

Arms and the man

Following the death of John the Fearless, duke of Burgundy, an inventory of the holdings of the Burgundian chapel was drawn up in 1420. Under the heading “Missals and other books used for the services of Mass,” the following items appear:

Item, a book covered in red, notated, in which there are polyphonic Antiphons, Virelais, and Ballades. [A later inventory describes this book as containing “many polyphonic Motets to be sung in a chapel.”]

Item, a large, flat book, notated, containing many Motets, Virelais, and Ballades...

Item, another book of Motets, Patrens, Virelais, Ballades, and other things, from which one sang in the chapel on the great feast days.

These entries imply something we would probably not have suspected: that the music sung “in the chapel on the great feast days” in “the services of Mass” included, besides antiphons, motets, and settings of texts from the Mass Ordinary like the Credo (or Patrem, from the first word to be set polyphonically, following the incipit “Credo in unum deum” which was intoned by the celebrant), songs in the *formes fixes* of secular poetry: “Virelais, Ballades, and other things.” The second of the books listed above survives in part: known as the Trémouille Manuscript, it was apparently copied in 1376 for a French royal chapel and acquired later by Philip the Bold of Burgundy. The extant portion of the manuscript includes the index, from which we can determine the book’s contents: five Mass movements; one hymn; seventy-one motets, most of them polytextual works with at least one French, secular text; three *chaces* or three-voice canons; and thirty-four songs. That is to say, the great majority of the music in this volume which was “used for the services of Mass” in one of the grandest princely chapels in Europe is, on the face of it, partially or fully secular.

Surprising as it may be nowadays, this is far from an isolated case. Singing secular songs during the Mass seems to have been quite common in the fifteenth century. Besides positive evidence such as inventories of chapel service books like the one cited above, numerous examples exist of complaints against the practice. In 1435 the Council of Basel explicitly forbade “songs to be sung in the vernacular tongue, inserted during the solemn service of Mass.” According to the *Summa theologica* by one St. Antoninus, completed shortly before 1459, “What must be

particularly condemned in the divine office...is the insertion of songs or balatas, and vain words.” Nothing had changed by the next century. In his *Christiani matrimonii institutio* of 1526 Erasmus wrote, with scathing disdain, “Nowadays the most frivolous tunes are given holy words, which is no better than if one put the jewelry of Thaïs on Cato. And given the whore-like shamelessness of the singers, the [secular] words are not even held back.” And in 1532 Agrippa von Nettesheim lamented that “Today there is such permissiveness in the music in our churches that certain obscene little polyphonic songs are sometimes placed on a par even with the canon of the Mass itself.”¹

So in the middle of the fifteenth century there was nothing unusual about hearing an ostensibly secular tune like *L’homme armé* during Mass—songs and their texts had been heard in services for at least a century already, and probably much longer—but the notion of using a secular melody as the cantus firmus or structural foundation of a polyphonic setting of the five moments of the Mass Ordinary was new. Indeed, the polyphonic, cyclic Mass was itself a recent invention, originating in England around the 1440s and arriving on the continent via Flanders shortly thereafter. The earliest Masses on secular cantus firmi include John Bedyngham’s *Missa Dueil angoissex* (on a song by Gilles Binchois, setting a text by Christine de Pizan) and Guillaume Du Fay’s *Missa Se la face ay pale* (on his own song) from the 1450s; the first Masses on *L’homme armé*, by Du Fay, Johannes Regis, and Johannes Ockeghem, were composed in the early 1460s. Nearly forty more Masses on *L’homme armé* would follow in a series extending into the mid-sixteenth century and beyond, spreading from France and Burgundy to Rome and Naples and across Europe. But what did the composers of such masses mean by using *L’homme armé*, or what may their listeners have made of such works?

A fifteenth-century European Christian accustomed to think in allegory, metaphor, and analogy might have answered thus: All earthly phenomena correspond to heavenly ones. The music we produce on earth is analogous to the divine music of the angels and the spheres. Not only does the Sanctus we sing offer the human listener a rapturous preview of the sound of angelic choruses, but the love song of a courtier to his lady may symbolize one sung by the believer to the Virgin Mary; a song about an armed man may point to Christ, St. Michael, or some other

¹ All the above quotations may be found in Chapter 6, “The profane made sacred: outside texts and music in the Mass,” of Andrew Kirkman’s 2010 book, *The cultural life of the early polyphonic Mass* (Cambridge, 2010).

spiritual warrior. As Andrew Kirkman puts it, “From the perspective of a late medieval worldview permeated by patterns of religious allegory...potentially spiritual content inhered already in the secular entity, awaiting, as it were, the appropriate context or mindset to activate its higher, spiritual meaning.”² Secular songs could be concealed within the polyphonic fabric, their melodies drawn out into long notes and sung to liturgical texts, but they might also be incorporated into the new composition in such a way as to be immediately recognizable to the listener, with their original texts enunciated distinctly in counterpoint to those of the Mass. The use of song melodies was meant to offer enlightening parallels to the listener; the poetic texts they evoked, even if not sung, suggested metaphors by which humans might attempt to comprehend their relationship to the divine. Aquinas had stressed the utility of metaphor in conveying divine truth, which might not be directly apprehendable by all:

