Obrecht [Hobrecht], Jacob

(b Ghent, 1457/8; d Ferrara, shortly before 1 Aug 1505). South Netherlandish composer. In the 1480s and 1490s he was Europe's leading composer of cyclic masses, of which he wrote nearly three dozen. In addition he left a sizeable oeuvre of motets and songs, many of which continued to circulate widely, along with his most famous masses, during the first half of the 16th century. In the last years of his life Obrecht was frequently mentioned in one breath with Josquin des Prez. The latter was to outlive him by 16 years, however, and has come to be seen as the more significant representative of his generation.

1. Life and early reputation.

The text of Obrecht's motet *Mille quingentis* reveals that he was the son of a Guillermus Hobrecht who died on St Cecilia's Day (22 November) 1488. The father has been identified as the trumpeter Willem Obrecht who was permanently employed by the city of Ghent from 1452 until his death in 1488, and whose intermittent service in Burgundian court circles can be documented from 1454 to 1470. The composer appears to have been the only child of Willem's first marriage. His mother Lijsbette Gheeraerts died around the age of 20 in July 1460; his stepmother, by 1464, was Beatrijse Jacops. Obrecht's portrait gives his age as 38 in 1496, suggesting a date of birth in 1457/8.

Nothing is known about the composer's education, although it must have been suitable to prepare him for the priesthood. He is mentioned with the academic title of master – a degree normally obtained at or above the age of 20 – by 1480. (The Jacob Obrecht who was enrolled at Leuven University in 1470 is not identifiable with the composer, since his father was a Jacob Obrecht, not Willem.) There is no direct information about Obrecht's musical education, although it is likely that he was initially trained to become a professional trumpeter like his father. This would have involved a thorough grounding in the practice of contrapuntal improvisation over memorized tunes. Willem Obrecht's connections with the Burgundian court may well have brought Jacob in early contact with Antoine Busnoys, who had worked in the ducal chapel since 1467. Busnoys' influence may be apparent not only in Obrecht's selection of mass cantus firmi (most famously from such songs as *Je ne demande* and – if it is by Busnoys – *Fortuna desperata*), but also in the style of what may well be his earliest mass, *Petrus apostolus*.

There is no documentary support for the assumption that Obrecht worked at Utrecht in the late 1470s. (This was suggested by 19th-century music historians on the basis of Glarean's credible report that Obrecht had been the teacher of Erasmus, and Beatus Rhenanus's claim that Erasmus had served as a choirboy at 'Trajectum', probably Utrecht or Maastricht.) However, the composer was active as choirmaster at the St Gertrudiskerk in Bergen op Zoom in 1480–84, as documented by the annual accounts of the Guild of Our Lady based in that church. An unnamed mass by Obrecht, composed probably during these years, is known to have reached the court of Duke Ercole d'Este of Ferrara by 1484. During the same years, Tinctoris apparently mentioned Obrecht in his *Complexus effectuum musices* among the most renowned musicians of the century: 'For who has not heard of Johannes Dunstaple, Guillelmus Dufay … Johannes Okeghem, Anthonius Busnois … Jacobus Obrechts?' (Some scholars have wondered whether Obrecht's name might have been inserted by a later scribe, especially since the only surviving source for this passage was copied in the composer's birthplace in 1504.)

In September 1484 Obrecht accepted a position as master of the choirboys at Cambrai Cathedral. Within several months after his arrival there, however, he sought to obtain the succentorship at the collegiate church of St Donatian in Bruges. Once the latter position had been secured, he postponed his departure for several months, meanwhile discharging his responsibilities at Cambrai to the evident dissatisfaction of the cathedral chapter (in July 1485 he was formally reprimanded by the canons for an outbreak of scabies amongst the choirboys). Obrecht was finally installed at Bruges on 13 October 1485, and summarily dismissed at Cambrai upon his return there. An audit of his account books revealed a deficit that could not be

accounted for. The chapter agreed to settle by purchasing music manuscripts copied by the composer, at a price reduced by the sum he owed the cathedral.

During his early years in Bruges, Obrecht is known to have composed the masses *De Sancto Martino* and *De Sancto Donatiano* (for endowments that took effect in 1486 and 1487 respectively), and very probably the *Missa* '*Salve diva parens*', whose earliest surviving source has been dated 1487. In August 1487, the chapter of St Donatian granted the composer six months' leave of absence to travel to Ferrara at the invitation of Duke Ercole d'Este. He must have overstayed his leave considerably, for ten months later, in June 1488, we find him passing through Bergen op Zoom on his return from Italy. Obrecht did not come back to Bruges until 15 August of the same year. This was approximately three months before the death of his father.

After a summary decision to dismiss him in May 1490 (whose direct reasons are unclear, and which does not appear to have been implemented), Obrecht was finally granted remission from his post in January 1491. By June 1492 he was active as choirmaster at the church of Our Lady at Antwerp, filling the vacancy left after Jacobus Barbireau's death in the previous year. Obrecht returned to Bergen op Zoom in June or July 1497, possibly attracted by the increasingly generous musical patronage in that city. However, 18 months later, in December 1498, he took up his old post of succentor at St Donatian, Bruges. He continued to occupy this position until serious illness forced him to submit his resignation in September 1500. The chapter granted his request, but shortly afterwards rewarded him with three benefices in acknowledgement not only of his valuable services to the church but also of his fame as a composer.

