

PROGRAM NOTES
THE ARMED MAN
JOSQUIN DES PREZ (c 1450-1521)

The composition of *parody Masses* or *imitation Masses*, i.e., a Mass based on a popular tune of the day, was especially prolific during the Renaissance, the idea being that even the most common peasant could hear a recognizable tune and in turn be drawn to the Mass and its divinity. Seemingly, no tune was off limits: *Missa L'ami baudichon*, possibly the first Mass composed by Josquin uses a secular, somewhat ribald tune similar to *Three Blind Mice*. Orlando di Lasso's 1581 *Missa Entre vous filles* used Clemens non Papa's rather obscene secular chanson *Entre vous filles de quinze ans* ("Oh, you 15 year old girls!")

The Renaissance drinking song *L'homme Armé* (The Armed Man) was a particular favorite of composers of parody Masses, so much so that it has served as the basis for more Masses than any other tune in history. The song, a monophonic *chanson rustique* that originated in the Burgundian court sometime after the birth of Charles, the only surviving son of Philip the Good in November of 1433 (and connected with Order of the Golden Fleece founded about that time) is anonymous in its origin (although it is frequently attributed to Busnois, first by Pietro Aaron in 1523) and somewhat of a mystery as to what it refers.

Many have suggested it is perhaps a "theme song" of the *L'homme Armé* tavern, a popular meeting spot for Renaissance musicians. Others feel it was a "protest song" over French citizenry being forced to house the militia. Or, perhaps the *L'homme armé* was a popular outcry against the soldiery, absorbed by the Church in the form of a Mass celebrating papal supremacy and order over the ravaging effects of nationalistic ambition. Regardless of its precise meaning, the existence of the *L'homme armé* mass cycles points to an interpenetration of the political and sacred worlds in the 15th century to an extent that many of us would find hard to conceive of today.

Josquin's *Armed Man* Masses also fall under the classification of *cantus firmus* compositions (i.e., use of a pre-existing melody forming the basis of a polyphonic composition). Prior to Josquin's mature period, the most common technique for writing Masses was the *cantus firmus*, a technique that had been in use already for most of the 15th century. While based on a *cantus firmus*, the *Sexti toni* Mass is also a paraphrase Mass, for fragments of the tune appear in all voices. Technically it is almost restrained, compared to the *Super voces* Mass, until the closing *Agnus Dei*, which contains a complex canonic structure including a rare retrograde canon, around which other voices are woven.

"At first hearing, the two Masses are worlds apart. One might guess that *Super voces musicales* was a medieval composition, and *Sexti toni* a mature Renaissance one. In fact the manuscript evidence is that they were probably both from Josquin's so-called 'middle' period, which ended around the year 1500, though it is assumed that *Super voces musicales* was written first. They were both printed by Petrucci in 1502.

The title *Super voces musicales* indicates that the *L'homme Armé* melody is quoted in turn on every note of the hexachord. This ascent starts on C in the *Kyrie*, proceeds to D in the *Gloria*, to E in the *Credo*, F in the *Sanctus* (given again, complete, in both *Hosannas*), G in the first *Agnus Dei* and A in the third (by which time it has at last become too high for the third voice part to sing and has been transferred to the top part). The only sections to be completely free of the tune are *pleni sunt caeli* in the *Sanctus*, the *Benedictus* and the second *Agnus Dei*, of which the two latter are mensuration canons for two and three voices respectively. The second *Agnus Dei* is made particularly complicated in that the top part is given the canon in triple time against the different duples of the two parts beneath it. The second halves of the *Gloria* and *Credo* (beginning at *Qui tollis* and *Et incarnates est*) are based on the melody in strict retrograde, with the *Credo* containing one more statement of the melody, the right way round, from *Confiteor* in a syncopated rhythm. It is because the mathematical framework in this Mass is more apparent than in *Sexti toni* that it sounds the more old-fashioned of the two. Also untypical of late Renaissance music is Josquin's decision to write here for four voice parts which continuously overlap each other: the top part low, the bottom part high and two in the middle of roughly complementary ranges. But there can be no doubt that he knew exactly what he was doing, for the characteristically dense texture of this Mass is just as expressive, though in a different way, as the rather widely spread writing in *Sexti toni*.

