Program Notes

Contrary to popular legend (for which a careless reading of Albert Schweitzer may be partly to blame), Martin Luther almost certainly did not ask 'why should the devil have all the good tunes?' Nonetheless, the debates about the legitimacy of secular music in church worship or private devotion were as lively in the sixteenth century as they are in the church today, and they were not new then. Indeed, one of the richest traditions of liturgical music to draw upon secular melodies was the polyphonic mass tradition of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; both *cantus firmus* and parody technique were used to fashion new liturgical compositions around existing works. Although the most common source material for these settings was taken from the repertoire of liturgical plainsong and motets, a fair number of these masses were based on secular melodies or *chansons*, ranging in subject matter – not unlike today's popular music – from the profound and sorrowful to the lewd and obscene. Movements from these works, paired with their secular source melodies, form the framework of the present programme, with Lassus's *Magnificat* based on Gombert's chanson *Mort et Fortune* providing a suitably weighty conclusion. These are interspersed with four of Monteverdi's most overtly erotic madrigals, 'made spiritual' (and not without controversy) by the addition of sacred texts by the Italian priest, poet and musician Aquilino Coppini, and dedicated to none other than the Archbishop of Milan Federico Borromeo.

Without doubt the most often-used secular melody in the *cantus firmus* mass tradition was *L'homme armé*, a popular *chanson* of uncertain origin which gained popularity sometime shortly after 1450. As well as being one of the oldest non-liturgical *cantus firmus* melodies, it could also be argued that it is one of the least secular: although its exact source isn't known, it is fairly certain its origin lies in the crusades; some commentators have suggested a link with the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Over the next century and a half, dozens of polyphonic mass settings based on this chanson were to be composed; even the seventeenth-century composer Carissimi contributed a setting, as did Palestrina in the late sixteenth century - though the majority date from before 1510. Dufay's setting is amongst the earliest, and is characterized by the lively rhythmic interplay between parts which is so typical of that period.

With the notable exception of a setting by Scotsman Robert Carver, the *L'homme armé* mass tradition didn't generally capture the imagination of composers on this side of the English Channel. One melody which did, however – albeit more modestly – was the unashamedly secular folksong *Westron Wynde*, which inspired *cantus firmus* mass settings by Taverner, Tye and Sheppard. Taverner's is arguably the best-known, and is certainly memorable for its strident melodic profile (with the *cantus firmus* melody always clearly presented) and the clarity of its four-part texture, reduced to three in some passages. Taverner's work is striking for the freshness of its invention, faced with the challenge of how to come up with numerous contrapuntal solutions for such a distinctive melody.

Whereas in *cantus firmus* technique the source melody is usually stated in its entirety in one voice, in parody technique the source material could be polyphonic, and could be manipulated pretty much as the composer wished, with the most striking motivic ideas (and, if desired, their accompanying harmonies) reworked and reorganized in order to create the new composition. This is the technique at work in Victoria's *Missa pro victoria*, based on Clement Janequin's uproarious *chanson La guerre*. The *chanson* itself was groundbreaking in that it was probably the first example of the sort of programmatic 'battle music' which, by the baroque period, had become something of a cliché (Monteverdi's famed scene *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* from his eighth book of Madrigals provides an interesting comparison from just over a century later): the music contains a plethora of depictive sounds and effects which imitate the noises of the battle (the battle in question being the battle of Marignano of 1515, a French victory over the Hapsburgs). While *La guerre* – with its fiery repeated chords and short motifs – might not seem at first glance to be in the most amenable style for a polyphonic mass, Victoria in his Credo (as elsewhere in the mass) overcomes many of the *chanson*'s challenges by configuring his nine voices in two choirs, and using antiphonal effects which suit the economy of the original motivic material perfectly. Some of the more intricate motifs in the original chanson are handled by reduced forces, while at other times Victoria brings together all nine voices to create rich and sonorous polyphony.

Rather more sorrowful in character but no less admired in its day was Josquin's *chanson Mille Regretz*; indeed, it is said to have been be one of the favourite songs of the Emperor, Charles V. Apart from two *L'homme armé* masses, the *Missa Mille Regretz* was the only parody mass based on a secular melody be published by Morales, who tended to favour liturgical plainchant. The mass setting expounds upon the mournful character of the *chanson* well with its affecting falling melodic gestures and

striking modality – the parts so written as to minimize the likelihood of a raised leading note to brighten the proceedings!

Josquin's chanson was well-known to Nicolas Gombert, one of the singers at Charles V's court and one of the most gifted composers of the first half of the sixteenth century; indeed, he created his own six-voice re-working of it. His own *chanson Mort et fortune* seems to convey something of a similar character, with dolorous descending motifs one of its most striking features, albeit introduced with a more angular opening point. Lassus uses a very similar 'parody' technique in his *Magnificat*, although, following the alternatim convention of the day the verses alternate between plainchant and counterpoint, with the result that each passage of polyphony is more succinct and tightly constructed.

Clemens non Papa's chanson Entre vous filles de XV ans, with its unashamedly lewd text leaving little of its subject to the imagination, strikes one as just the sort of thing that the more reforming voices at the Council of Trent longed to banish from church. The chanson itself is musically unremarkable – cheerful in character and playful in its simple imitation – often involving pairings of upper and lower voices – and, like many *chansons* of its character, syllabic and efficient in its text setting. Its motivic and textural features all find their way into Lassus's *Gloria*, but in this movement in particular it is the conciseness of setting which seems to attract Lassus – the whole *Gloria* text takes him little more than a minute longer to dispatch than Clemens takes for his short eight-line stanza.

Aquilino Coppini's conviction that any good music, given appropriately spiritual words could be rendered 'commendable to God and to his saints in churches and private houses' was certainly the justification for his 'making spiritual' of some of Monteverdi's most profane madrigals which, he believed, held the power to 'move the human passions' – a power which he wanted to capture for more godly, devotional purposes than Monteverdi's original texts permitted. His sensitivity to the expressive intention of Monteverdi's music certainly displayed consummate musical and poetic skill, and his texts are impressive in the detail to which they attempt to match the vowel colours and poetic affect of the original, while completely cleaning up the subject matter – so, for example, a highly erotic ascending sequence in Monteverdi's original *Si ch'io vorrei morire* which describes in terms of increasing excitement a passionate and intimate encounter ('O mouth! O kisses! O tongue!') becomes a passage of equally ecstatic devotion of a spiritual kind: 'O Jesus, my light, my hope, my heart'.

– *Matthew O'Donovan*