

PROGRAMME

Missa Alleluia Pierre de la Rue (c.1460–1518)
Kyrie
Gloria

Gradual motet:
Media vita Nicolas Gombert (c. 1490–c. 1560)

Missa Alleluia Pierre de la Rue
Sanctus

Elevation motet:
O salutaris hostia Pierre de la Rue

Missa Alleluia Pierre de la Rue
Benedictus
Agnus Dei

INTERVAL of 10 minutes

O Domine Jesu Christe Pierre de la Rue

Doleo super te Pierre de la Rue

Absalon fili mi Pierre de la Rue?/Josquin Desprez?

Anima mea liquefacta est Gaspar van Weerbecke (c. 1445–after 1517)

Gaude virgo mater Christi Pierre de la Rue

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The Cambridge Taverner Choir

Director: Owen Rees

Sopranos: Helen Arnold, Josie Dixon, Helen Garrison,
Hester Higton, Caroline Preston Bell, Sally Terris

Altos: Toby Gee, Matthew Orton, Rupert Preston Bell, Christophe Rhodes, Mythili Vamadevan

Tenors: David Allinson, James Eisner, Peter Leech, Tom Salmon

Basses: James Durran, Piers Master, Gary Snapper, Paul Watson

The Cambridge Taverner Choir is a member of the National Federation of Music Societies.

Our thanks to the Master & Fellows of Jesus College for their kind permission to use the chapel.

The Chapel of the Dukes of Burgundy was one of the greatest European musical institutions of the fifteenth century, performing a rich repertory of splendid polyphony by such masters as Pierre de la Rue (a member of the chapel) and Josquin Desprez. This music is preserved in large numbers of magnificent manuscript choirbooks produced at the Burgundian court. The chapel (a group of clergy and singers, rather than a particular building) was founded by Philip the Bold in 1384, and was enlarged (albeit with fluctuations) by successive Dukes during the course of the fifteenth century. By 1500 the musical personnel numbered 28, and at Philip the Fair's death in 1506 the number was 33. The chapel's function was to provide for the spiritual needs of—and to reflect the piety and prestige of—the Burgundian rulers which it served, through the regular performance of the liturgy, including polyphonic music: the 1431 regulations established daily polyphonic Mass, and the 1515 regulations specified daily sung Vespers and Compline as well as Mass.

The territories ruled by the Dukes of Burgundy—including in the North such flourishing commercial and cultural centres as Bruges and Ghent—were reduced after the death of Duke Charles the Bold in 1477, but the marriage of Charles's daughter Mary of Burgundy to the Habsburg Maximilian of Austria was a crucial stage in the formation of what—under their grandson the Emperor Charles V—was to become the most powerful political conglomerate in sixteenth-century Europe. The children of Margaret and Maximilian—Philip the Fair and Margaret of Austria—were both assiduous in promoting the musical life of their courts.

The chapel was peripatetic, travelling with the ruler around the Burgundian-Habsburg domains and elsewhere. Such travels were an opportunity for musical influences (repertory, and perhaps also performing styles) to spread. For example, in 1501–3 Philip the Fair undertook a journey to Spain with his Spanish bride, and we have accounts from that journey of joint performances by his chapel and the French royal chapel, the chapel of King Ferdinand of Aragon (in Toledo Cathedral), the chapel of the Duke of Savoy, and the Imperial chapel in Innsbruck.