Josquin's *Sexti toni* ('in the sixth mode') is so called because he has transposed the melody to make its final note F (as opposed to the more normal G), giving it a major key tonality. This element of transposition is one

of the features borrowed from *Super voces musicales*, though there, as we have seen, it was turned into a constructional principle. The idea of stating the melody in retrograde has also been transferred from the other Mass, though instead of giving the direct and retrograde forms in consecutive statements as he did before, here in the third *Agnus Dei* Josquin states them both at the same time. These form the lowest two parts in a movement where the number of voice parts has been increased from four to six, and the upper voices are in two paired canons at the unison. While this shows exceptional compositional virtuosity, the actual sound in this final *Agnus Dei* is most unfamiliar, suggesting, if anything, the methods of such modern minimalist composers as Philip Glass.

The remainder of the setting seems more relaxed though, in fact, Josquin can be heard to be constantly trying out new speeds, new rhythms and new scorings for the *L'homme Armé* tune, now complete, now with a few notes use as the basis for an ostinato pattern or a canon. The wide overall range of the four voice parts brings to the writing the kind of sonority which is associated with Palestrina, and Josquin constantly uses this to imaginative effect, nowhere more memorably that at *Et resurrexit* in the *Credo*. For showing all these different aspects of his extraordinary technique, this Mass must rank as one of the most accomplished productions of a composer long held to be the greatest writer of his time.”[1]

Indeed arguably the greatest composer of the high Renaissance and certainly one of the most influential, surprisingly little is actually known of the early life of Josquin des Prés (c1450-1521). This is perhaps because his name seems to have been recorded differently from time to time and from place to place; he was also called Des Prés or Després, and by a Latinized form of his name, Jodocus Pratensis, or A Prato.

We do know that he was a pupil of the great master Johannes Ockeghem and in his early youth Josquin seems to have been a member of the choir of the collegiate church at St. Quentin. When his voice changed he went to Ockeghem to take lessons in counterpoint until Pope Sixtus IV invited him to Rome to teach his art to the musicians of Italy, where musical knowledge at that time was at a low ebb.

In Rome des Prés lived until the death of his protector in 1484, and it was there that many of his works were written. His reputation grew rapidly, and he was considered by his contemporaries to be the greatest master of his age. Martin Luther is credited with the saying that "*other musicians do with notes what they can, Josquin what he likes.*" The composer's journey to Rome marks in a manner the transference of the art from its Gallo-Belgian birthplace to Italy, which for the next two centuries remained the center of the musical world.

After leaving Rome des Prés went for a time to Ferrara, where the duke Hercules I offered him a home; but before long he accepted an invitation of King Louis XII of France to become the chief singer of the royal chapel. According to another account, he was for a time at least in the service of the Emperor Maximilian I. The date of his death has been placed by some scholars as early as 1501. However, this is sufficiently disproved by the fact of one of his finest compositions, *A Dirge (Déploration) for Five Voices*, being written to commemorate the death of his master Ockeghem, which took place after 1512. The real date of Josquin's decease has since been settled as the 27th of August 1521 when he was a canon of the cathedral of Condé.

For more about these masses and their enigmatical nature, we refer you to the entertaining article from *The New York Times* that follows.

Finally, we gratefully acknowledge Jesse Rodin, assistant professor of music at Stanford University and director of the ensemble Cut Circle who generously gave us permission to use his soon-to-be-published transcription of *Super voces musicales* for our performances.

Read the preview article about these concerts that recently appeared in *San Francisco Classical Voice* at: <http://sfcv.org/preview/san-francisco-renaissance-voices/massing-for-josquins-armed-man>

[1] Peter Phillips, 1989 from his notes from the Tallis Scholars recording of the Armed Man Masses, Gimell Records

**Arms and the Mass, or:
Why Does This Liturgy Sound So Familiar?**

by Evan Eisenberg

(This is a condensed/edited article/review that appeared in
The New York Times, February 26, 2006)

YOU are a Renaissance composer. You have been asked to compose a setting of the Latin Mass, a text that begins with “Kyrie eleison” (“Lord have mercy”) and ends “Dona nobis pacem” (“Grant us peace”). You scratch your lice-bitten scalp, tap your quill against the lectern. How to start?

A ditty has been running through your head: DUM-da DUM-da DA DA DA. Catchy! Rich in musical matter: ascending fourths, descending fifths. Tailor made for counterpoint. And maybe, just maybe, if you use it for your Mass, the Lord will have mercy and drive it out of your head, now and forevermore, Amen.

Halfway through the Sanctus, you’re going great guns. You’ve even used the tune in a canon (to the words “peace on earth”), which should earn you some admiring glances when you walk into the local musician’s hangout, ***The Armed Man***.

