
Plainsong as Pre-composition: Josquin's *Missa de Beata Virgine*

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The *Missa de Beata Virgine*, along with the *Missa Sine Nomine* and the *Missa Pange Lingua* form a great trilogy of Masses that come from Josquin's late period, and all three take their place among his most important works.¹ Comparing them, one cannot help but notice how different they are, with the *Missa de Beata Virgine* standing out particularly from the set, primarily on account of the variety of materials on which Josquin bases the Mass, and the uncertainty surrounding how the Mass came together as a whole, unified work.² This Mass is also the only example of a votive Lady mass in Josquin's *oeuvre*. In the *Missa de Beata Virgine*, Josquin makes extensive use of the chants associated with Lady mass. In each movement, there is always at least one chant-bearing voice and, especially in this Mass, the chant dominates the texture, either in literal quotation, organisation into motives or in paraphrase. Moreover, Josquin also follows the cadence structures in the chant. Through skilful use of transposition and by using only certain invocations of the chant, Josquin sets up tonal poles around which all the music in the Mass will revolve. The paradox of this Mass is that while the chant is treated quite strictly, it is also one of Josquin's most musically wide-ranging works, with a textural diversity not encountered in his other Masses.

The most extraordinary feature of the *Missa de Beata Virgine* however, is that Josquin has based each movement on a *different* set of plainchants: *Kyrie* and *Gloria IX*, *Credo I*, *Sanctus IV* and *Agnus Dei IV* from the Ordinary chants associated with Lady mass. The differing musical characteristics of the chants and Josquin's treatment of them brings a real sense of heterogeneity

¹ For Josquin's masses, see Alejandro Enrique Planchart, 'Masses on Plainsong Cantus Firmi' (120–30) and William Elders, 'Symbolism in the Sacred Music of Josquin' (531–68) in Richard Sherr (ed.), *The Josquin Companion* (Oxford: OUP, 2000). For the mass in Josquin's time, see Edgar H. Sparks, *Cantus Firmus in Mass and Motet 1420–1520* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963) 368–72.

² The *Gloria* and *Credo* were circulating independently as early as 1503, while the other movements may date from around 1510. The Mass was first published complete in 1514.

to the work. The modalities, the key signatures and the ranges of the voice parts vary amongst every movement. The voicing in the *Missa de Beata Virgine* is also unique among Josquin's masses. Four voices are called for in the *Kyrie* and *Gloria*, whereas a fifth, canonically derived voice is added from the *Credo* onwards. In all movements the *dux* in the canon is the tenor, which is also the voice most closely derived from the chant. In the *Credo*, the tenor presents the chant transposed up a fifth with the canonic voice a fifth below; in the *Sanctus* the tenor has the chant transposed up a fourth with the canonic voice a fifth above, and in the *Agnus Dei* the tenor presents the chant transposed up a fifth with the canonic voice up another fifth. These transpositions thus set up strong internal structures in each movement. While the *Missa de Beata Virgine* is also distinguished by its great textural variety, one is always aware that Josquin has applied similar rigorousness to his planning of these textures, organising and balancing them into the work as a whole.

The manner in which Josquin plans this work is intrinsically linked to the relationships between the *Gloria* and the *Credo*, which were the first movements to be composed. While the overall handling of the chant in the work is complex and wide-ranging, the *Gloria* presents the most straightforward setting of the cantus firmus. In the *Gloria*, the chant is presented in its entirety in one voice or another as the movement proceeds. In the opening section, the chant is presented as a canon at the octave between the superius and the tenor, with the other two parts providing counterpoints that are sometimes imitations of each other, sometimes free and sometimes derived from the chant. Josquin expands the chant melodically and varies it rhythmically so that the *cantus firmus* and the free parts are always skilfully integrated. There are also sections where the chant becomes 'embedded' in fauxbourdon-like passages. Following the chant, virtually all the cadences in the *Gloria* are on G or D. In the *Missa de Beata Virgine*, Josquin includes troped sections of material honouring the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ in the *Gloria*.³ The inclusion is certainly fitting in a work that honours the Virgin Mary, and Josquin underlines these phrases by using a different style of writing for each pair of lines.

At the words 'Spiritus et alme,' the tenor and bass present the chant in a canon at the fifth in the first extended passage of duet writing in the course of the movement. Josquin also slows the rate of declamation here so that the words are very clearly rendered. The next interpolation, which begins at 'Primogenitus Mariae' features the chant set as a long descending line in all parts, with syncopations in the alto line neatly offsetting the surrounding lines. 'Mariam coronans,' the last of these interpolations, is set as a series of slow sustained chords—one of the most memorable sections of the *Gloria* and once again, the first time we have heard such a passage over the course of the movement.⁴

In the *Credo*, Josquin introduces a fifth voice, and the tenor is given the entire chant. The fifth voice functions as a duplication of the tenor, always in strict canon. Following the instruction 'Le premier va devant [the first shall be last]' it functions as *dux*, while the derived voice comes in two bars later at the fifth below. At 'Et in Spiritum Sanctum,' a new instruction appears: 'Le devant va derriere [the last shall be first].' In accordance with this, the second voice in the

³ This was material that was commonly set by composers in Josquin's time, until it was jettisoned by the Council of Trent some forty years after Josquin's death.

