The *Missa Pange lingua* of Josquin des Prez: An Approach to Renaissance Performance Practice

by Barbara L. Hall

The vocal and choral music of the Renaissance provides a great wealth of repertoire for the small mixed choir composed of young and mostly untrained singers. The madrigal, both in its performance with solo ensemble and with small choir, has been a mainstay of high school and college programs for decades. Sacred music and particularly the mass setting, though no less suitable for such choirs, presents greater obstacles of language, of musical style, and of performance practice. Yet the masses of Josquin, Victoria, and Palestrina, among others, contain some of the most powerful music of the Renaissance. In addition, an entire mass can provide the substantial core for a program, thus relieving the problem of a long succession of short unrelated works.

The question of performance practice can be divided into three elements: historical authenticity, musical expressivity, and practical considerations. As concrete information on the historical practice of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries comes to light, we as performers are constrained to incorporate such material in the decision-making process that is performance preparation. Richard Taruskin insists that we have an "absolute injunction to take history into account," but he sees this demand as a challenge that frees us from unquestioned assumptions and guides our search for "the identification of performance style with the demands of the music."[1] This "authenticity of conviction" rests on "knowing what you mean and whence comes that knowledge."[2] Thus the responsibility of the performer goes beyond musicological research to the thoughtful coordination of historical and musical factors.

This task is made more liberating by the certain knowledge that for the majority of works from Josquin's time more than one style of performance is historically possible. The number of performers varied, the pitch at which the works were sung differed, the use of instrumental accompaniment was fixed neither as to instruments used nor to their use at all, and tempos and dynamic levels surely differed from church to church, from decade to decade, and even from performance to performance. This article, then, seeks to suggest solutions to these problems of performance based on one conductor's personal interpretation of the triad that links historical, musical, and practical factors.

First, to perform a Renaissance mass as a single musical entity defies the historical practice in which the mass was part of a larger liturgy and was divided by other sung and spoken portions into five separate musical works.[3] Some of the decisions that must be made today for a concert performance of the mass are predicated on the need for variety that sustains the listener's as well as the performer's interest over a long span of time. The variation of tone color, tempo, dynamics, phrasing, and articulation serves this end and may also serve to articulate the structure of the composition.[4]

We know with some accuracy how many singers were employed at court chapels and cathedrals in Italy during Josquin's active years (1460-1520), and that the numbers were often determined by politics, wealth, and social custom rather than by aesthetic preferences.[5] The number ranged from four (one singer on a part) in smaller chapels in the 1470s to a total of thirty singers at the Sistine Chapel in 1521.[6] These are extremes; a total of fifteen to twenty-four singers was more common, particularly in the decades around the turn of the sixteenth century.[7]

Usually these choirs were composed of men and boys, with the exception of the choir of the Sistine Chapel which had only adult singers. In general, boys were used only on the top part and often were joined by one or two adult male sopranos. Perhaps because of the lighter boys' voices and falsetto tone of the men, the number of sopranos often was twice as high as the number of any other part. For example, at the Florentine Cathedral in 1502 the fourteen singers were divided into seven sopranos (five boys and two adults) two altos, three tenors, and two basses.[8] From the practical standpoint of today's mixed SATB choir, an equal number of singers on each part, unbalanced only in the case of a weaker group of voices in any section, seems a good general rule. In fact, the young female soprano voice often has the strongest and most developed tone rather than the weakest, thereby nullifying the historical need to reinfoce this voice part. The use of at least three voices but no more than five or six per section avoids the problems of too few to establish a blend and too many to maintain the clarity and purity of sound. Here the historical precedent becomes today's musical and practical solution as well.