By June 1501 Obrecht was back again at Antwerp, where he served as a choirmaster at the church of Our Lady until June 1503. A payment recorded by the treasury of the Emperor Maximilian I reveals that he was in Innsbruck in October 1503. Apart from this isolated record, however, nothing is known of the composer's whereabouts between his departure from Antwerp in June 1503 and his final appointment as *maestro di cappella* at Ferrara in September 1504. At Ferrara he served Duke Ercole d'Este, one of his most enthusiastic admirers, until the latter's death in January 1505 left him once again without a position. After an unsuccessful attempt to obtain a post at Mantua, Obrecht died of the plague at Ferrara in late June or July 1505.

20th-century historians have often commented on the restlessness of Obrecht's musical career. The composer appears to have been perpetually in pursuit of a position commensurate with his artistic talents and international reputation. The erratic pattern of his career movements may not be unrelated to the lack of professional responsibility he could exhibit (at Cambrai, for instance) when tempted by new career prospects. Although Obrecht was hardly the only musician of his time to be neglectful of routine duties or to treat his employers badly, there is no other 15th-century composer of comparable stature whose career seems to have been so persistently dogged by problems like these.

Any assessment of Obrecht's personality ought to take into account his relationship with his father, which appears to have been of special significance. *Mille quingentis*, the musical prayer of commemoration for Willem Obrecht, is an extraordinary gesture – even for a period when all Christians, following the fifth commandment, were expected to pray for their deceased parents. The 'public' nature of the motet, as well as its ambitious literary and musical style, suggest a concern to immortalize Willem's name, and thereby perhaps to redeem an emotional debt of some kind. The work may well repay closer analysis in the light of the composer's biography. Another aspect that deserves mention is the apparent speed at which Obrecht composed, and his readiness to part from works immediately after finishing them. He was alleged to have written a mass in one night, a feat 'at which learned men were astonished'. Glarean, on whose testimony we rely for this report, contrasted this with the creative habits of Josquin, who was said to keep polishing and revising his compositions for years before allowing them to circulate publicly. This comparison may underline an element of generosity in Obrecht's musicianship, and in any case suggests an

impressive confidence in his artistic abilities. Whereas Josquin has often been perceived, even by his contemporaries, in terms of the personality-type of the 'melancholic', obsessively preoccupied with his art, the more outgoing, 'sanguine' temperament of Obrecht seems to be reflected in the musical vigour and exuberance of his best-known masses, and is expressed in his own comment (in the motet *Inter preclarissimas virtutes*) that '[I am] jubilating always in my songs'. Modern psychology does not endorse the humoral personality-types that were current in Obrecht's time, but such categorization played an important part in shaping the early images of composers, if only by determining what contemporaries chose to remember (or fabricate) about them and what they chose to neglect. The point here is that Obrecht and Josquin were seen, from an early date onwards, to have fundamentally different creative temperaments.

There were other perceived differences between the two composers as well. Towards the end of Obrecht's life, critical reflection on music became increasingly preoccupied with issues of excess versus moderation, to a degree unknown before the 1480s. These issues played a major part in early comparisons between Josquin and Obrecht. It was high praise indeed when Tinctoris, in the early 1480s, ranked Obrecht among the masters 'whose compositions, distributed throughout the whole world, fill God's churches, the palaces of kings, and the houses of private individuals, with the utmost sweetness'. This comment is typical of mid-15th-century attitudes, for which there could seldom be enough 'sweetness' in musical composition and performance. Scarcely 30 years later, however, 'the utmost' in sweetness could easily be felt to be too much – as it evidently was for the humanist writer Paolo Cortese, who noted in 1510 that Obrecht 'has sown more of the keenest sweetness in music, with skilful harmony, than would have sufficed to please the ear'. A comment like this implies a responsibility on the part of composers to avoid excessive use of musical ingredients which are pleasing and beneficial only when used in moderation – just as listeners (including the most powerful princes) could at this time be publicly taken to task for excessive and decadent indulgence in music. Against this light, Glarean surely meant to pay Obrecht a compliment when he commented, in 1542, that 'all the works this man has left have a certain wondrous grandeur and an intrinsic quality of moderation'. The Swiss theorist once again implied a contrast with Josquin, to whom he ascribed excessive and ostentatious pursuit of *raritates* – an eccentric taste for the unusual, the farfetched, and the bizarre. (For Cortese, on the other hand, it was Josquin who had put more *doctrina* in his music than any other composer.) Glarean held up Obrecht as 'one who displayed his talent, but without pretence, as if he preferred to await the judgement of the listener rather than to preen himself'.