⁴ This passage is particularly effective in the recording by A Sei Voci, where a reduction in tempo and dynamic make it stand out even more. *Josquin Desprez: Missa de Beata Virgine, Motets a la Vierge* [sound recording], A Sei Voci, Astree E8560.

canon takes the lead, while the tenor now functions as *comes* and follows at a distance of two bars. It is fascinating to see how Josquin scores for the other three voices around this strict canonic apparatus. There are several points where each of these lines engages in lively canonic dialogue with the other two and, likewise, there are also many points where Josquin 'disguises' the canon between the two tenor lines by using freely composed material around it.

The *Credo* also differs from the *Gloria* by virtue of its low scoring and its key signature. In context, the *Credo* seems a whole fourth lower than all the other movements and, whether it was Josquin's intention or not, the *Credo* thus becomes the 'centre' of the work. This is something that registers strongly in any performance of the *Missa de Beata Virgine*. The *Credo* is much more texturally diverse than the other movements, and its overall effect is due largely to the constantly shifting sonorities and the different speeds of declamation that Josquin uses for each section of text. For example, the opening section has the text set out mainly in minims; at 'Deum de Deo,' the text is abruptly declaimed in crotchets. The question of voicing arises here: because of the different ranges required, would the music have been transposed up, or, say, would the other movements have been transposed down to bring them into line with the *Credo*? If not, can we assume a different group of singers might have been used for the *Credo*? Whatever the answers, transposing the music would seem to throw out the cadential structures and modal relationships that exist throughout the work.⁵

There are many felicities of scoring in the *Credo* that catch the ear. First, the cadence at 'et homo factus est,' in which the music just seems to stop: the forward movement of the music is obviously a concern here. Later, at 'et resurrexit tertia die,' the words 'tertia die' are given out in a sudden flight of triplets in the superius. One of the most remarkable sections of the movement is at 'Qui cum Patre et Filio,' where the superius breaks into a slow passage of triplets set high over the other voices—both in its rhythm and its tessitura, this phrase makes a clear allusion to the Trinity.⁶ Josquin again follows the structure of the plainchant in the *Credo* by working most of the cadences in the movement to G, with a few others on C and D. Thus, both the *Gloria* and *Credo* are largely rooted on G, and this key area will be of great importance in linking these two movements to the other movements of the Mass. Before leaving the *Credo*, it is worth mentioning that the final cadence in the movement is a startling Phrygian cadence on E. Through the last few bars of the 'Amen,' Josquin seems to be leading the music into an ending in C, or G, but the diversion to E is a real surprise. Again, Josquin seems to be following the shape of the chant, which also has the power to surprise the listener with its ending.⁷

⁵ In my experience, performances of the work, whether one voice on a part or not, have explored all these options. The recording by Theatre of Voices shifts the whole work up a semitone, presumably to 'lift' the sound of the *Credo* and help the (female) altos, whose lines are often too low for comfort (see *Josquin Desprez: Missa de Beata Virgine, Jean Mouton: Motets* [sound recording], Theatre of Voices directed by Paul Hillier, Harmonia Mundi HMU907136). A Sei Voci transpose all the movements except the *Credo* down a fourth, thus bringing their ranges into line; however they use a different set of singers for each movement. With my own choir, Gloriana, I have performed the work with the *Credo* transposed up a fourth and with the alto and canonically derived voice swapped in this movement, as the latter is consistently higher than the former. These are difficulties any choirmaster must navigate when adapting music from this period to today's standard SATB format.

⁶ In Paul Hillier's recording, the rhythm of these triplets is not exactly 'correct,' as it is in the A Sei Voci recording and so the passage loses its impact.

⁷ In Paul Hillier's recording, this ending is underlined through the basses dropping the octave to an unwritten low E. This is effective but, in my opinion, unnecessary: the cadence is already startling enough.

