

## A Marriage of England and Burgundy

Excerpts from the sleeve notes

Extravagant even by the standards of the most extravagant European court of its day, the celebrations surrounding the marriage in 1468 of Margaret of York, sister of Edward IV of England, and Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, constituted one of the undisputed pinnacles in the history of the Court of Burgundy. To judge from the extent and enthusiasm of surviving testimony, outstripping those for any similar fifteenth-century state occasion, this was indeed, as Christine Weightman has put it, the marriage of the century.

Yet the wedding could very easily not have happened at all. An expression of the fragile power triangle that linked England, France and Burgundy in the later fifteenth century, the alliance that brought together the houses of York and Burgundy could have been orientated in quite different directions: earlier negotiations had turned on proposals, among others, to marry both Charles and Margaret into the Royal House of France, and delays in the marriage had been due in no small measure to obstacles engineered by the French monarch, Louis XI. Dynastic marriages in the Middle Ages were emblems of things far greater than themselves: the main route to territorial expansion, they brought with them also a host of treaties guaranteeing peace, borders, trade and so on. Meanwhile, the celebrations themselves had a purpose beyond those of surface pomp or frivolity: they were a statement - both to the populace and the visiting ambassadors and dignitaries of foreign powers - of power and wealth and, implicitly, a warning against political or civil unrest.

For Charles the Bold, newly created Duke of Burgundy following the death only the previous year of his aged father Philip the Good, the marriage was an opportunity for display on a grand scale. The spectacles began as soon as Margaret entered the port of Sluis in present-day Belgium: a barge carrying Burgundian and local dignitaries, along with musicians playing trumpets and clarions, greeted her ship as it sailed into port. On disembarking, she passed through carpeted streets lined by local people bearing torches to the house of a wealthy merchant. Here for a week she was lavishly entertained by symbolic pageants - many of them based on themes drawn from biblical, mythological and historical weddings - and by fireworks and music. As was usual for the time, the wedding itself, which took place at the port of Damme a week after her arrival on Burgundian territory, was a private affair; in Damme as in Sluis, though, her presence in the city was the focus of elaborate public and ecclesiastical ceremony and display.

But it was with her arrival in Bruges, now as Duchess of Burgundy, that the high-water mark of the celebrations was reached: making a powerful impression on all who witnessed it, the entry into Bruges has maintained its hold on popular imagination through its annual re-enactments as a tourist attraction. The new bride, magnificently dressed and carried on a gilded litter, was honoured by processions and gifts from merchants and dignitaries from home and abroad. A procession of some 1,500 passed through streets lined with banners, tapestries and flowers to the accompaniment of music,

pageants and cheering crowds. The banquets, held every night in Bruges for a week, were the stuff of Burgundian legend. Entertainments included a gilded lion, surmounted by a dwarf, which paced through the hall singing; a 41-foot tower containing dancing monkeys, bears and wolves, and the obligatory unicorn, symbol of chastity, which on the night of the first banquet entered the hall, to trumpet blasts, surmounted by a leopard holding the banner of England in its left paw and a marguerite in its right.

Music clearly played a major role in these great events, but, beyond the information that it emanated from the mouths of lions, goats, wolves and asses in addition to the more conventional players of trumpets and clarions, the chroniclers are typically silent as to what was actually performed. In this case, though, history has been unusually kind in preserving a manuscript that was almost certainly associated with the marriage, and whose contents may well have been performed at ceremonies associated with it. This is the Burgundian Court manuscript Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 5557. Long known as Burgundian from the presence in its first initial illumination of the (modified) arms of Philip the Good and Charles the Bold, the manuscript's provenance was substantially fleshed out more recently by Rob Wegman. His conclusions were based chiefly on the initials of the manuscript, and especially that of the second Mass in the volume, where the tendrils of an elaborate letter 'K' (for 'Kyrie') enclose the Burgundian emblem of the fusil, or flint and steel, and a white rose, presumably that of the House of York. The supposition that this is indeed an allusion to the marriage, rather than to the treaty signed between Burgundy and the ruling English House of York almost two years earlier, derives from the presence to the left of the initial of the head of a noble lady in a richly-jewelled hennin or headdress, and the dog, symbol of marital fidelity, who crouches above the letter itself. Further iconographic details strengthen the suspicion that this manuscript, or at least its first part, or 'nucleus', is indeed a rare surviving fragment of the splendour of the great marriage ceremonies of 1468.

