

Motets of DuFay and Josquin

The root of the motet is based in the sacred Latin texts of Gregorian chant and was primarily a decoration of chant. In the early motet, the tenor sang original Gregorian chant and was in the form of troped clausula ¹. In the 14th century, the tenor ceased singing chant as the motet took on a more secular form. Rather, the text was usually French and portrayed ideas of refined love or satire. Many motets still carried religious symbolism, most commonly the Virgin Mary and were also used to commemorate special, most often religious, occasions. Some of the most renowned composers of the early motet included Guillaume Du Fay and Josquin Des Prez. I will discuss two important motets: Du Fay's "Alma Redemptoris Mater II (antiphon for Blessed Virgin Mary)", and Des Prez's "Gaude Virgo Mater Christi (Sequence)" musically as well as their historical and religious significance.

Guillaume Dufay lived from 1397-1474 as a Franco-Flemish composer of the early Renaissance. He is considered the most renowned composer in Europe in the mid-15th century and was the central figure in the Burgundian School. Most motets of Du Fay's were simple settings of chant designed for liturgical use, likely as substitutes for the unadorned chant, and can be considered chant harmonizations. He employed a technique of parallel writing known as fauxbourdon to harmonize chant. The chant of "Alma Redemptoris Mater" is from Vespers of Saturday before the 1st Sunday of Advent to 2nd Vespers of the Purification and was catalogued in the Liber Usualis. This motet begins monophonically and then shifts to polyphony in measure nine. The Latin text translates: "Loving Mother of our Savior, hear thou thy people's cry Star of the deep and

¹ J. Peter Burkholder, *Norton Anthology of Western Music, Volume 1: Ancient to Baroque*. 6th edition.

Portal of the sky! Mother of Him who thee made from nothing made. Sinking we strive and call to thee for aid: Oh, by what joy which Gabriel brought to thee, Thou Virgin first and last, let us thy mercy see.” Thus, this motet is one that glorifies and pleads with the Virgin Mary to offer them liberty from everlasting purgatory through the gift of their music. Each line is sung as its own musical phrase and cadenced with a double bar line at the last measure of each phrase. There are three different voices, creating a polyphonic texture, but the top voice or cantus is the most texted line, while the tenor and contratenor are equally texted with much fewer words than the cantus.

When the tenor part enters in measure nine, it is homorhythmic with the cantus until measure 11. The cantus is by far the most complex line. It is the only line with any eighth notes excluding a couple measures in the second half of the motet by the tenor and contratenor. The cantus and tenor are homorhythmic in measures 20-21, while the tenor and contratenor are homorhythmic in measures 25-26. In measure 30, all three voices become more detailed with shorter note values and less disparity between each voice.

The piece cadences three times: in measures 34, 59 and in the last measure. Each cadence has C in the cantus and contratenor with an e in the tenor, except for the last cadence which has two c’s an octave apart in the cantus. Contrapuntally, the tenor and contratenor act as a sort groundwork for the melodic cantus above them. Often the tenor comes in on the downbeat of a given measure and the contratenor follows suit on beat 3. They are sometimes homorhythmic with dotted half notes such as in measures 52 and 53. All three parts are completely homorhythmic in the final cadence of the piece from measures 60-64.

The rhythm is comprised primarily of dotted half notes, half notes, and quarter notes. It is in 6/4 time signature though it switches to 9/4 from measures 49-59. It is in compound duple mensuration as measures are generally divided into groups of three with two beats per group such as in measures 9 and 10. There is little to no syncopation throughout the entire piece though there are some rhythmic patterns of ending measures with an eighth notes such as in measures 14, 27, 39, 42 and 46. There is occasional syncopation within the contratenor such as in measures 39, 44, 45 and 46 where the contratenor enters the measure on the end of beat 1, always with an eighth note followed by a quarter note. The melodic style is melismatic. Cadences match the phrase structure of the text; the first cadence in measure 34 coincides with the ending of the first phrase of the text beginning with the Virgin Mary. The next and second phrase beginning with Virgin Mary picks up after the first cadence and each of the four cadences match with the beginnings and ends of each phrase of the text.

The first phrase is much longer and more melismatic than the rest, and the second phrases are equal length while the final phrase is half the length of the middle two and sung in complete homorhythmic unison with all three voices. This motet is in authentic church mode 3, because the final is the note e on every cadence in the tenor. Additionally, the range is from d to the e an octave above middle c. There is a significant opening melisma in the cantus from measures 1-9 before the tenor and contratenor come in; it is first ascending and then begins descending from note c and is on the syllable "Al" of "Alma," employing word painting. There are two other significant melismas in the tenor: on the syllable "stel" of "Stella" which means star and marks the beginning of the second half of the first phrase. The last main melisma in the cantus is on the syllable

“Vir” of “Virgo” in measures 49 and 50. It is on the word Mary for Virgin Mary, which emphasizes the importance of the virginity of Mary and is marked by groups of eighth notes in the cantus. The overall form is not repetitive as no phrases repeat and the motet exists as one long continuous plea to Virgin Mary. It begins simply and somewhat homorhythmically and becomes more complex in rhythmic and contrapuntal melodic lines before returning to simpler rhythms and harmonies towards the end.