In the *Kyrie*, Josquin transposes the chant up a fourth, so that it ends on G, which is the same note that ends the *Gloria*. Only the first, fourth and ninth invocations of the chant are used, the range of each never exceeding the range of the authentic G mode. Thus, the *cantus firmi* for the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* are brought into line in terms of their range; that is, the *Kyrie* is worked so that it appears to be based on an authentic G mode. In the first *Kyrie*, Josquin begins by quoting and paraphrasing the chant but as the music proceeds, more freely composed material is included, ending with a passage that bears little resemblance to the chant itself. In moving away from the chant, one sees that Josquin clearly gravitates around the tonal poles of G and D, set up through the canonic entries in the opening bars of the movement (see Figure 1). These tonal centres, in turn, look forward to the tonal planning of the *Gloria* and the *Credo*.

Figure 1. *Kyrie*, mm. 1–12: the canonic entries of the four voices set up G and D as tonal poles from the beginning of the movement.

The musical score for the beginning of the *Kyrie* (measures 1–12) is presented in four staves: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The music is in G minor (one flat) and common time. The lyrics are: "Ky - ri - e, Ky - ri - e, Ky - ri - e, e - le - i - son, Ky - ri - e, e - le - i - son, Ky - ri - e, Ky - ri - e, e - le - i - son, Ky - ri - e." The score shows the canonic entries of the four voices, with the Soprano and Tenor parts having lyrics and the Alto and Bass parts having rests.

The *Christe* opens with two duets. The tenor and bass present the paraphrased chant in canon at the fifth (see Figure 2), which is then replicated up the octave by the superius and alto (see Figure 3). This section makes a striking contrast with the surrounding *Kyries*, first, through the reduction of parts—all four parts sound together only in the final cadence (see Figure 4)—and second, by the dramatic compression of the melodic material, strongly outlining the third, G–B \flat . Musically, this contrast works forcefully to point the shift of emphasis in the text ('*Kyrie eleison*' to '*Christe eleison*') and it also points forward to the other extended section of duet in *Agnus Dei II*, which also occurs in the central panel of that similarly tripartite movement.

Figure 2. *Kyrie*, mm. 25–30: first duet.

Chri - - - ste, Chri - - - ste,
Chri - - - ste, Chri - - - ste,

Figure 3. *Kyrie*, mm. 37–48: second duet.

Chri - - - ste,
Chri - - - ste,
i - son,
i - son,
Chri - - - ste,
Chri - - - ste,
e -

Figure 4. *Kyrie*, mm. 53–61: all voices together for the final cadence of the *Christe* section of the movement.

i - son, e - le - i - son.
i - son, e - le - - - i - son.
Chri - ste, e - le - - - - - i - son.
e - le - i - - - son.

The final *Kyrie* features the transposed chant in imitation at the octave. The first two phrases of chant are given to the alto and superius, with accompanying counterpoints from the lower parts. This is then replicated the octave below by the tenor and bass. Towards the end of the movement the tenor becomes the only chant-bearing line and Josquin elaborates the chant here more than in any other place in the *Kyrie*.

The shift from the *Kyrie* to the *Gloria*, the only two movements heard in succession in the liturgy, is very striking. The *Kyrie*, particularly on account of the 'Christe,' strongly emphasises the interval G to B \flat : the *Gloria* dramatically widens this interval by switching this up to a B \natural . Josquin further reinforces this change by using shorter and less melismatic points, and by using more open textures compared with the *Kyrie*. The corresponding lightening of mood is, of course, entirely apt for this part of the Mass. Later on, we encounter the same shift of key between the *Sanctus* and the *Agnus Dei*—the *Sanctus* has a B \flat signature, while the *Agnus Dei* has no signature. But because of the way Josquin has transposed the chant in each case (the *Sanctus* up a fourth, the *Agnus Dei* up a fifth), the difference in sonority between the movements is softer compared with that of the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* since the last two movements are predominantly in C, and so the B that shifts from flat to natural is the second last note in the scale, rather than the third in this case.

In the *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*, the canon between the tenor and derived voice is not at the fifth below but rather at the fifth above (see Figures 5 and 6, respectively). In terms of tessitura, these two movements return to the higher ranges of the *Kyrie* and *Gloria*, balancing the darker and heavier scoring of the *Credo*. Josquin also uses long stretches of perfect time in the *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei* and this together with longer phrase lengths makes the music feel slower compared to the earlier movements. The superius is given special prominence in the opening section of the *Sanctus*. Both in its melismatic writing and consistently high tessitura Josquin has fashioned it into a kind of *vox caelestis*. At several points, the superius separates from the other voices by up to an octave: at the second entry of 'Dominus Deus,' the superius is an astonishing octave and a sixth above the rest of the choir. One also notices the independence of the superius in the opening of the *Credo*, where frequent octave jumps, passages of sequence and filigree give the line a decorative, almost secular feel.

Figure 5. *Sanctus*, mm 1–7: alto 1 enters in canon a fifth above the tenor at m. 5.