It is befitting Holy Writ to put forward divine and spiritual truths by means of comparisons with material things. For God provides for everything according to the capacity of its nature.... It is also befitting Holy Writ, which is proposed to all without distinction of persons...that spiritual truths be expounded by means of figures taken from corporeal things, in order that thereby even the simple who are unable by themselves to grasp intellectual things may be able to understand it.³

The most obvious and most common analogy made available by courtly love was between the female object of desire and Mary, and our concert includes a song, Du Fay’s *Vostre bruit et vostre grant fame*, whose text could easily be read as a “Dictier qui se poeult adreschier soit a la vierge Marie ou pour un amant a sa dame” (“Poem that may be addressed either to the Virgin Mary or by a lover to his lady”), to quote a rubric given by the Burgundian court chronicler and poet Jean Molinet (c. 1435-1507) to his own *Dame sans per*.⁴ A song addressed to or speaking about a man, like Ockeghem’s *D’un autre amer* or *Quant de vous seul*, could by simple analogy express the believer’s devotion to Christ.

The gender of the beloved in *D’un autre amer* is actually ambiguous and the text might be directed towards a male or female. The first line is adapted from the *Complainte* or lament on the death of his lady by Alain Chartier (d. 1430), but Ockeghem’s song appears to be spoken by a woman about a man. On the other hand, Molinet’s *Oroison* recasts the opening thus: “D’ung

² Kirkman, p. 44.

³ *Summa theologiae* (Q. 1, art. 9), written 1265–74, quoted by Kirkman on p. 45.

⁴ Kirkman, p. 49.

aulture aimer que vous douce Marie / En verité mon cueur s'abuseroit." In any case, the song offered rich symbolic potential for sacred interpretation and it lent its melodies and presumed allegorical meaning to a number of motets and Masses.

The first set on our concert shows the process of allegory at work, moving from a monophonic rendition of the tune (about which more below), followed by a comic song, *Il sera par vous combatu*, then *D'un autre amer*, and finally a setting that combines *D'un autre amer* with *L'homme armé*. The latter demonstrates how two ostensibly secular, superficially unrelated texts, one speaking in an elevated register about courtly love, the other a *chanson rustique* describing a general call to arms, could be juxtaposed so that their allegorical meanings enrich each other.

Il sera par vous combatu speaks directly and familiarly to Symon le Breton, cheering him on to take up his battle axe (his *crocq de ache* or *hache* with aspirated h – or is it a stalk of unspirated *ache*, the wild celery?) and defeat the dreaded Turk. Symon, called Symonet (little Symon, good old Symon), was a chaplain and singer in the Burgundian chapel, which he had joined by 1431. He retired in 1464 to a canonicate in cathedral of Cambrai, joining his friend Guillaume Du Fay, to whom he left a number of valuables upon his death in November 1473; Du Fay stipulated in his will what was to be done with the items after he died, just one year later. By 1460 or so, when *Il sera par vous* was likely composed, the aging Symon would certainly have looked with dismay on a call to arms, but in the years after Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, Europe rang with cries for a new crusade, and in January 1457 the Burgundian *chambre des comptes* issued a memorandum instructing the members of the court, including the chapel singers, to prepare for imminent departure:

Item. As regards the chapel, the duke ought to now name those he wishes to take with him so that they can get ready and they and their servants can be fitted out with brigandines or otherwise, according to their means.⁵ [A brigandine, like a hauberk, was a type of body armor.]

In the event, no such crusade took place, but the atmosphere of fear and alarm, the sense of impending doom, persisted for many decades, even centuries.

⁵ Cited and translated by Alejandro Enrique Planchart in his article "The origins and early history of *L'homme armé*," *Journal of Musicology* 20/3 (2003): 305-57, on p. 324.

As for *L'homme armé* itself, its origins are obscure. There is no source for the song or its French words apart from its use in polyphonic music. Far from being a popular song, it is a highly crafted musical product, full of artifice, irregular and rhythmically unpredictable, its fanfare-like fifths evoking the sound of trumpets of war, its text repeats vigorously conveying urgency, its two halves carefully balanced harmonically and melodically; quite possibly it is the tenor of a lost song. The tradition of cyclic Masses on the tune has perhaps occasioned more musicological prose than any other subject in early music history. The Armed Man might be the Turk, or his Christian opponent. He might be the Christian believer, arming himself against the wiles of Satan (thus St. Paul, in the letter to the Ephesians, chapter 6: "Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.... Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God"); or the priest, donning the sacred armor of vestments to do spiritual battle for the souls of the faithful in the ceremony of the Mass. Perhaps he is the Holy Roman Emperor, who was permitted to hold a bared sword aloft when, garbed as a sub-deacon, he was permitted to read the Gospel at Matins on Christmas Day, or some other prince, secular or religious, who was granted the authority to raise a sword at Mass in a so-called "ceremony of the armed man," performed "in defence of the faith of Christ against whoever would contradict it."⁶ *L'homme armé* Masses have been associated with the Order of the Golden Fleece and its founders, the dukes of Burgundy; with Beatrice of Aragon and her husband, King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary; and with various other crusaders against the Ottomans, potential or actual.⁷