The quality and characteristics of overall sound and hence of vocal production as well are nearly impossible to document precisely. Himself a singer, Josquin was called a "master of singers" by Glareanus and surely demanded a particular vocal quality for the performance of his music. An exact contemporary of Josquin, the theorist Franchinus Gafurius, offers an unusually clear statement of what this ideal tone might have been:

> . . . in performing they should not project their voices with an unusual and unsightly opening of their mouths, or with an absurd loud bellowing when they strive after melodies, especially in the divine mysteries. They should also spurn excessive vibrato and voices which are too loud, for they are not compatible with other voices similarly pitched.[10]

He also warns against "an extravagant and indecorous movement of the head or hands" since only "a well-modulated voice" produces the desired tone.[11]

Experience confirms that a tone on the light, pure, and straight side

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improves the blend within each section and within the group, purifies the intonation, and projects the clarity of each linear strand of melody. This last point is particularly apt for the music of Josquin's time. The principle of composition—a counterpoint of equal voices—"should be mirrored in the sound."[12] In his 1953 survey of sixteenth-century sacred music on records, Jeremy Noble found that "the absence of this linear quality . . . is the most general failing" in the recorded performances.[13] More than thirty years later, Noble would be pleased to find the large number of performances striving for this clarity.

The young undergraduate voices I work with achieve this light sound without strain. The tenors and sopranos use a light head tone while the basses can use a fuller tone but with brightness for clarity in the low range. The altos have the most difficulty since their part often lies quite low in range and tessitura. For this reason, one or more tenors frequently join the altos for low passages; the reverse also solves the problem of high phrases in the tenor parts where, to keep the tone pure and full enough, one or more altos join the tenors. Since a soloistic vocal color is avoided in all sections, this crossing of color actually adds to the blend and ease of projection for each melodic strand.

Because of the original disposition for men and boys, most Renaissance sacred works are too low for performance by a mixed choir at original pitch. Again, the practical considerations are congruent with historical precedent. Transposition up a major second and even up a minor third was not infrequent during the Renaissance.[14] In addition, according to Peter Phillips "we cannot with any certainty predict what pitch was considered to be normal."[15] Only in cases of the association of a particular tessitura with a symbolic meaning, such as the unusually low range of some Requiem Mass settings, would a reasonable and practical transposition not serve the music. In my edition of Josquin's *Missa Pange lingua* the transposition is a third higher than the original score. However, in several performances the choir sang the work a half step lower or a half step higher than notated; the higher pitch in particular produced better overall intonation.

The matter of instrumental accompaniment of sacred music also lacks definitive historical answers. The musicological concensus is against any instrument other than organ being used as part of a liturgical service.[16] Though there is no conclusive evidence that the organ actually accompanied the singers, Frank D'Accone agrees with Professor Helmut Hucke that

"because of its privileged and unquestioned position . . . (the organ) might therefore very well have become an integral part of 'a cappella' performance."[17] Howard Mayer Brown points out that the Cathedral at Cambrai and the Sistine Chapel in Rome both explicitly forbade the organ's use as an accompaniment to the singers and he concludes that:

> most of the polyphony of the 15th and early 16th centuries set to Latin words was probably performed more often then by voices alone than by voices and instruments or by instruments alone.[18]

In practice, the a cappella choral sound can be beautiful and expressive, and can achieve absolute purity of intonation. What exactly an organ might play remains a question answered only for later eras. The use of other instruments—wind instruments being the ones most easily defended on historical grounds—would add variety of color. However, such variety may also be achieved by the adoption of a kind of vocal *alternatim* practice not unknown in the Renaissance. The alternation of tutti and soloists had been a practice as far back as the medieval era in monophonic/polyphonic exchanges and in the singing of responsorial texts. But it was also a normal practice in the singing of masses, most logically in duo or trio sections sung by soloists in contrast to homophonic passages sung by the chorus. In Josquin's *Missa Pange lingua* any or all of the following sections can be assigned to solo voices:

"Christe eleison"
"Qui tollis peccata mundi" up to "Suscipe" (Gloria)
"Qui sedes" up to "miserere nobis" (Gloria)
"Genitum non factum" up to "Et incarnatus est" (Credo)
"Et in spiritum" up to "Confiteor" (Credo)
"Pleni sunt coeli" (Sanctus)
"Benedictus"
"Agnus Dei II"

If the choir has five or six voices per section, a reduction to two or three voices can also achieve a similarly effective contrast of color.