But the impression created by the initials gains greater depth from the nature of the repertory that they adorn. The manuscript 'nucleus' encompasses the sole surviving copies of five Mass settings by the English composers Walter Frye, John Plummer and Richard Cox. It is hard to resist the speculation that, as Wegman proposes, these pieces were brought together for performance at the documented high Masses that constituted key moments in Margaret's rite of passage from English princess to the most powerful duchess in Europe. The choices of cantus firmi for some of the Masses offer further hints in the same direction. Frank Harrison commented that the Trinity Sunday responsory *Summe trinitati*, which forms the scaffold for the Mass by Frye performed on this disc, was also sung in procession, at least in the Use of Salisbury (the principal English liturgical rite), at the reception of a king and queen. Hence in this context the Mass may, as Wegman noted, be as an allusion to Charles's well-known pretensions to the status of king. Although the cantus firmus of Frye's *Missa Flos regalis* has not been traced, its title is certainly suggestive, the 'royal flower' perhaps being a double allusion to the princess and the white rose of the House of York. Finally, Wegman pointed out that at least two other English pieces that are based, like Frye's *Missa Nobilis et pulchra*, on chants from the Feast of St Catherine of Alexandria, have been associated by scholars with weddings. According to this scenario these chants would have been chosen in reference to the

mystic marriage between that saint and the infant Christ, a scene frequently portrayed in Flemish paintings of the period that would undoubtedly have been familiar to the participants in the wedding ceremonies of Charles and Margaret.

Whatever the merits of these suppositions, though, other circumstances render it unlikely that the Masses were composed expressly for the marriage. First, they are separated by stylistic differences that point to composition over a number of years; and second, traces of adaptation in the copies in Brussels 5557 belie the notion that the pieces were commissioned directly from their composers. Most obviously, two of the Masses, Frye's *Missa Summe trinitati* and *Missa Flos regalis*, have lost their Kyries. The omission of Kyries from English festal Masses, their large dimensions and long prosula texts out of keeping with liturgical traditions elsewhere, was a fate suffered frequently by such Masses in continental transmission. Why two Masses lost their Kyries while the other three hung on to theirs is a mystery; it is a circumstance, though, that resonates with other discrepancies between the copies, which would seem to suggest that the Masses reached their copyist's desk via diverse routes rather than as a unit. As it happens, a motet, *Salve virgo mater*, surviving in the manuscript Trent 88 is so intimately related in cantus firmus, structure and style to the four *Summe trinitati* movements in Brussels that it is almost surely the lost Kyrie of that Mass masquerading in another guise. It has been reinstated on this disc with the prosula text *Conditor Kyrie*, an item, like the responsory that forms the Mass's cantus firmus, that was specified by the Use of Salisbury for Trinity Sunday. All in all, then, it seems more likely that if the five Masses were indeed used in the ceremonies associated with the marriage, they were assembled from diverse sources, perhaps with a mind to their relevance to the occasion, rather than being commissioned directly for the celebration itself. Alternatively it is possible, as Rob Wegman has suggested to me, that they were already in the possession of the Burgundian Court and were simply supplied with initials in recognition of their use at this auspicious moment in its history.

As it happens, the five opening Masses of the Brussels manuscript are not its only evidence of a Burgundian interest in English music. An anonymous Mass later in the source, also recorded on this CD, bears many of the hallmarks of English style, and some years ago I constructed a case that it may also be by Frye. Modest in scale and with a short Kyrie designed for alternatim performance with chant, this *Missa Sine nomine* nonetheless shares much of the melodic, rhythmic and contrapuntal idiom of Frye's authenticated Masses, such as *Summe trinitati*, that are conceived on a grander scale. A similarly alternatim Kyrie ascribed to Frye, and based, as discovered by Brian Trowell, on the same composer's song *So ys emprentid*, survives in a fragmentary state in the Lucca Choirbook. Stylistically related in its general rhythmic and melodic profile to Frye's other ascribed Masses as well as to the anonymous cycle, the surviving discantus of the Lucca Kyrie bears a more direct relation to the Kyrie of the Brussels anonymous Mass: the corresponding section openings of the two pieces are strikingly similar, while the two *Christe II* settings trace substantially the same melodic contour throughout. Further strong melodic relationships link the Lucca Kyrie to other parts of the Brussels anonymous Mass, as can be seen for example by comparing Kyrie I of Lucca with *Agnus Dei I* of Brussels. Finally, the Brussels anonymous Mass has a direct stylistic counterpart,

as Gareth Curtis and Rob Wegman had earlier noted, in another authenticated work by Frye: his setting of the Prose for St Nicholas, *Sospitati dedit*. Mass and Prose setting share the characteristic features of English discant: a simple, rhythmically-integrated style and voice parts in almost entirely distinct ranges, with the tenor as the lowest voice. In fact *Sospitati dedit* recalls the Brussels Mass from its very beginning: its opening motif, though admittedly echoed in many pieces from this period, is almost exactly the same as the figure which begins each movement of the Mass.