One of the singers accompanying Philip on this journey to Spain was Pierre de la Rue, who was a member of the chapel by 1492, and who served successively Maximilian, Philip, Margaret, and Charles. The high regard in which he was held is demonstrated by the fact that there is more music by de la Rue in the surviving manuscripts associated with the Burgundian-Habsburg courts than by any other composer, including Josquin Desprez. As Honey Meconi notes, he was 'author of numerous compositions that specifically celebrated, consoled, or commemorated events and people at the court'. Among the works by de la Rue which may be most closely associated with his Burgundian-Habsburg employers is the motet *Doleo super te* (the last part of a longer motet, *Considera Israel*), which is preserved in a manuscript belonging to Margaret of Austria and may well have been composed as a lament on the death of her brother Philip the Fair in Spain in 1506 (the text being a Biblical lament for a brother). *Absalon fili mi* (whose authorship is still in debate) may have been commissioned by Maximilian following Philip's death: this text is a lament for a son. The piece is famous for its last section, where the text 'but let me descend weeping into hell' is portrayed by an extraordinary musical descent in which the interlocking falling motives of the four voices pull the music down into harmonic areas exceptional for the time. A similar expressive manner to that of *Doleo super te* is heard also in Gaspar van Weerbecke's *Anima mea liquefacta est*, which is preserved in the same manuscript of Margaret's that contains La Rue's motet. Here the impassioned lament, addressed to the Daughters of Jerusalem, is for the lost 'beloved' (Christ). Weerbecke was associated with Philip the Fair's court in the 1490s.

The variety of styles within de la Rue's motet output is striking: an extreme of simplicity is found in *O salutaris hostia*, preserved both as a substitute for the 'Osanna' of one of his Masses and as an independent piece. We perform it tonight as a motet sung at one of the climactic points of Mass, the Elevation, to which its text makes it highly appropriate. Far more elaborate is *Gaude virgo mater Christi*, with its vigorous rhythmic and melodic style, including different levels of triple meter in different voices at the opening. *O Domine Jesu Christe* is a highly expressive setting of a prayer to Christ.

The *Missa Alleluia* by de la Rue uses the traditional cantus firmus technique: a chant melody is repeatedly presented in the tenor in long note-values for much of the piece. The rising fourth with which this melody opens can be heard in other voices at the openings of many sections. The chant melody finally 'emerges' in the topmost voice in the final 'Agnus Dei', where its notes are extended to extreme length. The resulting music has an almost mesmeric quality. After the first two movements of de la Rue's Mass we sing a motet by a later member of the chapel, Nicolas Gombert, who joined Charles's chapel as a singer in 1525 or 1526. *Media vita* is typical of his motet writing in its rich full textures and acerbic clashing of the voices in counterpoint.

The **Cambridge Taverner Choir**, founded in 1986, belongs to a generation of exciting early music chamber choirs which, like The Tallis Scholars and The Sixteen, emerged from the Oxford and Cambridge choral tradition. As well as regular concert series and festival appearances in Cambridge, the choir has performed in many parts of the U.K., and undertaken highly successful tours of Portugal in 1991 and Switzerland and Italy in 1996; it has also broadcast on Radio 3, and has been featured on Radio 4. The choir has released three recordings; all have been acclaimed by the critics, and *Music from Renaissance Portugal* was short-listed for the *Gramophone* Early Music Award in 1994.

The choir specialises in the performance of sacred polyphony in illuminating thematic, liturgical and physical contexts, aiming to recreate the grandeur and excitement of the European Renaissance, and especially the Tudor age in England and the Iberian 'Golden Age'. The choir also performs baroque and contemporary works. The 1995/6 season celebrated the music of John Taverner on the 450th anniversary of his death, and included a prestigious commission from the contemporary composer, John Tavener, while the 1996/7 season explored the music of five great European cities at the turn of the seventeenth century. In 1999 the choir performed the complete motets of J.S. Bach with guest director John Butt.

Owen Rees began his academic and conducting career as Organ Scholar at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, studying with Peter le Huray and Iain Fenlon. After a period as College Lecturer in Music at St Peter's College and St Edmund Hall, Oxford, he joined the Music Department at the University of Surrey. In 1997 he returned to Oxford, where he is Fellow in Music and Organist at the Queen's College, Lecturer at Somerville College, and Lecturer in the Faculty of Music. His published studies include work on musical sources and repertories from Coimbra, and on the music of, for example, Francisco Guerrero and William Byrd. His work as a scholar has consistently informed his work as a performer. He has conducted at festivals in the UK, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, France, and the Netherlands. Choirs under his direction have released CD recordings on the Herald, Hyperion, and Unicorn-Kanchana labels to