As these quotations indicate, it may well have been through comparisons with Josquin that Obrecht's early image (and to some extent Josquin's in turn) acquired its distinctive profile. It is worth adding that such comparisons were not always decided in Josquin's favour. Contemporaries praised Obrecht as 'nulli secundus' almost as habitually as modern historians have ranked him 'second only to Josquin'. Not in every case can we dismiss such early testimony as mere commonplace. A good example is provided by the Bruges singer Jean Cordier, who declared to the chapter of St Donatian in 1487 that Duke Ercole I of Ferrara 'takes much delight in the art of music, and favours the musical composition of [Obrecht] above other compositions'. It is hard to assume that Cordier, who had just returned from northern Italy, would have knowingly testified to a falsehood, or that Ercole was completely unaware of Josquin's music at this time. Ercole was to hire Josquin as the highest-paid musician in the history of his chapel, in 1503, but allowed him to go within twelve months (even though it was at his discretion to decide otherwise, and to have the composer seized if he left without his permission), only to appoint Obrecht in the same position five months later. There is no record of any meeting between Obrecht and Josquin, though it is clear that they responded to each other's music (as in their respective masses on *Fortuna desperata* and *Malheur me bat*, or in the openings of *Inviolata* and *Salve sancta facies/Homo quidam*). However, even such apparent gestures of respect cannot conceal

the fact that the two composers were seen to have little in common. It may be no coincidence that none of the compositions by Obrecht is found with a misattribution to Josquin in any surviving source.

2. The modern image.

In the modern period a new image of Jacob Obrecht has emerged, albeit one that has undergone significant changes over the past 125 years or so. To some extent these changes may reflect the shifting intellectual preoccupations of Renaissance musicology during that period. Yet this cannot explain everything: after all, there has been a deep underlying continuity in the modern images of such composers as Ockeghem or Josquin. Obviously the stability of any image depends on the degree of coherence it can provide when the evidence itself is contradictory, ambiguous, or incomplete. In Obrecht's case, apparently, no image has succeeded in doing this; it is important to understand why this should have been the case.

Like many Netherlandish masters, Obrecht first emerged as a distinctive musical personality from the pages of Ambros's *Geschichte der Musik* (iii, 182–7). Ambros, as is well known, adopted the language and values of Romantic music criticism in his discussion of Renaissance music history. Most revealing in this regard (certainly in comparison with later histories of music) was his tendency to typify composers and works in terms of their perceived individualistic qualities. Ambros sought to develop an intimate personal understanding of each composer and his music, even when concrete historical evidence to support such understanding was lacking. He communicated his perceptions in richly evocative poetic language, thereby shaping the image of masters and masterpieces for decades to come.

Interestingly, Ambros characterized Obrecht in terms similar to those he used for Ockeghem. Obrecht, in his judgement, was 'a great, profound, serious and manly master, whose works show, almost throughout, a strain of stern loftiness'. The works on which he based this opinion were the ones he found in prints issued by Petrucci and various German publishers – a small but probably representative sample of the oeuvre available to 16th-century audiences. In these pieces he discerned a musical sensibility that encompassed, amongst others, the 'deeply serious, somewhat dark' but 'on the whole magnificent' writing of the *Missa 'Grecorum'*, the 'uncommonly intimate' expression of the *Missa 'Salve diva parens'* (a work that sounded to him as if it breathed 'a gentle melancholy'), and the 'powerful grandeur' and 'robust joy' of the *Missa 'Fortuna desperata'*. The overriding impression, for Ambros, was one of majestic grandeur. This perception may well have been influenced by Glarean's judgment that the works of Obrecht 'have a certain wondrous grandeur and an intrinsic quality of moderation'. Curiously, however, what Ambros passed on to the 20th century was, above all, his impression of Obrecht's spiritual depth. Reference books and music histories noted this as a prominent quality in his music up to and even beyond the Second World War.

Yet the image of Obrecht as a Renaissance *Tondichter*, as a Romantic musical poet *avant la lettre*, was short-lived. The Ockeghem-like qualities that Ambros and others ascribed to him were to give way, in the postwar decades, to a perception of Obrecht as primarily a musical architect, as a formalist who was to be admired more for his abstract musical thinking than for significant depth of feeling. It is hard to establish how and why this change should have taken place. Quite possibly, however, the publication of the complete works under the editorship of Johannes Wolf in 1908–21 played an important part. This made Obrecht, by some margin, the first 15th-century composer whose oeuvre could be studied as a unified corpus. Apart from anything else, the *Werken* provided a scholarly basis for questioning Romantic perceptions based merely on samples of pieces, thus allowing scholars to revise Ambros's image at a comparatively early date. It did not take long for such a revision to appear. In his Leipzig dissertation of 1925, Otto Gombosi adopted a notably more objectivist, scholarly tone than previous commentators had done. His remarkable study offered penetrating insights into selected pieces by Obrecht and his contemporaries, but it did so at the expense of the individualism perceived by Ambros. Gombosi's new insights did not blend into a distinctive, coherent image of the

composer – certainly not one that possessed the poetic qualities so admired in the 19th century.