The Armed Man? That, of course, is the name of the tune: “L’Homme armé.” And now, only now, you remember the words:

***L’homme armé doit on doubter.
On a fait partout crier
Que chascun se viegne armer
D’un haubergeon de fer.***

***The armed man must be feared.
Everywhere it is proclaimed
That everyone must arm himself
With a coat of mail.***

Hardly the right sort of tune to be using for a Mass, is it? Well, maybe no one will notice. You dip your nib, scratch harder, just above your left ear – got him!

COULD this really be how it happened?!

From 1460 to 1700, “L’Homme armé” served as the basis of nearly 50 Mass settings, more than any other tune ever has. Obrecht wrote one. Tinctoris wrote one. Josquin wrote two, as did Palestrina and Morales and Pierre de la Rue. Anonymous wrote scads. In Early Music circles, you can’t throw a sackbut without hitting a “L’Homme armé” Mass. And the tradition is not dead yet: as recently as 1968, the English modernist Peter Maxwell Davies wrote one. Did they all just forget the words of the song?

From the very start, the game of one-upmanship was in full swing. Dufay ran the tune backward. Ockeghem flipped it to the bass. Busnois inverted it. The unknown composer of six Masses found in Naples built each one on a different segment of the melody. Josquin, in his “Missa l’Homme Armé Super Voces Musicales” left everyone in the dust: in each section of the Mass he started the tune on a different note of the scale, while the piece as a whole remained firmly in the key or mode of D.

Lodged near the top of the Renaissance Top 40, the song, or bits of it, could no doubt be picked out of a polyphonic fabric even by the most pungent wool dyer in the back pew. And he may have had help. In the Naples Masses, the tenor who sings the “Armed Man” tune is assigned the actual French lyrics, even as the other voices sing in Latin.

So yes, there were musical reasons aplenty. And yet ... 50 Masses? But WHY?!

To answer this, it might help to know what the song is about. Who, exactly, is the Armed Man?

In the 1970’s scholars guessed that the song might have to do with the founding by the French King Charles VII of a standing army to be billeted in private homes. Or the same king’s establishment of town militias.

("Everyone must arm himself.") In the case of the army, the song might express anger; in the case of the militia, mockery, since the peasant or merchant soldier might seem dangerous only by mischance. (To my ears, the song's second section has the "nah-nah-nah-nah-nah" pattern of a child's taunting song.)

More recently, it was noticed that the song first reared its helmeted head shortly after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, a world-shaking event that generated calls for a new crusade. The Armed Man, then, might be the Turk – feared, mocked or both. Or he might be the crusader on his way to tackle the Turk. If so, those who must fear him might be the infidels, or they might be the faithful who happened to get in his way, and on whom (by way of practice) he might inflict rape, pillage and other collateral damage.

Though the called-for crusade never happened, the calling-for was "politically useful." The permanent "orange alert" kept the rabble in line while allowing the nobles to play soldier and feel holy at the same time. Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, readied his Knights of the Golden Fleece to cross the Bosphorus. As it turned out, they never crossed the Saône. They did, however, spend lots of time showing off their habergeons and rousing themselves with music. In this they were assisted by the court's musicians, among them Dufay and Busnois, both early authors of "L'Homme armé" Masses. Several works in the genre pay odd homage to the number 31, the statutory number of knights in the order. The song itself has 31 beated measures.

If this theory accounts for the vogue for "Armed Man" Masses in Burgundy, it hardly explains why the rest of Europe followed suit. As the historian Johan Huizinga observed in the 15th century, "there is not an object nor an action, however trivial, that is not constantly correlated with Christ or salvation." This gives a composer a lot of latitude.

Christ is a warrior. He assails the dragon Satan (either hand-to-hand or through captains like the archangel Michael) and prevails. The Mass enacts a cosmic battle. The vestments of the priest are seen as Christ's armor, the missal as his weapon. At times, the priest wears actual armor and wields an actual sword. The sacred and secular were not such separate categories as they have come to be for us.

Almost two decades ago, John Rockwell observed in *The New York Times* that jazz, like Renaissance music, transforms pop tunes, raising them to a sacred level of art. Sonny Rollins said of Louis Armstrong: "He found the Rosetta Stone. He could translate everything."

Jazz musicians, it could be said, are alchemists making gold of Tin Pan Alley's (often) base metal. You might instead call them prospectors, using tin skillets to pan for gold; the stream is the same one Josquin stood in. Tin pan or iron helmet, "You Don't Know What Love Is" or "L'Homme armé" – the stream still glitters.

#####