Variety and textual expression can both be served by using different articulations, dynamic shadings, and adjustments of tempo. Such suggestions have historical precedent as well. Vicentino in his *L'Antico musica* (Rome, 1555) encourages choices of *piano* or *forte, presto* or *tardo* based on the words and nature of the text.[20] Drawing an analogy with good oratory he states:

> the composition sung with changes of tempo is more pleasing in its variety than that which is sung without being varied all the way to the end.[21]

Beyond the single consideration of tempo, this statement reflects an attitude toward performance practice that recognizes the need for expressivity and communication.

Four short examples of how to add variety may suggest other possibilities for expressive performance.

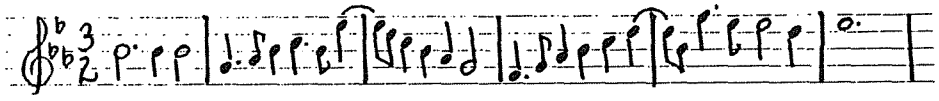
1. The second *Kyrie* begins with the upper voices and has an extended sequence in the middle. A brighter, louder, more extroverted tone and quicker tempo can be used here to close this first movement of the mass.
2. The litany of praise in the *Gloria* beginning "Laudamus te" through "glorificamus te" gains impact with a dynamic crescendo that confirms the gradually denser texture and the octave extension that caps this section in the highest voice.
3. After the homophonic passage "passus et sepultus est" that ends on a low, closed-position chord, a louder and crisp attack for the polyphonic "Et resurrexit" seems only natural.
4. The *Hosanna* falls into two sections: the opening duple-meter duets between the lower and upper pairs of voices, and the closing extended section in triple meter in four-voice counterpoint. Whether one chooses a more *marcato* articulation for the opening and more legato for the close as I did, or some other contrast of delivery, the resulting structural

clarity justifies taking the liberty.

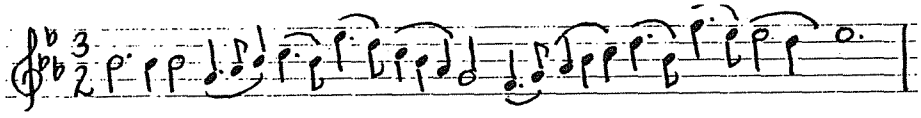
This last example raises the question of coordinating successive proportions, here ¢ followed by a section in $\frac{3}{2}$. Though I chose to accommodate the triple meter to the duple (𝅗𝅥. = 𝅗𝅥) I tend to agree with Richard Taruskin who states that probably the practices of the Renaissance were multifarious, ranging from careful mathematical proportionality to the looser *piu* or *meno mosso*.[22]

Another and even more significant rhythmic problem arises from the modern score which usually bars all parts according to a consistent metric pattern set at the beginning in the form of a modern time signature. This practice does a great disservice to the independent and asymmetrical flow of each individual line. A short example notated in two different ways will illustrate the problem.

Example 1. Kyrie II, Soprano, mm. 1-6.[23]



Example 2. Kyrie II, Soprano, mm. 1-6.



1. Using a strict $\frac{3}{2}$ signature the second *Kyrie* opens in the soprano as shown in Example 1 (here transposed up a third from the original). This notation syncopates the rhythm between measures 2 and 3, 4 and 5, and in the middle of measure 2 (where the third beat is not clear) and measure 5 (where beats 2 and 3 are not clear).
2. An alternate unbarred version of this same passage with phrase marks suggests the natural assymetric flow of the music. (Example 2) This latter version highlights the irregular units of two and three, gives integrity to the rhythmic figure ♩ ♩ and its augmentation to 𝅗𝅥 𝅗𝅥 at the cadence.

In a 1952 review of recordings Otto Gombosi states the case for a rhythmic notation faithful to Renaissance precepts with persuasive clarity.