The impression of spiritual profundity was in any case hard to reconcile with the discovery, published by André Pirro in 1927, that Obrecht had been neglectful of routine duties at Cambrai Cathedral, and in fact had embezzled money from the cathedral. History books have told and retold this episode many times (which has often been thought to reflect a character flaw), with the inevitable effect, certainly in the long run, of calling into question the sincerity of Obrecht's musical expression. It became less easy now to infer the composer's personality simply from the aesthetic qualities of his music in the way Ambros had done, and as historians would continue to do until the present day in the cases of Ockeghem and Josquin. One way to vindicate Obrecht as a composer, however, was to give new emphasis to his accomplishments on the 'purely musical' level. It may be no coincidence that scholars in the postwar decades began to draw attention to aspects of Obrecht's music that had previously attracted little notice: the element of calculation and clever contrivance in his cantus-firmus layouts, for example, or the apparent facility and (at times) almost naïve simplicity of his part-writing. Neither of these aspects is conspicuous in all or even most of Obrecht's compositions, and several of his most significant works (e.g. the *Missa 'Sicut spina rosam'* or the six-voice *Salve regina*) do not attest them at all. Even so, a new image of Obrecht began to take shape: that of a cold constructivist and *Vielschreiber*, whose prominence in music history owes more to the clever ingenuity of his tenor manipulations and to the sheer bulk of his output than to genuinely inspired or truly innovative masterpieces. This would now set him apart from the other composers of his generation. Obrecht came to be seen as the loner of the Josquin generation, as a curiously single-minded individual who doggedly stuck to old-fashioned practices, to the point of having little or no influence on subsequent composers. (As early as 1929, Heinrich Besseler had characterized him as the 'genialer Außenseiter' of the Renaissance; to some extent that is what he has remained ever since.)

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the postwar decades have left a substantial body of research on the formal layouts and cantus-firmus procedures in Obrecht's masses and motets. This research seems to have been motivated, at least in part, by perceived parallels between the *Kanonkünste* of the Franco-Flemish composers and the avantgarde serialism of the 1950s. It may also have been promoted by the rigorously empiricist orientation of Anglo-American musicology during the Cold War decades, an orientation which typically privileged aspects that are susceptible to empirical verification. On these latter terms a composer like Ockeghem was bound to remain an elusive figure – and this, if anything, intensified the romanticized image of a 'mystic' already conferred on him by pre-war musicologists. Obrecht's works, on the other hand (at least those of his works that scholars chose to study), seemed to give all their secrets away in rational designs of one kind or another – ingenious tenor manipulations, symmetrical formal layouts, tonal structures and numerological schemes. Postwar musicology found its methodological preoccupations richly rewarded in Obrecht's music, and repaid him by canonizing the new image of the composer, one in which his music seemed to offer little else of historical (or even musical) interest besides the much-analysed rational designs. Significantly, the Obrecht mass that has been most often recorded since the 1950s is *Sub tuum presidium*, the very model of a complex mathematical design in 15th-century music.

All this is not to deny that Obrecht's music was still appreciated, especially for the flair and direct appeal of his melodic invention. Yet in most cases such appreciation was expressed merely as a qualification of the predominant image. In his *Music of the Renaissance*, for instance, Gustave Reese concluded his discussion of the composer with the afterthought: 'in addition to the technical proficiency shown in his music, its sheer loveliness makes him one of the greatest figures in a great generation'. And it is perhaps significant that the only attempt to analyse Obrecht's contrapuntal writing in any detail, Manfred Bukofzer's brilliant study of the *Missa Caput*, did not inspire similar attempts in other pieces so much as helped to solidify the postwar image of the composer.

Bukofzer compared Obrecht's setting with the *Caput* masses of the English anonymous (then thought to be Du Fay) and Ockeghem. For obvious reasons he was concerned especially to bring out the stylistic differences between the three works. Given this objective, the deep kinship between Obrecht and Ockeghem once perceived by Ambros was bound to give way to a stark polarity – between the perceived inwardness and spirituality of Ockeghem, and the outward show and flamboyance of Obrecht. Bukofzer's impression of 'boundless exuberance and inexhaustible vigor', 'lusty virility', 'ceaseless rhythmic drive', and much else, has found its way into numerous postwar accounts of Renaissance music history, usually in connection with the composer's perceived facility (and rarely without reference to Glarean's 'mass in one night' anecdote).

The image that has remained, fairly or unfairly, is that of a man with a curiously singleminded tendency to play with outmoded ideas, whose music may show a great contrapuntal facility, but lacks the spiritual depth of an Ockeghem, let alone the innovative vision of a Josquin. The 1980 Grove article on Obrecht, written by Edgar Sparks, could be viewed in this light. The article presented virtually the opposite of the image sketched by Ambros more than a century previously. In some respects it was a reworking of the chapter on Obrecht in the author's magisterial study *Cantus Firmus in Mass and Motet, 1420–1520*. The composer is portrayed as a man whose significance to the history of music lies chiefly in the realm of tenor manipulation, and whose historical position must be assessed largely on those terms. Just as in the case of Reese, the acknowledgement of the aesthetic value of Obrecht's music appears as an afterthought, qualifying the image rather than defining it.

Much has happened in the twenty years since: the appearance of the third complete works edition, under the editorship of Chris Maas (published in 1981–99), the availability of more and more of his music in recorded performances, fresh archival research in all the major musical centres in which Obrecht is known to have worked, new datings for several of his works (on the basis of both archival and manuscript evidence), and research into the local chant traditions from which the composer may have selected his cantus firmi. If anything, the trend in Obrecht studies has been to contextualize our knowledge of the composer and his music – to deepen our understanding of the surroundings in which he lived and worked, and to ground new interpretations of his music more firmly in a knowledge of medieval liturgy, devotional practices, preaching and exegesis, social history, scholastic and humanist learning, biographical evidence, and much more. A wealth of historical material has been brought to bear on Obrecht's music, prompting fresh readings and interpretations of such works as the masses *Sub tuum presidium*, *Sicut spina rosam*, *De Sancto Donatiano* and *De Sancto Martino*, and such motets as *Mille quingentis*, *Factor orbis*, *Salve crux*, *Inter preclarissimas virtutes*, *Beata es Maria* and others. As a result of all this, Obrecht has begun to shed the one-dimensional image of a rigid constructivist and has come to be seen rather as a man of his time, a thoroughly medieval mind whose music embodies and articulates the values of the society in which he lived. In many ways, it is the fundamental 'otherness' of the medieval experience to which his works are now seen to offer uniquely revealing windows. (In this regard, the trend in Obrecht studies seems to parallel a similar trend in Du Fay research.) This contextualized image of Obrecht may as yet lack the coherence of previous images, yet a compelling visual counterpart has become available with the breathtaking portrait of the composer, which emerged unexpectedly in 1991.