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the *Sanctus*, measures 1 through 7. It consists of five staves, labeled S, A1, A2, T, and B from top to bottom. The time signature is 3/2 and the key signature has one flat (B-flat). The lyrics 'Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus' are written below the staves. The Superius (S) part is highly melismatic and high in tessitura. The Tenor (T) and Bass (B) parts enter in canon a fifth above the Tenor at measure 5.

Figure 6. *Agnus Dei I*, mm 1–6: alto 1 enters in canon a fifth above the tenor at m. 5.

The musical score for Figure 6 shows five staves: Soprano (S), Alto 1 (A1), Alto 2 (A2), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The music is in 3/8 time. The lyrics are: "A - - - - gnus De - - - - i, a - - - -". The alto 1 (A1) enters in canon a fifth above the tenor (T) at measure 5. The lyrics "A - - - - gnus" are written below the A1 staff, and "De - - - - i, a - - - -" are written below the T and B staves.

The *Sanctus* is unusual in Josquin's *oeuvre* in that it has no section in reduced scoring: all five voices are used throughout. However, Josquin brings them together only occasionally, mainly at the ends of each section. The constant play of textures continues as Josquin experiments with different combinations of voices. In the 'Hosanna,' predominantly trios of voices are alternated in high and low groupings. However, these are underpinned by a considerable amount of close imitation on the cantus firmus material. The 'Pleni sunt caeli' section begins with a passage of imitation involving all five voices, in which the highest, middle and lowest voices enter first, giving a clear aural representation of heaven and earth (see Figure 7). The *Benedictus* consists mainly of duos and trios which are again integrated by much use of imitation. Despite the sheer variety of textures in the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*, the chant itself can always be followed relatively easily, even if Josquin does depart in a few spots from the *Liber Usualis*.

Agnus Dei II is a duet for the bass and alto, and is one of the best-known parts of the *Missa de Beata Virgine*. Indeed, it is one of the longest and most memorable of all of Josquin's duets. Despite a great deal of close imitation, the duet unfolds quite freely, with a number of different rhythms and motives being used. Outlines of the second invocation of the plainsong become a prominent feature as the music progresses, sometimes given out in long notes, sometimes treated sequentially. The last five notes of the chant (C-D-E-C-C) are also treated sequentially in a long passage that slowly rises and falls, and as the duet comes to a close the tenor part gradually reduces to only the notes C, D and E; the same pitches that the tenor sings in the openings of both the first and third statements of 'Agnus Dei,' thus creating a strong structural link both forwards and backwards in the movement (see Figure 8).

Josquin explores yet another texture in *Agnus Dei III*.⁸ Here, Josquin pairs up the voices with the tenor and bass as one pair, the superius and canonically derived voice another pair, with the alto providing rhythmic and melodic ornamentation that is sometimes taken up by the other voices. As in the later stages of *Agnus Dei II*, the three notes C, D and E (and other transpositions) again feature prominently in the writing, with Josquin leaving one final

⁸ A Josquin hallmark, perhaps: one thinks of the *Missa L'homme arme sexti toni* with its canons and different speeds of material, or the *Missa Pange Lingua* where, in the 'dona nobis pacem,' Josquin contrives to create a texture using little else but the same six-note motive in all four parts.

Figure 7. *Sanctus*, mm. 35–50: wide tessitural gaps signifying heaven and earth.

35 Ple - ni sunt cae - - - - - li

35 Ple - ni sunt cae - - - li et ter -

35 Ple - ni sunt cae -

43 et ter - - - - -

43 ra, et ter - - - - - ra,

43 Ple - ni sunt

li et ter - - - - - ra, ple - - -

Figure 8. *Agnus Dei*, mm. 79–84: the final note in the alto is taken by the tenor to commence the final section of the movement.

79 mi - se - - re - - re no - - - bis.

79 A - - -

bis, mi - - - - se - re - re no - - - - bis. A -

quotation to the superius alone, floated up over the final cadence. This movement then, is as much about major thirds (C to E, G to B, etcetera) as the *Kyrie* is about minor thirds. In terms of tonality, whereas the first three movements predominantly revolve around a G tonality, the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* are centred on C, and thus one perceives a tonal shift over the course of the work. These keys are, of course, closely related but unity is also achieved through the use of common modalities. For example, both the *Gloria* and the *Sanctus* are based on the Mixolydian form of their respective keys, G for the former and C for the latter.

Despite the fact that the *Missa de Beata Virgine* began as a collection of separate movements, the work nonetheless achieves great coherence in terms of its tonal plan and the shaping of its textures and scorings. The plainchants, while bringing much variety to the work are, in the final analysis, its most unifying feature as so much of the fabric of the *Missa de Beata Virgine* is generated by the plainchant. Through Josquin's transpositions, mutations and transformations of the chant, and his adoption (or adaptation) of the cadence structures implied by the chant, the final result is one of superb tonal unity.