On a local level, the pieces just discussed share a lot of common ground: all have the same highly varied and heavily syncopated lines embracing periodic, sometimes obsessive, rhythmic repetitions, while their melodic profiles frequently show a similar persistence in repeatedly returning to a single note within a short space of time. Cut from the same cloth though they may be, however, the two Masses on this disc fashion it in ways that are quite different. The concision and economy of the *Missa Sine nomine*, with its lucid texture and brisk text setting, create an arresting impression from bar 1. Careful listening, though, entices the ear increasingly into a brittle sound world in which brief and highly sculpted melodic ideas are passed from one voice to another in what strikes us as something akin to chamber music. Propelled forward by a high density of musical events, the Mass nonetheless articulates a wide range of moods with the most economic use of material. Compare, for example, the conclusion of the Credo, its sense of acceleration and excitement generated by brief rests, syncopation and rhythmic disparity between the parts, with the serenity and expansiveness, which, at the opening of the following Sanctus, is shaped from the basic ingredients of melodic repetitiveness and rhythmic simplicity.

Compared to the anonymous Mass, the *Missa Summe trinitati* unfolds in a series of musical events that is at once more leisurely and more complex. Resistant to easy comprehension, Frye's texture becomes, on closer listening, a source of endless fascination. The stylistic consistency of his idiom is entirely belied by the sense of freedom and invention that he brings to bear on it: to become acquainted with the style of the *Missa Summe trinitati* is to be gradually absorbed into a perpetual interplay of melodic and rhythmic ideas held in check by a subtle sense of timing. Repetition, sometimes of melodic motifs, but much more typically of brief rhythmic patterns, plays a major role in Frye's articulation of musical space, at one and the same time slowing down the pace of musical events and drawing attention to key moments. Such repetitions emerge increasingly from the texture with each hearing, drawing attention to themselves in different ways by being melodically exact or varied, flowing with or against the prevailing metre, appearing in one voice or several, and so on. Even the most basic idea can, in Frye's hands, lend his music a sense of cohesion and structural poise out of all proportion to its simplicity. The Credo *Summe trinitati* provides a classic example: a short-long repeated-note motif first heard in the tenor in the second bar is immediately repeated in the top line and thereafter pervades the whole movement. Far from becoming tedious, though, this simple motif is treated with the utmost taste and restraint, by turn saturating the texture, occurring in isolation and disappearing altogether. In fact repeated notes play a major role in the structure and pacing of the entire cycle: the repeated d's of the cantus firmus, recurring at regular intervals in each movement, become an aural 'tag'

which the composer appears to exploit to a greater or lesser extent depending on the degree of emphasis required at any given moment.

If the two English Masses on this disc are at least stablemates, the other pieces are markedly - and surprisingly, given their probably similar date of composition - different. Here we turn to another powerful presence in the Brussels manuscript, that of the most celebrated musical employee of the Court of Charles the Bold, Antoine Busnois. Copied in a number of cases on openings left blank between larger compositions, there is some reason to believe that the series of motets by Busnois was added, subsequent to the completion of the rest of the source, by the composer himself. The Regina coeli settings, which rub shoulders in the manuscript, are also placed side by side on this recording.

Regina coeli I must count as one of the most limpidly beautiful compositions of the later fifteenth century. Each line has an almost sculptural quality, and each emerges periodically from the texture to articulate a series of carefully-planned and gently-paced climaxes. Even the passage of four-against-three proportion near the beginning of the second part of the motet - a touch of typically Busnoisian rhythmic complexity - does nothing to detract from the overall sense of calm and elegance that wreathes this glorious piece. After Regina coeli I, the second setting of the same text seems suffused with a kind of quirkiness much more often associated with the composer. Moments of harmonic pungency and rhythmic fitfulness, along with a brief, high passage in fauxbourdon-like parallel motion, pepper a setting which, though lacking the suavity of its companion piece, yields nothing to it in character and inventiveness.