The revival of many of Obrecht's compositions on sound recordings, especially by English *a cappella* ensembles in the 1990s, has opened up yet other dimensions to the composer's musicianship. When his works are heard in performance, the technically superlative part-writing reveals, in addition, an unparalleled ear for sonority and vocal timbre. Motets such as the five-part *Salve crux* and especially the six-part *Salve regina* have emerged as awesome edifices of sound, and may do much to explain Ambros's perception of Obrecht as 'a great, profound, serious and manly master, whose works show, almost throughout, a strain of stern loftiness'. Even the four-part music, including

many of the cantus-firmus masses, turns out to be far more effective in performance than its often unassuming appearance on paper might suggest. In sound, Obrecht's use of the musical idiom of his time seems so inexhaustibly imaginative and inspired as to reduce the notorious tenor manipulations to virtual aesthetic irrelevance. The effect of all this on the modern image of Obrecht cannot be calculated as yet.

Over the past century, the music history of Obrecht's generation has usually tended to be construed in terms of the lives and oeuvres of the most important masters, or of the major genres and styles current at the time. However, one could with equal justification conceive that history as the complex of mentalities, sensibilities and attitudes towards music that prevailed in European society, and which conditioned the reception of composers' works. The trend in recent Obrecht research has been to incorporate more and more of the latter within the framework of the former – to the point where the very privileging of such categories as 'author', 'work', 'style' and 'genre' has begun to seem problematic in light of what we know about musical experience in the period itself. To contextualize Obrecht and his works is inevitably to acknowledge that musical meaning and value may have been context-dependent rather than immanent in the artwork itself. To give an example, if the four-voice *Salve regina* is a prayer to the Virgin, *Quis numerare queat* a sermon, *Mille quingentis* an epitaph and *Inter preclarissimas virtutes* a 'letter of application', then obviously it is problematic to appraise one work as intrinsically better or more successful than another without regard to its purpose or function. Each of these motets was conceived for a different audience – the Virgin, a congregation, posterity, an unknown music patron – and these differences are likely to have borne on Obrecht's choices of musical style and construction. As this example illustrates, then, evaluative comparisons – not only between works but also between composers such as Obrecht and Josquin – must take into account such qualifying distinctions as between, say, urban and courtly, humanist and scholastic, private and public, votive and communal, sacred and secular, Flemish and Italian, 1490s and 1510s. The trend in Renaissance music research over the last decade or so has been to do exactly this. Ultimately that trend may cause the dissolution of the received images for Obrecht and Josquin. But for now the potential gains in historical understanding seem to outweigh the losses.

3. Music: the early years.

One of the most significant developments in Obrecht studies over the last twenty years has been the discovery of new datings and *termini ante quem* for several of the composer's works. This has involved some unexpected surprises, notably in the case of *Missa 'Fortuna desperata'*. This work had always been thought to be among Obrecht's latest works, and is indeed remarkable for the breathtaking novelty of its conception (see example). Watermark evidence reveals that this piece must have circulated in Germany as early as 1489–93, along with several other masses that are closely related to it in style: *Rose playsante*, *Je ne demande* and the anonymous *N'aray-je jamais*. These masses, and several others like them, represent the core of Obrecht's mass oeuvre, and share a contrapuntal idiom that was identified as the 'mature style' by Wegman (1994). Watermark evidence confirms that this style must have been fully developed by the early 1490s, around the midpoint of Obrecht's professional career. It does not appear to have undergone significant changes until the very last years of his life. There are no direct models for the style in the works of other composers, nor does it seem to be anticipated in those Obrecht masses that can be securely dated in the late 1480s (*De Sancto Donatiano*, *De Sancto Martino* and *Salve diva parens*). As far as the masses are concerned, it is the most distinctively Obrechtian style, and the one for which he became internationally famous in the 1490s. It can be seen in some of the motets as well, most clearly in *Inter preclarissimas virtutes*.

That Obrecht's mature style should have developed, and been brought to perfection in masses like *Fortuna desperata* and *Rose playsante*, at such an early stage in his career is indeed a remarkable discovery. It is one of two recent developments which have prompted a major reassessment of Obrecht's historical position vis-à-

vis Josquin – the other being the discovery that Josquin's career started much later than previously thought, in the late 1470s rather than the late 1450s. Several significant Josquin pieces that had been dated before about 1480 to accommodate the two decades he was believed to be active in Milan (1459–79) must now be assumed to be much later. With few exceptions, their copying dates and *termini ante quem* do not predate the mid-1490s, that is, at least half a decade after Obrecht's mature masses were already circulating in eastern Germany. In view of this, the emergence of Obrecht's mature style in these masses, which include such masterpieces as *Fortuna desperata*, *Rose playsante*, *Malheur me bat* and *Libenter gloriabor*, must be regarded as one of the most important developments in the music history of the 1480s and 1490s.

