Program note
Born in the Flemish city of Ghent in 1457/8 to one of the city trumpeters, Jacob Obrecht’s eventful career took in a succession of posts as choirmaster throughout the Low Countries. In 1487-78 he spent a year in Ferrara at the invitation of the music-loving duke Ercole I d’Este. He returned nearly twenty years later in 1504 as the duke’s chapelmaster, but the following winter Ercole died unexpectedly and Obrecht was dismissed; by the end of the summer he too died of plague. The bulk of Obrecht’s surviving output consists of 30-odd mass cycles, nearly all based on known cantus firmi. Obrecht’s ingenuity in re-working these materials makes fascinating study, but in his lifetime he was famous for his melodic fluency (he is reputed to have composed an entire Mass in a single day) and the balance of his compositions.

When Obrecht composed Missa Maria zart isn’t known, but there are good reasons for thinking it one of his very last Masses. Its use of a monophonic German devotional song as cantus firmus is unique in his Mass oeuvre and its only surviving source is a print issued in Basel within a few years of his death. All this suggests a Germanic origin. As it happens, Obrecht stopped at the court of Maximilian I at Innsbruck on his last journey to Ferrara and was paid for composing at least one Mass, likely at Maximilian’s request. Although that Mass was probably not Maria zart (the equally impressive Missa Sub tuum presidium being a more likely candidate) this stay is nevertheless the most plausible known context for its composition.

Missa Maria zart is one of the longest cantus firmus Masses that survives, lasting nearly an hour. Even by Obrecht’s standards it is unusually ambitious, complex, and inventive. Using a procedure peculiar to Obrecht, the Maria zart tune is broken up into segments, to which the tune naturally lends in itself due to its short phrases and simple note values. The tenor voice (in the middle of the texture) presents these segments gradually throughout the Mass, a few in each section but always in their correct order, first in long note values and then speeding up gradually during each section. The last segment having been reached in the Hosanna (coinciding with the elevation of the host) the entire tune is stated in long notes in the Agnus dei, first in the bass (Agnus I) and finally, most audibly of all, in the top voice (Agnus III). But even in the sections where the tenor is silent (the Christe, the two central duos in the Gloria and the central trios in the last three movements) the tune appears in different (dis)guises, some clearly audible and others cunningly hidden.

The Basel partbooks being somewhat problematic for practical use, Cappella Pratensis sing from a newly commissioned copy in choirbook format, handmade by bass-singer Marc Busnel. The singers’ preparation of the very complex notation took place under my guidance as part of a project in collaboration with the Alamire Foundation (University of Leuven, Belgium).
Fabrice Fitch

For this performance, Cappella Pratensis is evoking the liturgical form of a Mass by presenting the Missa Maria zart in the context of the plainsong propers appropriate for a Marian feast. The choice of these chants has a special meaning for Cappella Pratensis as we are singing them from facsimiles of a manuscript that forms part of a music collection in our “home town” of ’s-Hertogenbosch (The Netherlands). This manuscript, a choirbook known as the “Codex Smijers” is held in the archives of the Confraternity of Our Illustrious Lady, a paraliturgical organization that has formed part of the church of St. John in that city for more than 700 years. The music collection represents one of the rare cases where musical sources are still held by the institution for which they were made. The Codex Smijers, made in the early years of the sixteenth century, is unusual because it contains both chant and polyphony. The splendid calligraphy and illumination of this source make it a valuable part of the musical heritage of the province of North-Brabant. Cappella Pratensis is proud to share this heritage with the wider world on this tour. In accordance with the formulary as presented in this source, we will sing the Introit, Gradual, Alleluia, and Communion will be sung, but there is no Offertory. – Stratton Bull

Texts

Maria zart
Maria zart von edler Art
ein Ross ohn aller Dornen;
du hast mit Macht herwieder bracht
das vor lang war verloren.
Durch Adams Fall dir hat die Wahl
Sanct Gabriel versprochen,
hilf dass nit werd gerochen.
Mein Sünd und Schuld erwirb mir Huld,
dann kein Trost is wo du nit bist,
Barmherzigkeit erwerben.
Am letzten End bitt dich nicht wend
von mir in meinen Sterben.

Salve sancta parens
Salve sancta parens, enixa puerpera regem,
qui celum terramque regit in secula
seculorum.
V. Sentiant omnes tum juvamen quicumque
celebrant tuam commemorationem.
Gloria patri et filio et spiritui sancto. Sicut
erat in principio et nunc et semper et in
secula seculorum. Amen.

Kyrie
Kyrie eleison.
Christe eleison.
Kyrie eleison.

Sweet Mary, of noble kind,
a rose without any thorns;
you have mightily brought back
what long was lost.
Through Adam’s fall, to you has fallen the
choice promised by St. Gabriel:
help that I be not revenged.
Give me protection for my sins and guilt,
For where you are not, there is no
consolation: be merciful.
And at the very end, I pray you, turn not
away from me at my death.

Hail, holy mother, who in childbirth brought
forth the king who rules heaven and earth,
world without end.
V. May all those who keep your
commemoration enjoy your help and
protection.
Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to
the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning,
is now, and ever shall be, world without
end. Amen.

Lord, have mercy on us.
Christ, have mercy on us.
Lord, have mercy on us.
Gloria


Benedicta et venerabilis es
Benedicta et venerabilis es, Virgo Maria, que sine tactu pudoris inventa es Mater salvatoris.


Alleluia
Alleluia. Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus. Alleluia. Alleluia. Ave Maria, full of grace, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women. Alleluia.
Credo


I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, only begotten Son of God born of the Father before all ages; God of God, light of light, true God of true God begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father: through whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary: and was made man. He was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, he suffered and was buried: And the third day he rose again according to the scriptures, and ascended to heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father, and he shall come again in glory, to judge both the quick and the dead: whose kingdom shall have no end. And in the Lord, the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke through the prophets. And in one holy, catholic and apostolic church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.
Prefatio
Per omnia secula seculorum.
Amen.
V. Dominus vobiscum.
R. Et cum spiritu tuo.
V. Sursum corda.
R. Habemus ad Dominum.
V. Gratias agamus Domino Deo nostro.
R. Dignum et justum est.

Vere dignum et justum est, equum et salutare, nos tibi semper et ubique gratias agere, Domine sancte pater omnipotens eternus Deus, et te in commemorationem beate Marie semper virginis, collaudare benedicere et predicare. Cum quibus et nostras voces ut admitti jubeas deprecamur supplici confessione dicentes:

Sanctus
Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus
Dominus Deus Sabaoth.
Pleni sunt celi et terra gloria tua.
Hosanna in excelsis.
Benedictus qui venit
in nomine Domini.
Hosanna in excelsis.

Pater noster

Agnus Dei
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.

[Cantus firmus:] Maria zart…

Through all ages of ages.
The Lord be with you.
And with your spirit.
Lift up your hearts.
We lift them to the Lord.
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is fitting and just to do so.

It is truly fitting and just, right and salutary, that at all times and everywhere we should give you thanks, holy Lord, almighty Father, eternal God, and to praise you, bless you and tell forth your greatness in the commemoration of the Blessed Mary, ever Virgin. We pray that you may bid our voices also to be admitted with them as we say in humble acknowledgement:

Holy, Holy, Holy
Lord, God of Hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes
in the name of the Lord:
Hosanna in the highest.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

Sweet Mary… [see above]
**Beata viscera**

Beata viscera Marie virginis, que portaverunt eterni Patris Filium.  
Blessed be the womb of the Virgin Mary which carried the son of the eternal father.

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