Most of these connections, however richly fruitful for interpretation, remain speculative. The only securely documented relationship of any *Missa L'homme armé* to any specific meaning or occasion concerns that of Johannes Regis, which was copied at Cambrai Cathedral in the fall of 1462 and was surely composed shortly before, during a period when Regis was being courted to become master of Cambrai's choirboys. (Eventually he chose to remain in Soignies.) An

⁶ From an Italian document of 1457 cited in Flynn Warmington, "The ceremony of the armed man: the sword, the altar, and the *L'homme armé* Mass," chapter 5 in *Antoine Busnoys: method, meaning, and context in late medieval music*, ed. Paula Higgins (Oxford, 1999).

⁷ The literature on the subject is vast and includes stimulating studies by Lewis Lockwood, Leeman Perkins, Alejandro Enrique Planchart, William Prizer, Richard Taruskin, Flynn Warmington, and Andrew Kirkman, among others.

additional collection of cantus firmus texts assigned to the tenor of “le messe Regis sus l’ome arme” establishes that this Mass was associated with a procession founded by a canon at Cambrai, Michel de Beringhen, for the feast on September 29 of the saint whose name he bore, St. Michael.⁸ Nevertheless, of all the possible sacred meanings of *L’homme armé*, the one with the widest applicability, the one most likely to have inspired the composition of so many Masses, is the Christological allegory, whereby the Armed Man is Christ Himself, aloft on the Cross, engaged in cosmic battle with evil on behalf of all humankind.

The melody of *L’homme armé* is found in two distinct modal forms, one Dorian with a minor third above the final, and one Mixolydian, with a major third. The anonymous composer of *Il sera par vous* chose the major mode, as does Ockeghem in his Mass. At least, most of the Mass presents the tune in major, written with final G and B natural. But in the Credo the tenor is instructed (by a written *canon* or rule) to transpose the cantus firmus down a fifth to C, which introduces a B flat into the tune as the seventh degree of the modal scale, and indeed B flats have already intruded strikingly into the harmony here and there before, commonly at the ends of sections and elsewhere, too. Indeed, flats seem to invade gradually, culminating in an extraordinary shift to all B flats in the very last section, the third and final *Agnus dei*, where they are all-pervasive, including the minor third above the G final of the *L’homme armé* tune, now transposed down an octave into the lowest voice in the texture and pulling the entire tessitura down with it. I cannot offer any explanation for why Ockeghem suddenly shifts the modality of the Mass from major to minor at the last moment, nor am I aware of any study that accounts for the phenomenon, but the effect is astonishing; it is one of the many passages in Ockeghem’s music that can overwhelm you with emotion that seems to well up out of nowhere, deeply moving and utterly inexplicable.

Ockeghem sets the *L’homme armé* melody in note values moving quickly enough to make it clearly audible at all times. Given the wealth of evidence concerning the presence of secular songs and their texts in the Mass, specifically including “some, albeit limited, support”⁹ for singing the French words of songs in Mass settings, we have decided to sing the melody to its original text; indeed, it would be virtually impossible to accommodate the words of the Ordinary

⁸ The link is definitively established by Sean Gallagher in his 2010 book, *Johannes Regis*.

⁹ Kirkman, p. 138.

to the tune. (The two sources of the piece offer no clues to Ockeghem's intent.) The result is a Mass that constantly reminds us of its structural and allegorical underpinning, sometimes in exhilarating and very likely meaningful fashion, such as the juxtaposition of "Jesu Christe" and "L'homme armé" towards the end of the Gloria.

As Blue Heron performs the complete works of Ockeghem over the next several seasons, we plan also to explore music of Ockeghem's predecessors (Du Fay, Binchois, and others), contemporaries (Regis, Busnoys, and others), and followers (Josquin, Obrecht, Agricola, Isaac, et al.), developing and sharing a sense of the entire fifteenth-century repertoire. Today we offer Busnoy's *C'est bien malheur*, and we accept the invitation offered by Philippe Basiron's combinative song *D'ung aultre amer / L'homme armé* to perform another of this younger composer's works, his lovely *Salve regina*, in which the top part paraphrases the plainchant melody throughout. And we add one more polytextual work, this one unmistakably Christological in destination, *Lauda Syon salvatorem* by Ockeghem's almost exact contemporary, Johannes Regis. The main text is a sequence written by St. Thomas Aquinas around 1264 at the request of Pope Urban IV for the new Mass of Corpus Christi; the tenor quotes the words of Jesus from John 6, "I am the living bread..." Regis's unique sound world, rich and sonorous, harmonically surprising, and completely unlike Ockeghem's, reminds us, should reminder be necessary, that the musicians of the fifteenth century were as diverse and individual in their art as any human beings before or since.

—Scott Metcalfe