Quite how Obrecht arrived at his mature style is hard to determine, since so few of his remaining works can be dated on external grounds. It is possible to suggest datings based on internal, stylistic evidence, but these are inevitably open to the danger of circularity: although our perception of Obrecht's compositional development should ideally be based on a secure chronology of his works, we may never be able to arrive at a chronology without some hypothetical idea of how he developed as a composer. Then there is the additional problem (which may affect the motets more than the masses) that Obrecht's stylistic choices at any point may have been dictated by context and function rather than by purely compositional considerations. Despite these caveats, however, there are several works for which it can be plausibly suggested that they must be early – mainly because they rely on compositional conventions that were current in the 1470s and disappeared in the next decade. A good example is the *Missa 'Petrus apostolus'*. Despite the late date of its main source, a German print of 1539, the style of this setting is a faithful imitation of Busnoys' masses *L'homme armé* and *O crux lignum triumphale* (both of which began to circulate in the 1470s). Like these latter works, its contrapuntal idiom is exceedingly smooth and polished, yet has a quality of urgency and drive that derives from the persistent tendency (so typical of Busnoys) to create and resolve suspended dissonances between pairs of voices in quasi-cadential fashion. (This quality had been notably absent in Ockeghem's masses from the 1460s and 1470s, such as *De plus en plus* or *Ecce ancilla Domini*, whose dense layers of sound typically moved at glacial pace.) Given the likelihood that Obrecht was personally acquainted with Busnoys by the late 1460s, it stands to reason that he would have modelled his first efforts after the masses for which the latter had become most famous. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that the *Missa 'Petrus apostolus'* might have been composed at a later date, though in that case it would have represented a consciously historicizing gesture, or at least an attempt to emulate an identifiable older style.

This latter possibility must be assumed in the case of another early mass, *De Sancto Donatiano*, which was written for a Bruges endowment in 1487. The style of this work is a faithful imitation of Ockeghem's *Missa 'Ecce ancilla Domini'* (1470s) and in fact the music makes several explicit allusions to that work. Significantly, Obrecht made no effort to transform Ockeghem's style or to assimilate it to his own idiom. The result is a setting that, had it survived anonymously, might well have been mistaken for a work by the older composer – in the same way that the *Missa 'Petrus apostolus'* is a stylistic twin of Busnoys' *Missa 'O crux lignum'*. It seems significant that Obrecht, at the beginning of his career, should have been concerned to pay musical tributes of this kind. In the case of the *Missa de Sancto Donatiano*, however, the gesture is likely to reflect not so much a sense of artistic loyalty arising from personal acquaintance (as was probably true in the case of Busnoys), but rather an awareness of the historical status of past masterpieces – a status that Obrecht's emulation helped solidify. Another work that seems to pay tribute to Ockeghem is the *Missa de Sancto Martino*, written at Bruges in 1486: the first Kyrie quotes the head-motif of the latter's *Missa 'Mi-mi'*. However, one can still discern the influence of Busnoys as well: just as in the *Missa 'Petrus apostolus'* Obrecht tended to state and restate his cantus firmi in schematic fashion, occasionally by means of mensural transformation.

The clues provided by these three datable masses may allow us to suggest early dates for several other settings. The *Missa 'Sicut spina rosam'* makes even more sustained allusions to Ockeghem's *Missa 'Mi-mi'* than *De Sancto Martino*: the head-motif of the older mass is once again quoted in the first Kyrie, and the bass of the Kyrie is quoted literally in the Agnus Dei of Obrecht's setting. *Sicut spina rosam* has several other features in common with *De Sancto Martino*, most notably the tendency to incorporate extended literal quotations of the cantus firmus in the introductory duos of individual movements. This tendency can be observed already in the *Missa 'Petrus apostolus'*, but it is expanded here to a degree unprecedented in Obrecht's (or indeed any other composer's) oeuvre. Similar examples can be found in the masses *Beata viscera*, *O lumen ecclesie* and *Ave regina celorum*, all of which are likely to date from the 1480s.

If any trend can be witnessed in these early works, it is one towards increasing expansiveness – the very opposite of the measured concision of the later, mature masses. The sense of urgency and drive that was characteristic of Busnoys' idiom seems to have disappeared soon after the *Missa 'Petrus apostolus'*, giving way to a sense of tranquillity and poise more typical of Ockeghem's cantus-firmus masses. Some Busnoys-inspired devices still retain a token presence, particularly the literal imitation or restatement of cantus-firmus material in different voice-parts (migration is especially prominent in *O lumen ecclesie* and *Sicut spina rosam*), but Obrecht tended to expand the scale on which these are applied – to the point where the devices are more easily detected on paper than heard in performance. The extreme in this regard is the *Missa 'Sicut spina rosam'*, a sombre, dense piece in the style of Ockeghem, organized by extended migrations and imitations of the cantus firmus on various hierarchical levels.

