other voices throughout the setting of the stanza, causing it to contrast heavily with the rhythm of the other three voices. This tension between the tenor and the other voices finally ends in m. 108-110, on the word “purgatio” (“cleansing”)<sup>21</sup>. Finally, the motet as a whole contains early traces of sequences and functional harmony, most prominently in the latter half of the second stanza. The harmonies produced by the staggered entrances of the voices on “Ut lucifer, lux oriens...” beginning at m. 64 hint at those of a descending thirds sequence. As the stanza comes to a close in m. 76-77, the bass demonstrates 4-5-1 motion coupled with a leading tone in the superius and scale degree 2 in the tenor, all of which resolve to a unison C<sup>22</sup>. If the is assumed to be C major, such harmonic movement is indicative of the beginnings of the authentic cadence.

### **Historical Significance and Later Influence of “*Ave Maria...virgo serena*”**

In composing “*Ave Maria...virgo serena*,” Josquin revolutionized the techniques of imitation and motivicity. Over the course of the motet he interrelates them, generously using both to evoke vivid images of the text and clearly outline the structure of the piece. In addition to this, he also makes great use of antiphonal and homorhythmic settings and staggered entrances,

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<sup>20</sup> Des Prez, “*Ave Maria*,” In *Oxford Anthology*, 112.

<sup>21</sup> Des Prez, “*Ave Maria*,” In *Oxford Anthology*, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Des Prez, “*Ave Maria*,” In *Oxford Anthology*, 112.

extending great importance to all four voices. Josquin's innovations had a lasting effect on the genre of the motet, greatly influencing the next generation of composers. Looking closely at music composed between 1520 and 1550, thicker textures, more pervasive imitation, and a fuller contrapuntal texture that makes use of all four voices are favored overall<sup>23</sup>.

Josquin's "*Ave Maria*" was so influential that it even elicited the composition of a parody version by German composer Ludwig Senfl (c. 1486-1542/3)<sup>24</sup>. The piece was "admired in sixteenth-century Germany, and even used as an exemplum by young composers"<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, the technique of imitation was regarded as "central to the idea of a renaissance...(and) a method of bringing the classical world back to life"<sup>26</sup>. Senfl's parody is composed for six voices (SSATTB) rather than four, allowing him to further thicken the texture of the piece. Though he begins with the same chant-based musical motive as the original does, it begins in the alto rather than soprano line and the order of the entries progresses up the staff rather than down. Senfl lengthens each phrase, allowing for expansion of Josquin's several compositional techniques. For example, three or four voices rather than two are grouped during antiphonal sections<sup>27</sup>. In short, Senfl's parody of "*Ave Maria*" pays homage to Josquin's many innovations by exploring and emphasizing them even further.

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<sup>23</sup> James Haar, "Classicism and Mannerism in 16th-Century Music," In *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 25 (1994): 11.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Bente and Clytus Gottwald, "Senfl, Ludwig," Oxford Music Online, Accessed October 11, 2013, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/>.

<sup>25</sup> Stanyon, "Pervasive Imitation," In *Identity and Locality*, 155.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> Stanyon, "Pervasive Imitation: Borrowing," In *Identity and Locality*, 165.

In conclusion, Josquin des Prez's sacred motet "*Ave Maria...virgo serena*" has emerged over the years as one of the most influential pieces to come out of the 15th century. It introduces the frequent use of pervasive imitation and motives, employing them both as a means for text painting and the outlining of the piece's structure. Additionally, Josquin grants equal importance to each of the four voice parts, straying from emphasis on the tenor voice, and significantly thickening the texture in some excerpts of the motet. Such innovations were later copied by numerous composers, even leading to a parody of the piece. Its great regard and influence has secured Josquin des Prez's position as one of the most prominent composers of the Renaissance.



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