

## JOSQUIN DES PRES

**Josquin des Près** (ca 1450/55-1521) was one of the most relevant composers of the Renaissance period. His formative years were very solid on the technical side: some maintain that Josquin was a student of Johannes Ockeghem, though it has not really been documented. This allowed him to serve as a young composer in several courts in Italy, including the Papal court in Rome. Josquin's biographical information can easily be found on the internet. His contemporaries called him "*The Prince of Musicians*," surely proof that he was widely revered for his work.

Many of Josquin's motets, and particularly his masses, were published by the famed Petrucci as of 1502. His French *Chansons*, however, came to us through different manuscripts, chief among them those coming from the court of Margaret of Austria, aunt of Charles V. Here lies a musicological challenge: several *chansons* have been doubtfully attributed to Josquin, since authorship was often not properly documented, and known pieces by other composers were wrongfully attributed to him. Josquin's researchers have long sustained that he wrote more than 70 works in French.

Two retrospective collections of Josquin's *chansons* were published more than 20 years after his death, both in Antwerp, by Tylman Susato in 1545, and in Paris, by Pierre Attaignant in 1549. This would certainly indicate the level of admiration his work arose among his followers. Some of the works included in these collections are not backed by original manuscripts, which opens the question of whether the great composer of *Mille regretz* did indeed write them or not. It is likely that those manuscripts did exist at some point, but, as with many other valuable historical documents, they are now lost.

I would like to offer several *chansons* from these collections on this page, carefully indicating the cases of doubtful authorship. In all instances, these are exceptional works, well worth performing.

Josquin was a great master of canonic writing. Though in most cases he placed the canon in the two upper voices (*Ie me complains*, for

example), in many others the canonic voices are found in the lower parts. This is, in my view, a very successful and inventive way to hide this composition technique. I would like to argue that, in Josquin's style, the extensive use of canonic writing is not an end in and of itself, but rather a pillar on which he builds his work on polyphony.

In Des Pres's contrapuntal writing, which moved gradually toward imitation among all voices, albeit alternating with some use of homophony, placing the canon in lower voices undoubtedly helped to hide it, as stated before. The many similar entrances are based on the same canonic motive in other voices, which causes the final result to be essentially that of an imitative work (A-B in *Parfons regretz*, S2-T in *Plusieurs regretz*, S2-T2 in *Regretz sans fin*, S-T1 in *Cueur langoureux*).

The double canon *Baises moy* (published by London Pro Musica Edition in the 70s, and available today in *imslp* and *cpdl* versions) is a good example that ratifies my idea about the Josquinian desire to "hide" the canon and, in that way, approach a type of writing which could be described as systematically imitative. In the beginning of that *chanson* (which is probably based on a popular melody), Josquin writes a canon between the soprano and the alto lines, and another between the tenor and the bass lines, using different melodies for each canon; on top of that, he superimposes them, in the style of partner-songs. What is truly a novelty and something extraordinary about this work is the fact that, after the initial phrase, Josquin utilizes the same melodic material in all four voices (rigorously maintaining both canons) but giving the idea of imitative writing in all voices. In Susato's collection of 1545 there is a version of *Baises moy* as a triple canon for 6 voices, a true compositional feat.

In my opinion, Josquin gradually left strict canonic writing, moving clearly toward imitation in all voices in his later works, while sometimes inserting homophonic passages. The celebrated *Mille regretz* is, arguably, the clearest example of this.

I present two works (*Cueurs desolez* and *Je ne me puis tenir d'aimer*) that also share that profile. Though some musicologist colleagues

doubt that Josquin is indeed the composer of these pieces, their high quality of imitative writing and beautiful melodic lines make them well worthy of Des Pres's genius authorship. And if he was not the composer (something that probably will never be confirmed), as we say in Italian, "*Se non é vero é ben trovato*" (if it is not true, it is a good find anyway!).