A similarly expansive composition, but one in which the influence of Busnoys' contrapuntal idiom can be discerned much more clearly, is the six-part *Salve regina*, a work of awesome power and depth. One might well hesitate to date a setting for six voices in the mid-1480s, yet there is little else about this work to justify such hesitation. The stylistic trend in the late 1480s and 1490s (exemplified by Obrecht's mature masses) was to be towards leaner, more lightly-textured polyphony. As if to make up for the loss of rich vocal sonority, composers increasingly invested their works with a purposeful compositional logic – witness, for instance, the more sensitive treatment of openings and endings, the increasing reliance on motivic imitation, and the careful positioning and handling of climactic points in the course of the musical argument. None of this can be observed as yet in the six-part *Salve regina*. By later standards this work seems almost self-indulgent in the degree to which it revels in slowly drifting layers of consonant sonority – 'more of the keenest sweetness', as Cortese was to put it, 'than would have sufficed to please the ear'. More than any other work in Obrecht's oeuvre, the *Salve regina* exemplifies an older aesthetic that might be called the 'wall of sound'. (This aesthetic was not abandoned in England, as one can tell from the motets in the Eton Choirbook. On the continent, the predilection for unrelentingly dense counterpoint was to return again after the 1510s, especially in the works of Gombert and Willaert. Significantly, the German theorist Hermann Finck, writing in praise of Gombert in 1556, described Josquin's music as 'thinner' (*nudior*) than modern taste approved, whereas Gombert 'avoids pauses, and his work is rich with full harmonies and imitative counterpoint'.)

The change towards the newer aesthetic can be observed in several motets by Obrecht that are likely to date from the later 1480s. If one considers, for instance, *Factor orbis* or *Salve crux*, one is struck immediately by the degree to which Obrecht has endowed the extended passages in reduced scoring with significant compositional interest of their own. It is true that one can still hear those passages as preludes or interludes between the cantus-firmus based stretches in full scoring. Yet while the latter are admittedly magnificent examples of sonorous part-writing, and show Obrecht at his best, they are typically less expansive, and dissolve so smoothly into the passages in reduced scoring as to discourage the impression that they constitute the core of the musical argument. From here one can see the

direct path to still later tenor motets such as *Laudemus nunc Dominum*, *Mater patris* and *O preciosissime sanguis*, none of which is likely to predate the 1490s.

By the late 1480s, when Italian musical sources had barely begun to register the presence of Josquin (aside from a handful of songs only his *Ave Maria … virgo serena*, *Domine non secundum* and the four-part *Salve regina*), Obrecht had a justifiable claim to being the most versatile and prolific composer in Europe. As far as the masses are concerned, the masterpiece of these years was *Salve diva parens*, a virtuoso display piece of breathtaking complexity and contrapuntal resourcefulness. This setting is the nearest Obrecht ever came to writing a freely-composed mass: although one can recognize passing resemblances between the tenors of the various movements, if these reflect a pre-existing melody it was clearly ornamented to such a degree as to obscure it beyond ready identification. The *Missa 'Salve diva parens'* seems to have found its way to Italian sources by 1487; its early transmission to the peninsula may do much to explain the invitation to the composer extended by Duke Ercole d'Este later that year. There is a string of other masses that can be or have been dated in the late 1480s with varying degrees of plausibility: *Adieu mes amours*, *Ave regina celorum*, *De Sancto Johanne Baptista*, *Caput*, *L'homme armé*, to mention only a few. One is not surprised to learn from the fabric accounts of St Donatian that the rate at which masses were copied in the choirbooks increased sharply after Obrecht's appointment in 1485 and declined almost as sharply after his departure in 1491. It is true that the accounts seldom specify titles or composers, and hence not every mass was necessarily composed by Obrecht. Still, even if one allows for possible contributions by other composers, the sheer quantity of mass cycles copied in 1485–91, 22 (of which eight were specifically designated as 'new'), suggests the likelihood that these years were among the most prolific in Obrecht's career.

Several motets may be associated with this period as well. *Mille quingentis*, the musical prayer commemorating Willem Obrecht, is likely to date from 1489 or shortly thereafter, since it refers to the year of Willem's death, 1488, in the past tense. It is a tenor motet in the old style, based on a threefold statement of the Introit for the Requiem mass, *Requiem eternam*, identically notated though rhythmically varied by means of mensuration changes. Just as in Josquin's later *Nymphes des bois* (commemorating Ockeghem), the plainchant has been transposed down a step, to accommodate the plaintive Phrygian modality of the setting. The contrapuntal idiom of the Corpus Christi motet *Discubuit Jesus* is reminiscent of *Mille quingentis* (compare, for example, bars 15–16 of the former with bars 20–21 of the latter, the frequent octave leaps in the top part, as well as the almost mannered use of suspensions in dotted rhythm), though the treatment of the plainchant itself is quite different: it is freely elaborated in the various voices and, with the exception of the first 14 bars, there is no literal imitation or migration of cantus-firmus material anywhere in this piece. (Similar freedom of treatment is evident in the three-part settings of *Salve regina* and *Alma redemptoris mater*.) If *Discubuit Jesus* was written in the 1480s, as seems likely, its apparent stylistic relationship to *Mille quingentis* underlines an important point: given the variety of functions and occasions for which Obrecht wrote his motets, it is hard to generalize about his stylistic profile in these works. For that reason it may often be more useful to evaluate his motets in terms of their probable ritual or devotional function and context rather than their position in a hypothetical compositional development. Many motets might equally well have been written for Bergen op Zoom, Cambrai or Bruges, and undoubtedly entered the repertory in all these places during the 1480s: the three-part and four-part *Salve regina* settings, *Ave regina celorum* (one of several late 15th-century motets based on the famous setting by Walter Frye), and the four-part Marian prayer *Cuius sacrata viscera*. The three-part *Salve regina* is written in an unrelentingly exuberant style reminiscent of some of Obrecht's songs (especially *Tandernaken*, with which it shares the opening bar).