Born approximately fourteen years before Du Fay’s death, Josquin Des Prez rose to be one of the most influential composers of the renaissance period. He lived from ca. 1450-1521. He was at the court of King Rene of Anjou in 1475, in the papal chapel from 1486 to 1495, employed by the Duke of Ferrara from 1503 to 1504, then a provost of Notre Dame, Conde until his death ². Josquin's motet style varied from almost strictly homophonic settings with block chords and syllabic text recitation to very ornate contrapuntal compositions. He also composed psalm settings, which combined homophonic and ornate extremes with the text-painting that spurred the later course of the madrigal. He wrote most of his motets for four voices, which was a perfunctory ensemble size around 1500, but was also inventive in writing motets for five or six voices.

Josquin’s motet “Gaude Virgo Mater Christi (Sequence)” is a unique gem among Josquin’s works. The text of the rarely-set Marian sequence text is strictly metric, consisting of six verses of three lines with 8, 8, and 7 syllables each ³. The Marian sequenced text is one of the many sequences that were eliminated from the liturgy in the

2. Sydney Robinson Charles, *Josquin des Prez: A Guide to Research*. (New York: Garland, 1983).

3. J. Peter Burholder, *A History of Western Music*. 8th edition. (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2010).

16th-century Council of Trent. It is a sequence for the Feast of Purification, which marks a day of purification, renewal, and hope in which Catholics commemorate Mary's obedience to the Mosaic law by submitting herself to the Temple for the ritual purification. The first five verses begin with "Gaude" ("rejoice"), while the last ends "in perenni gaudio" ("in everlasting joy").

Josquin's motet builds and becomes more homophonic and homorhythmic before culminating to a dramatic cadence in the final "Alleluia." There are no repetitions in the text. Each verse is the same length and three lines. There are no rhymes. The piece is in four-part polyphony but begins with only the superius and altus, which cadence on measure nine. These two voices are paired imitation. Then, in measure 10, the tenor enters followed by the bassus in measure 11. In measure 16, the superius rejoins creating three-part polyphony, and finally in measure 17, the altus joins the other three voices and the piece remains in four-part polyphony throughout the rest of the piece, with intermittent measures of homophony. All four parts are texted at all times and it follows church mode one, with d as its final and a as its reciting tone. The tenor part mostly outlines major triads and commonly leaps thirds, octaves and fifths. It is often the busiest part and the most rhythmically complex. Contrapuntally, the tenor often shares the melody with the superius and often joins in melodic union such as in measures 20-21. The tenor and superius are closely related and similar, while the altus and bassus share similar half-note rhythms as well as similar motion; for example, in measures 32-33, both the bassus and altus leap up and down in equal intervals at the same time. All four voices are equal in contrapuntal function.

The rhythm is mostly in 4/2 time signature but switches to 6/2 in measure 36, back to 4/2 in measure 42 and finishes in 6/2 beginning measure 47. The piece appears to be in duple mensuration throughout, as every measure is grouped into two groups of two half notes. It is grouped into three groups of two half notes when the piece switches to 6/2. There is syncopation mostly in the tenor line but the piece is only sparingly syncopated. There is syncopation in measures 33 in the tenor line and 35 in the tenor and bassus line, 43 in the tenor and altus line, measures 44-46 and measure 49. Otherwise, the motet is rhythmically straightforward and comprised of triplets, eighth notes, dotted quarter, and half notes.

The melodic style is both neumatic and syllabic with only a couple instances of melismas. The few melismas fall on eighth notes; the first is measures 7-8 in the superius on the syllables “e” and “le” of the word “Gabriel,” perhaps because he is announcing something. The second occurs in the tenor voice in measure 15 on the syllables “ris” and “li” of “lily of purity.” The last melisma is shorter than the rest and occurs in the tenor in measure 36 on the syllable “pro” of “own” referring to God’s own strength. Cadences match phrase structure of the text as, like in the text, each new musical phrase begins on the first word of each verse, “Gaude” or “rejoice.” For example, in the opening, the superius enters on “Gaude” and cadences on “messenger.” The tenor follows and enters on “Gaude,” the first word of the second (and each) verse; this pattern occurs each phrase. A moment of text painting occurs on the word “ascendente” as a two-octave scale rises from the bassus to the altus. There is very often melodic repetition in which the superius sings a line that is then mimicked by the altus or tenor and mimicked again by the bassus; this occurs with the first musical phrase of the opening and throughout the

entire piece. Thus, Josquin uses the imitative technique in many different places throughout the motet.

Both Guillaume Du Fay and Josquin Des Prez were historically significant in their contribution to late medieval and renaissance music. As Du Fay's music was copied and reproduced anywhere polyphonic singing took place, almost all composers succeeding him were inspired and influenced by his generous output in a range of music forms. While Josquin elevated polyphonic singing to a new and unprecedented level in his prime, both composers shared contrapuntal complexity and a meticulously executed method of voice interval leaping. Du Fay's "Alma Redemptoris Mater II" and Des Prez's "Gaude Virgo Mater Christi (Sequence)" demonstrate each composer's unique and shared abilities that distinguished them as the forefront composers of their time.

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