

A Digital
Recording

JOSQUIN

Gimell

Missa Pange lingua · Missa La sol fa re mi

Plainchant: Pange lingua

THE TALLIS SCHOLARS

Directed by Peter Phillips



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These two mass-settings, both for four voices, were written at different periods in Josquin's long career. *La sol fa re mi* was published in 1502, whereas *Pange lingua* was a late work possibly Josquin's last mass-setting, not published until after his death, in 1539. The change in style is immediately apparent. In the middle of his life, Josquin often liked to tax his powers of invention by setting himself difficult puzzles to solve, but later relaxed until he came to perfect a freer kind of music. In the case of *Pange lingua*, widely acknowledged as one of his masterpieces, this freedom takes the form of 'a fantasy on a plainsong'.¹ In both settings Josquin's mastery of vocal texture may be fully admired: many of his contemporaries needed five or six voices to achieve the kind of sonority which he could conceive with four.

By taking a plainsong melody for his setting entitled *Pange lingua*, Josquin gave himself much more scope than in *La sol fa re mi*. However he decided to extend this freedom by writing such expansive vocal lines that it is sometimes impossible to tell whether the melody is being 'paraphrased' or not. At any rate it was in this work that Josquin finally made the art of imitation, by which all the voices must be treated as being equal, of primary importance. This technique had profound repercussions for later renaissance music throughout Europe.

The *Pange lingua* chant was originally intended as a hymn for the feast of Corpus Christi. It may be heard clearly in Josquin's setting in the soprano part of the final 'Agnus Dei' where it at last emerges in recognisable form. Elsewhere it tends to be the soprano part which makes the most obvious references to the melody, for instance in the 'Kyrie', at the beginning of the 'Gloria' and at the 'Et incarnatus est'. For the rest, fragments appear and disappear, either forming part of longer, quite new melodies, or abbreviated into one of Josquin's characteristically terse rhythmic units. In this way he achieved the variety of expression which has led to this mass being so widely admired.

La sol fa re mi, as its name implies, is based on the solmisation notes which these syllables represented in the medieval scale: A,G,F,D and E. Virtually the whole mass is derived from this single five-note phrase, which may be clearly heard in different note-lengths and occasionally in different pitches in one or other of the parts. It is mostly found in the tenor (which in fact does not differ significantly in tessitura from the alto part). To write an entire mass-setting which strictly retains the statement of five notes throughout as a kind of very abrupt *cantus firmus* is an astonishing feat of sheer inventiveness. Josquin had tried out the same technique in an earlier mass

entitled *Faisant regretz* (based on 'fa re mi re') but had there allowed himself the opportunity of transposing the ostinato up and down by step, a procedure which was commonly followed by other composers of the time, like Obrecht and Isaac. The technique of *La sol fa re mi*, on the other hand, was sophisticated and rare.

However it was not Josquin's idea in the first place to use these notes. According to Glareanus, writing in 1547,² they originated in mimicry of an unknown potentate who used to send away importunate suitors with the words 'Lascia fare mi' (leave me alone). Whether this is true or not a number of popular songs of the time were written around the phrase. Apart from basing the tenor on it almost exclusively, Josquin was able to lend it to the other parts in his mass-setting by the technique of initial imitation, for instance in the 'Christe' and first 'Hosanna'. The 'Pleni sunt' is imitative throughout. Only once (in the bass part at the end of the 'Christe') is the ostinato transposed to begin on D (subsequently necessitating a B flat). Otherwise, in more than two hundred repetitions, it starts on A or E. Perhaps the finest moment comes at the very end of the 'Agnus Dei' (I and III) where the note-lengths of the ostinato become shorter and shorter as the mystical nature of the music intensifies.

¹ Gustave Reese *Music in the Renaissance* (1954 pg 244).

² Glareanus *Dodecachordon* (1547)

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Missa Pange lingua · Missa La sol fa re mi

———— Plainchant: Pange lingua —————

THE TALLIS SCHOLARS

Directed by Peter Phillips

Plainchant / Canto piano / Plain-chant / Cantus planus

1. Pange lingua (3-36)

Josquin des Pres (c. 1440-1521)

Missa Pange lingua (29-25)

2. Kyrie
3. Gloria
4. Credo
5. Sanctus & Benedictus
6. Agnus Dei I, II & III

Missa La sol fa re mi (28-28)

7. Kyrie
8. Gloria
9. Credo
- 10. Sanctus & Benedictus
11. Agnus Dei I, II & III

Recorded in Merton College Chapel, Oxford

The Tallis Scholars Sally Dunkley, Deborah Roberts, Timothy Wilson, Robert Harre-Jones, Rufus Müller, Nicolas Robertson, Donald Greig, Francis Steele.

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