



(LEMS 8085, previously released as LLST 7273)

Jacob Obrecht

Missa Caput

Salve Crux, arbor vitae
Capella Cordina
Alejandro Planchart, *director*

The three Caput masses have remained something of a musicological riddle even though Manfred Bukofzer solved the puzzle of their cantus firmus in his magnificent essay on them (*Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Music*, New York, 1950). The two earlier ones have been available on records for some time (Lyrichord, 7190 and 7213), so this record closes the cycle by making the last of them available.

Since Bukofzer's essay, our understanding of the history of the three works has changed in a number of ways. Originally, it was thought that the first of the three pieces was written by Guillaume Dufay around 1445, following an English model, as a four-movement work. Ockeghem then based his Mass on Dufay's four-movement version, and was thus forced to write an independent Kyrie. In 1463, Dufay wrote a Kyrie to bring his own Mass in line with normal Continental practice. Finally Obrecht wrote his

Mass while he was at Cambrai in 1485, where he presumably knew the Dufay Mass and possibly that by Ockeghem as well.

The discovery of further manuscripts of the oldest of the three Masses has now forced the conclusion that the piece is not by Dufay, but rather an anonymous English work that had been known in the Continent as a four-movement Mass. The place was apparently known at Cambrai, where Dufay was a canon, and in 1463 the Kyrie became available and was copied into the choir books. At this point it is possible that Dufay did some revising of the Kyrie, and this may have started the legend that he was the composer of the work. Apparently the legend evolved in several stages, and when Obrecht was at Cambril it is likely that the Kyrie and the rest of the old Mass were considered as two different works, because of Obrecht, like Ockeghem, wrote an independent Kyrie, and signaled the start of his imitation of the old Mass by citing the first eight measures of the Gloria as the situs of his own Gloria.

Bukofzer had argued that Obrecht probably knew both the “Dufay” and the Ockeghem Masses, and that he alternated in his imitation between the two models. In a later study I argued against this because I found that the Obrecht Mass was in fact modeled quite carefully on the structure of the “Dufay” Mass alone. The listener, however, will find that Bukofzer was absolutely right, although in a sense different from that which he had proposed. In the Agnus dei Obrecht shows that he indeed knew the Ockeghem Mass, not by placing the cantus firmus in the bass, which is merely the logical conclusion of his systematic transpositions of the part, but by the sheer sound world of the entire movement, which is inconceivable without the existence of the Ockeghem work. Significantly, though, the sound world being evoked is not the relatively unproblematic (for Ockeghem) sound of the older composer’s Agnus dei, but rather the incredible filigrees and cross-relations of the Gloria and the Credo, by far the most impressive movements of Ockeghem’s Mass.

Despite the borrowings, Obrecht’s Mass is a strikingly original work (albeit unselfconsciously so). The borrowed structure is filled to overflow with a wealth of new motives and constantly changing lines. The long sequential passages and ostinatos that in other works betray Obrecht’s sheer excess of facility never descend in Caput to the purely mechanical.

The contrapuntal richness, however, affects the tempo of the work. Although it is virtually a replica of the “Dufay” Mass in terms of its structure and the number of tempora (in fact, the “Dufay” piece is longer on account of its extended Kyrie), Obrecht’s Mass lasts almost twice as long for the profusion of semiminims and fusae demands a stately tempo for the semi-brave. Even at a slow tempo, however, the piece makes almost inhuman demands on the rhythmic accuracy and the stamina of the singers, and it is well to recall that Obrecht was famous also as a virtuoso singer.

The most obvious difference between this Mass and its two predecessors is in the treatment of the cantus firmus, which was probably intended in all three works as a Petrum, for Maundy Thursday, appears in the other two Masses in one voice throughout, either in tenor (“Dufay”), or in bass (Ockeghem), and always on G. In Obrecht’s Mass, on the other hand, the cantus firmus appears as follows:

Kyrie: CAPUT on G	in the tenor.
Gloria: CAPUT on g	in the superius.
Credo: CAPUT on C	in the tenor.
Sanctus: CAPUT on c	in the altus.
Agnus: CAPUT on G'	in the bassus.

Except for the Kyrie, each movement gives the cantus firmus twice: once in triple meter and once in duple meter. The Kyrie gives it only once, in a conflation of Masses, see The Musical Quarterly, LVIII (1972), 1-23).

The motet Salve crux, arbor vitae is one of the most inspired works of the whole century. In it Obrecht shows his fondness for multiple cantus firmi. He has conflated three pieces: the prose Salve crux, the stanza O crux lignum from Laudes crucis attollamus, and the antiphone Per signum crucis. These he sets against each other in a remarkably dramatic manner whereby the text of O crux lignum, which first appears in the cantus firmus to Salve crux, gradually takes over the entire texture, leading to its climatic statement at the end of the motet.

Salve crux, arbor vitae, a 5.

PART I:

Hail, O Cross, illustrious tree of life, banner, throne, and altar of Christ!

O Cross, terror and ruin of the heathen, thou art salvation, and victory, and divine to the Christian.

Thou was glory to Constantine when he hurried against Maxentius' hordes, and when he brought his sword to the shores of the Danube, through thee Chosroes, the blasphemer, and his sons were overthrown when they fought against Heraclius. Christians may well glory in the salvation of this tree.

The length and depth of the cross, sublime and profound, speared by the saints, bring salvation to all corners of the earth.

True balm, Christ was there extended as on a balance, as the price to redeem us from death's bonds.

TENOR

PART 1: O Cross, tree of victory, true salvation of the world, farewell! Not a tree ranks with thee for leaf, flower, or bud.

PART II: O Cross, tree of victory, true salvation of the world, farewell! Not a tree ranks with thee for leaf, flower, or bud.

The Cross is our balance of justice, our king's scepter, his rod of might, the heavenly sign of victory, true salvation of the world, farewell! Not a tree ranks with three for leaf, flower, or bud.

By the sign of the Cross, deliver us from our enemies, O thou who art our God!

PART III (all voices): O Cross, tree of victory, true salvation of the world, farewell! Not a tree ranks with three for leaf, flower, or bud.

SUPERIUS: Millicent Allison, Julia Blue, Jeanine Dovell, Amy Klohr, Christine Hunter, Naomi Lewin, Kerala Snyder.

CONTRATENOR: Susan Addiss, Roberta Graziano, Maria Fowler, Christine Hunter, Naomi Lewin, Kerala Snyder.

TENOR: Franck Avril, Sarah Mead, Benjamin Ward, Steven Sametz, Britt Wheeler.

Bassus: David Carr, John Graziano, Thomas MacCracken, Christopher Wall, David Welsbrod.

William Cobb, rankett
Betty Hatch, viol
Margaret Johnston, viol
William Liddell, recorder
Edward Phips, organ
Theodore Toupin, sackbut

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