For the last items on this recording, we offer a new perspective on Busnois in the form of two pieces that, while not in the Brussels manuscript and not ascribed to Busnois by their copyists, have both been assigned to him on stylistic grounds by modern scholarship. The idea that *O pulcherrima mulierum/Girum coeli circuiui* might be by Busnois was first suggested more than half a century ago by Laurence Feininger. Support for Feininger's ascription may be seen in its presence in what appears to be a deliberately constructed 'nest' of pieces by Busnois in the source that transmits it, and Sean Gallagher recently made a powerful case for Busnois' authorship on notational, structural and motivic grounds. Like so many motet texts of this period, the words of this motet, drawn and adapted from *The Song of Songs* and *Ecclesiasticus*, were clearly chosen for their syncretic value in linking the messages of the Old and New Testaments. In this case they seem to point, as Leofranc Holford-Strevens has suggested to me, both to the Second Coming and, as so often, to Christ as the bridegroom of *The Song of Songs*. The luxuriance of the motet embraces something of the beguiling quality which so often imbues *Song of Songs* settings: its rich texture is formed from long and elegantly-shaped melodic lines that burst out periodically into more florid effusions.

If this exceptionally beautiful motet does not, nonetheless, seem indelibly marked with Busnois' fingerprints when translated into sound, the last item on this recording, *Incomprehensibilia firme/Praeter rerum ordinem*, undeniably does. Rob Wegman's case for the authorship of this piece, like Gallagher's for *O pulcherrima*, rests on considerations of mensural layout, cantus firmus layout and motivic behaviour. Yet in this instance resemblances to pieces firmly ascribed to Busnois, in particular his motet *In*

hydraulis, are so striking that it is difficult to imagine this motet being the work of anyone else. In its extraordinary control of musical architecture, relentless forward drive and brilliantly glittering surface, *Incomprehensibilia* stands as one of the most impressive musical edifices of its era. Coming from a time when composers' voices were marked more than anything - at least by our standards - by stylistic consistency, a piece such as this strikes a pose of such originality, individuality and self-confidence that it seems almost to belong to another age. Holding the vast musical juggernaut together is the cantus firmus, its three sections forming the armatures for the three sections of the motet. Each section begins in reduced scoring, with a different voice stating the chant each time before it is taken over, in a fully-scored passage, by the customary tenor. Beginning placidly, the non-chant bearing voices soon release their latent energy in brilliant arabesques - now in dialogue, now in imitation, now in tenths - that propel the music into glorious climaxes before launching it into the still greater activity of closing passages *alla breve*. To grasp the substance of this work, though, is still to wonder at its sum. To the three 'incomprehensibles' of the Catholic Church alluded to in the text, drawn from the so-called 'Athanasian Creed', one is tempted to add a fourth: the motet itself.

Composed apparently around the same time, the English Masses and Burgundian motets brought together on this disc may seem to the listener like a marriage of opposites: by comparison with the obvious (to us) sense of long-range musical architecture of the motets, the Masses can sound curiously short-breathed and aphoristic. Yet theirs is a different kind of beauty, demanding a different kind of listening: those expecting Beethovenian standards of long-range planning are likely to be disappointed; yet those who, by contrast, approach them with ears open to their constantly shifting textures and endless fund of ideas, bound by a subtle tissue of motivic interconnections, will be amply rewarded. This is music composed of beautiful, and individual, musical events, a succession of eloquent moments; to attempt to grasp it as if it were some form of musical sculpture is inevitably to be disappointed by its evanescence. Thus the two idioms showcased here present different facets of the fifteenth century's musical personality; to appreciate both is to open up the possibility for an enriched understanding of its greater achievement. As in all good marriages, then, the combination of the two styles on this disc offers, one hopes, more than the sum of its parts.

[Andrew Kirkman ©2000](#)

### **A Marriage of England and Burgundy**

#### **THE BINCHOIS CONSORT**

FERGUS McLUSKY, ROBIN TYSON alto

JAMES GILCHRIST, CHRISTOPHER WATSON tenor

DAMIAN O'KEEFFE baritone, ROB MACDONALD bass

ANDREW KIRKMAN conductor

#### Contents:

Anonymous (Walter Frye (d1474)?)

Missa Sine nomine

1. Kyrie [3'46]
  2. Gloria [4'17]
  3. Credo [4'42]
  4. Sanctus [5'46]
  5. Agnus Dei [4'34]
- Antoine Busnois (c1430-1492)
6. Regina coeli I [6'17]
  7. Regina coeli II [3'26]
- Walter Frye
- Missa Summe trinitati
8. Conditor Kyrie [4'48]
  9. Gloria [5'18]
  10. Credo [5'53]
  11. Sanctus [5'57]
  12. Agnus Dei [5'08]
- Anonymous (Busnois?)
13. O pulcherrima mulierum/Girum coeli circuivi [7'11]
  14. Incomprehensibilia firme/Praeter rerum ordinem [7'38]