

Gotham Early Music Scene • Early Music/Early Season
8:00 p.m., October 7, 2007 • The Times Center, New York

Pomerium

Alexander Blachly, Director

“Renaissance Music Wondrous Strange”

The Kyrie from Johannes Ockeghem’s *Missa Caput*, like the other movements of that work, places the serpentine Gregorian chant melody “Caput” in the bass voice. “Caput” begins on the pitch B and emphasizes it repeatedly, each time causing the harmonies in the upper voices to veer unexpectedly from sonorities with F-naturals to those with F-sharps. As recently demonstrated by scholar Anne Walters Robertson, “Caput,” in the fifteenth-century polyphonic pieces based on it, stands for evil, the snake in Eden. Ockeghem’s *Missa Caput* “crushes” the snake, as God had proclaimed would happen in Genesis, by putting the “Caput” melody in the bass voice.

Kyrie, *Missa Caput*

Kyrie eleison.
Christe eleison.
Kyrie eleison.

Johannes Ockeghem

Lord, have mercy on us.
Christ, have mercy on us.
Lord, have mercy on us.

The Virgin Mary was considered a “dragon-slayer” in the fifteenth century, for by her Immaculate Conception and purity she helped undo the evil Eve had contracted from the snake in the Garden. According to Robertson, Hygons’s mighty *Salve regina*[[*Caput*]] from the Eton Choirbook places the “Caput” melody in the tenor voice as a means of recalling Mary’s dragon-slaying prowess. Like most other large-scale works from late-fifteenth-century England, those in the Eton Choirbook alternate trios and duos for single voices with great waves of sound for the full choir. The statutes for Eton College drawn up by Henry VI in 1443 specified that its chapel was to have a large choir that would sing an elaborate Marian antiphon—such as the *Salve regina* heard here—every day in the evening. After the War of the Roses, the original choir of sixteen boys and ten adults was reduced in size to ten choirboys and seven adults, evidently the size intended for the music preserved in the Eton Choirbook, which was compiled in the years around 1495-1500.

Salve regina/[Caput]

Salve regina, mater misericordie, vita dulcedo et spes nostra, salve. Ad te clamamus exsules filii Eve; ad te suspiramus gementes et flentes, in hac lacrimarum valle. Eia, ergo advocata nostra, illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte, et Jesum benedictum fructum ventris tui nobis post hoc exsilium ostende.

Virgo mater ecclesie,
Eterna porta glorie,
Esto nobis refugium
Apud patrem et filium.

○ clemens.

Virgo clemens, virgo pia,
virgo dulcis, o Maria,
exaudi preces omnium
ad te pie clamantium.

○ pia.

Funde preces tuo nato,
crucifixo, vulnerato,
et pro nobis flagellato
spinis puncto, felle potato.

○ dulcis Maria, salve.

Richard Hygons

*Hail, Queen, mother of mercy,
our life, sweetness, and hope:
hail! To you we, the exiled
children of Eve, cry out; to you
we plea, groaning and weeping in
this vale of tears. Oh, there-
fore, our advocate, turn your
merciful eyes to us, and after
this exile show us Jesus, the
blessed fruit of your womb.*

*Maiden mother of the Church,
eternal gateway to glory,
be for us a refuge
before the Father and the Son.*

○ merciful.

*Kind maiden, holy virgin,
sweet maiden, O Mary:
heed the prayers of all
who piously cry out to you.*

○ holy.

*Pour out your prayers to your Son,
who for our sake was crucified,
wounded, scourged, thorn-
pierced, and given gall to drink.*

○ sweet Mary, Hail!

Giaches de Wert, most famous as a composer of colorful madrigals, also wrote dramatic Latin motets, often drawing their texts from the Gospels. Like the madrigals, Wert's motets strive for "realistic" evocations of various qualities—natural, emotional, and spiritual—by purely musical means. The six-voice *Ascendente Jesu* of 1581 takes as its challenge the evocation of a great storm on the sea, followed by a great calm. For the storm, Wert sets the six voices in rapid-fire sycopation with one another, momentarily cadencing together, then re-embarking on a collision of short, high-speed motifs. After Jesus' disciples cry out for help and the winds die down, Wert achieves a truly beautiful moment of musical calm.

Ascendente Jesu

Ascendente Jesu in naviculam,
secuti sunt eum discipuli eius,
et ecce motus magnus factus est in
mari, ita ut navicula operiretur
fluctibus. Ipse vero dormiebat,
et accesserunt ad eum discipuli
eius, et suscitaverunt eum dicentes:
Domine, salva nos, perimus. Et
dicit eis Jesus: Quid timidi estis
modicae fidei? Tunc surgens
imperavit ventis et mari, et
facta est tranquillitas magna.

—Matthew 8: 23-26

Giaches de Wert

*When Jesus got into the boat,
his disciples followed him, and,
behold, a great windstorm arose
on the sea, such that the boat was
being swamped by the waves. But
he was sleeping. And his disciples
went to him and awoke him, saying:
Lord, save us. We are perishing! And
Jesus said to them: Why are you afraid,
O ye of little faith? Then he arose and
commanded the winds and the sea,
and there was a great calm.*

Carlo Gesualdo was a melancholic with cause, having much to regret in his personal life, including the brutal murder of his first wife and her lover. Whatever pain this caused him emotionally, it seemed to inspire him to some of the boldest harmonic effects in music to be achieved before Richard Wagner in the nineteenth century. Particularly in setting texts emphasizing pain and suffering, Gesualdo the composer was wholly in his element. At times, Gesualdo's music stretches the implications of Renaissance counterpoint so far away from the norm that it feels not merely experimental but positively modernistic. At too fast a tempo, his extreme shifts of harmony may seem merely capricious. At a slower tempo, however, the listener feels the harmonies unfold with a heightened sense of expectation—sometimes fulfilled, sometimes diverted by a surprise turn in a new direction. Yet for all its manneristic extravagance in harmony, Gesualdo's music is guided procedurally both by a traditional approach to counterpoint and by the pervasive late-Renaissance aesthetic of pictorialism—of "painting" in music the sound and the meaning of the words. Gesualdo's twenty-seven large-scale responsories of 1611 for the Triduum of Holy Week (the *Responsoria*) are both his swan song and, some now believe, his greatest musical evocations.

Ecce vidimus eum

Ecce vidimus eum non habentem
speciem neque decorem: aspectus eius
in eo non est: hic peccata nostra portavit,
et pro nobis dolet: ipse autem vulneratus
est propter iniquitates nostras: cuius
livore sanati sumus.
V. Vere languores nostros ipse tulit,
et dolores nostros ipse portavit.

—Isaiah 53: 2; 4-5

(Responsory 3 for Matins of Maundy Thursday)

Carlo Gesualdo

*Behold, we have seen him without
comeliness or beauty: his look is
gone from him: he hath borne our sins
and suffered for us. He was wounded
for our iniquities and by his stripes
we are healed.
V. Truly, he hath borne our infirmities
and carried our sorrows.*

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Pomerium's performance today is made possible, in part, with public funds from
the New York State Council on the Arts.