

FLEMISH MUSIC FOR THE HOUSE OF HABSBURG

The peak of one of Europe's most extraordinary ruling dynasties coincided with the flourishing musical climate of the 16th century. This program features Flemish music associated with monarchs Maximilian I and Charles V.

PROGRAM

Nicolas GOMBERT - Magnificat tertii et octavi toni

GOMBERT - Lugebat David Absalon

Heinrich ISAAC - Tota pulchra es

JOSQUIN - Gaude virgo mater

Thomas CRECQUILLON - Pater peccavi

arr. Ludwig SENFL - Quis dabit oculis nostris

ISAAC - Virgo prudentissima

SINGERS

Soprano

Danielle Sampson

Ruth Schauble

Margaret Obenza

Alto

Sarra Sharif Doyle

Joshua Haberman

Tenor

Orrin Doyle

Kurt Kruckeberg

Bass

Gabriel Lewis-OConnor

Peter Lifland

Willimark Obenza

The House of Habsburg, one of the most influential royal houses of Europe, shaped the arts world like no other dynasty. In the sixteenth century, the power and wealth of a dynasty were expressed through its patronage of art and science. The most

important ruler had to demonstrate that he was also an outstanding patron by commissioning and collecting works of art. Artists employed at the court enjoyed a good income, high social standing, and remarkable freedoms, a rarity during this period of religious turbulence. The program features music by the most famous Franco-Flemish composers employed by Maximilian I (1486-1519) and Charles V (1519-1556).

Music was clearly important to Charles V. He collected musicians during his travels, eventually finding Nicolas Gombert (c.1495-1560) in Flanders and naming him choirmaster for the royal chapel in 1529. He and the singers would travel with the emperor, further spreading the Franco-Flemish polyphonic tradition. He unofficially held the position of court composer, arranging many works commemorating key events during Charles V's life. In 1540, Gombert was sentenced to hard labor for inappropriate contact with a boy, but was pardoned early sometime around 1547 after Charles heard the Magnificat settings he composed while serving his sentence. These "swansongs" are considered to be Gombert's greatest works and showcase his style—a preference for dense textures and dissonant harmony. His setting of the Magnificat on the program is the third of a cycle of eight and alternates between plainchant and polyphonic sections. The *Magnificat* begins with three parts and unfolds to eight parts by the end, each section marked with Gombert's signature splash of dissonance.

Gombert's eight-voice motet *Lugebat David Absalon* was originally attributed to Josquin. Josquin (c.1450-1521), a contemporary of Gombert and Isaac, is considered to be the greatest composer of the age and was so famous and admired that many anonymous compositions were attributed to him by copyists, probably to increase their sales. Gombert's *Lugebat David Absalon* is an example. Gombert's work is eight-voice motet based on David's Lament and is a contrafactum (where the composer substitutes one text for another without making substantial changes to the music). The motet is filled with beautiful imitative descending lines (classic lament painting) and the pleading repetition of "O fili mi" (O my son!), making it one of the most moving settings of David's Lament in the Renaissance.

Heinrich Isaac's (c.1450-1517) career spanned over 30 years and allowed him to travel far from his homeland of Flanders into Germany, Italy, and Austria. He took several positions as a professional singer before making his way to Vienna to take up the position of court composer for Emperor Maximilian I. Around 1502, Isaac traveled to Ferrara to the Este court where he wrote the motet "La mi la sol la sol la mi" in merely two days and competed with Josquin for employment. A famous letter from the agent of the Este Family compared the two composers, "[Isaac] is of a better disposition among his companions, and he will compose new works more often. It is true that Josquin composes better, but he composes when he wants to and not when one wants him to." The program includes two motets by Isaac dedicated to the Virgin Mary, both based on chant (found in the lower voice parts in longer note values). *Tota pulchra* is scored for four lower voices and through carefully balanced chordal and homophonic textures, delivers an intimate mood in this setting from the *Song of Songs*. Isaac's *Virgo prudentissima*, one of the grandest motets of the Renaissance, is a musical dedication to the Virgin Mary on one hand, but also a tribute his employer Maximilian I on the other, written for his coronation. The text is by humanist Vadian, and expresses hope that the Virgin will look mercifully on Maximilian. The motet alternates between chant sung as a duet and with declamatory sections of polyphony, one of Isaac's most complex works.

Josquin's *Gaude virgo mater Christi* is from a time when devotion to the Virgin Mary flourished in the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance, fostering new celebrations, new poetry, and music dedicated to the worship of the Virgin. The text has no liturgical use and was likely written for private devotion. The four-part motet tells the story of Mary's involvement with the Christ Child from her Annunciation, through his death and resurrection.

Not much is known about Thomas Crecquillon (1505-1557). He was a priest and member of the chapel of Charles V and died probably as a victim of the plague. Though details of his life are sparse, his output was somewhat prolific. He wrote twelve masses, over 100 motets and 200 chansons. Like Josquin, Crecquillon stylistically preferred writing imitative polyphony, but rarely varied

the texture for dramatic effect, preferring smoothness and consistency as demonstrated in *Pater peccavi*, a motet about the story of the Prodigal Son.

Luwig Senfl (1486-1542) was the most famous student of Isaac and served as his copyist. When Isaac died in 1517, Maximilian I appointed Senfl to fill Isaac's position as court composer. However, when Maximilian died in 1519, Senfl lost his job, and his situation became worse: Charles V dismissed most of Maximilian's musicians and refused to pay Senfl the annual stipend owed to him in the event of Maximilian's death. He spent his next few years seeking employment, eventually sympathizing with Protestants (although never officially becoming one) and acquiring a post in Munich which had high musical standards and was tolerant of Protestant sympathizers.

Quis dabit oculis nostris was originally attributed to Senfl, but it was actually composed by Costanzo Festa who wrote it originally for the death of Anne de Bretagne, the Queen of France whom Maximilian once sought for his wife. Senfl adapted Festa's motet for Maximilian's funeral changing only a few words ("Anna" was replaced by "Maximilianus") with the necessary rhythmic adjustments, probably because Senfl did not have enough time to compose a new motet.

The sixteenth century was a golden age for Renaissance vocal music and this program showcases the essence of the Flemish style - smooth and elegant lines, a predominantly polyphonic texture, and very moderate vocal ranges. From the somber setting of David's lament in Gombert's *Lugebat David Absalon*, to Isaac's fireworks-of-a-motet *Virgo Prudentissima*, the program displays the remarkable range of expression in Flemish polyphony.