> . . . the (modern) notational picture tends to obscure the musical meaning and there are still some spots of rattling syncopations . . . The polyrhythmic texture is in full bloom and conveys that living quality, that richness of life and movement, that expressive abundance that is the lifeblood of Josquin's intricate simplicity.[24]

For practical reasons, though against my truest wishes (which

Example 3. Hosanna, mm. 1-4.

would have everyone except the conductor reading from partbooks), I add *mensurstriche* (barlines that reach between staves but do not cross the staves) which facilitate rehearsal. Example 3 from the *Hosanna,* though admittedly more cluttered visually than the usual modern barring, gives each line a freedom of rhythmic flow and clearly illustrates the rhythmic polyphony between voices that Gombosi describes. In the absence of published editions that adopt this rhythmic approach, I have had to resort to making my own editions of Renaissance music, but the results in performance have been well worth the time spent.

This article has certainly not solved all the problems of performing sacred music of the Renaissance. Rather, it has suggested that the solutions to these problems may best be found in the coordination of historical fact, musical sensitivity, and practical compromise. Understanding of the text, of the principle of contrapuntal composition, and of the vocal technique and resources of the high-school or college singer, can be reconciled with musicological research and enlivened with musical insights gained by thorough study of the score. Only then can the performer hope to achieve the "authenticity of conviction" characteristic of any fine performance.

Footnotes

[1] Richard Taruskin, in his contribution to "The Limits of Authenticity: A Discussion," *Early Music* 12, no. 1 (February 1984): 10-11.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[3] That the composer of the mass setting considered it a unified work, however, is clear from the use of structurally unifying devices such as cantus firmus, motto openings, and modal and cadential planning.

[4] See Cecil Isaac's review of a performance of the *Missa Pange lingua* by the Pro Musica directed by Noah Greenberg in *The Musical Quarterly* XLVII (October 1961): 562-565.

[5] Frank D'Accone, "The Performance of Sacred Music in Italy during Josquin's Time, c. 1475-1525," in *Proceedings of the International Josquin Festival-Conference, New York, 1972* (London, 1975), p. 602.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 603, 607.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 605, 607; Thomas Warburton, "Editing and Performing Josquin's Mass," in *Josquin Des Prez: Missa Pange lingua,* edited

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by Thomas Warburton (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 10; Nanie Bridgman, "On the Discography of Josquin and the Interpretation of his Music in Recordings," in *Proceedings of the International Josquin Festival-Conference, New York, 1972* (London, 1975), p. 639.

[8] D'Accone, p. 612.

[9] Bridgman, p. 638.

[10] Franchinus Gafurius, *Practica musicae.* Translated and edited by Irwin Young (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 160.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[12] Peter Phillips, "Performance Practice in 16th-Century English Choral Music," *Early Music* 6, No. 2 (April 1978): 196.

[13] Jeremy Noble, "Sixteenth-Century Music on Records. I: Sacred Music," *Music and Letters* 39, no. 1 (January 1958): 156.

[14] See Hugh Benham, "Some Performance Problems," in *Latin Church Music* (London, 1977), and David Wulstan, "The Problem of Pitch in 16th-Century English Vocal Polyphony," *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 93 (1966/7): 97.

[15] Phillips, p. 195.

[16] D'Accone, p. 615; Howard Mayer Brown, "Choral Music in the Renaissance," *Early Music* 6, no. 2 (April 1978): 164.

[17] D'Accone, p. 618.

[18] Brown, p. 164.

[19] René Bernard Lenaerts, "Musical Structure and Performance Practice in Masses and Motets of Josquin and Obrecht," in *Proceedings of the International Josquin Festival-Conference, New York, 1972* (London, 1975), p. 625.

[20] Nicola Vicentino, *L'Antico musica,* translated by Carl MacClintock in *Readings in the History of Music in Performance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 77-78.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

[22] Taruskin, p. 12.

[23] The examples are from my own edition based on my transcription of Biblioteca Vaticana, Cappella Sistina, MS. 16. This transcription also served as the basis for Thomas Warburton's edition of the work (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

[24] Otto Gombosi, "Review of Records," *Musical Quarterly* 35 (October 1952): 134.