There is a strong case, on the other hand, for suggesting that other motets originated specifically in Bruges. *Omnis spiritus*, a cento of various prayers and acclamations, includes a supplication 'for our

king'. For the Brabant towns of Antwerp and Bergen op Zoom this might have implied a date in the period 1486–93, when Maximilian I was King of the Romans, but it would seem to point more plausibly to Cambrai or Bruges, both of which were under French royal rule. The musical style is unambitious, yet it was undoubtedly dictated by the nature of a specific occasion, probably a public procession of thanksgiving. The contrapuntal idiom of the St Basil motet *O beate Basili/O beate Pater* frequently reminds one of *Missa de Sancto Donatiano*, with which it shares a plainchant melody *O beate pater Basili* (texted *O beate pater Donatiane* in the mass). The two inner voices of the first part elaborate this melody in strict canon (a procedure found already in the first section of the six-part *Salve regina*), whereas the outer voices carry the text of the Magnificat antiphon *O beate Basili*. Reinhard Strohm has convincingly associated this piece with the veneration of St Basil in Bruges; its style seems consistent with a date in the late 1480s. The Holy Blood motet *O preciosissime sanguis* must likewise originate from Bruges, where it would almost certainly have been written for the Basilica of the Holy Blood, or perhaps for the annual Holy Blood procession on 3 May. However, this is clearly a later work: although based on a plainchant cantus firmus (stated three times in long note-values in the tenor), the vigorous idiom characteristic of the mature style, the prominence of chordal, declamatory passages, as well as the mensural layout (C throughout, with no opening section in perfect tempus), suggest a date in Obrecht's second Bruges period, 1498–1500.

The overall picture, then, is one of stylistic variety. As choirmaster in Bruges and other towns in the southern Netherlands, Obrecht was a composer who responded sensitively to what the nature of the occasion required. For this reason, the style of his Middle-Dutch songs may point to a specific type of occasion as well. Most of them are lively, animated pieces in a style that is almost reminiscent of the later Parisian chanson: frequent homophonic declamatory passages, modest use of imitation, and a generally simple harmonic style with regular cadences apparently articulating the phrase structure of the text. Although few of these pieces survive with any text beyond the incipit (and several may well have been conceived for instruments), the lighthearted nature of the opening words confirms that we may be in the realm of popular urban entertainment: 'When all the world lives in joy', 'The hail and the cold snow', 'I wear my cap awry', 'I heard the bells toll', 'Let yourself be pleased, dear John', 'Where are you, John? Who is calling us?' and others. Such pieces could well have been written for the morality plays that the singers of St Donatian were permitted to stage every year. Other songs strike a more serious note. *Lacen adieu* ('Alas, farewell, sweet company') seems to have circulated in Germany by the late 1470s, and may well be the earliest surviving work by Obrecht. The varied repetition of bars 13–35 in bars 37–55 may reflect the structure of the original poem, which has not come down to us. Like *Moet my lacen* and probably *Tmeiskin was jonck*, it seems to reflect the more selfconsciously serious environment of the chambers of rhetoric which flourished in Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp and other towns in the southern Netherlands. Still other secular pieces may have been conceived as *Spielmusik* for city minstrels, as Strohm has suggested, though in many cases we cannot tell whether that conception would have been authorial or scribal. Several of Obrecht's textless pieces could easily have been lifted from otherwise lost cantus-firmus Masses, where they might have originated as the Christe, Pleni, Benedictus, or second Agnus Dei. (The 'Qui cum patre' of the *Missa 'Salve diva parens'* circulated for decades as such a work.) No such explanation can be advanced for *Nec michi nec tibi*, however, which is the nearest in Obrecht's oeuvre to a work that seems inherently instrumental in idiom.

4. Music: the mature style.

The advent of the mature style, in masses composed around 1490 or shortly before, represents the central turning-point in Obrecht's career. It is at this point that he fundamentally reconceived the parameters of his style, developing what can only be described as a new artistic vision (typified in ex.1 by the first Kyrie of the *Missa 'Fortuna desperata'*). The older aesthetic of the 'wall of sound' disappears completely: cantus-

firmus based passages in full scoring tend to move at varying rates of rhythmic and harmonic activity, ranging from drawn-out homophonic passages, usually at key phrases of the mass text, to stretches of almost frenzied contrapuntal activity. The allocation of these different passages typically reflects a purposeful musical design – though one, significantly, that is seldom dictated by the shape of the predetermined cantus firmus, and indeed may encompass long stretches in which the tenor is not heard at all. Instead of a conventional alternation between sharply contrasted passages in full and reduced scoring, standing side by side as monolithic stretches of relatively undifferentiated counterpoint, Obrecht now tended to treat the beginning or ending of a tenor statement as one of several steps in a continuing musical development. To achieve a cumulative effect, for example, he might pre-empt the first phrase of the cantus firmus in a series of imitations, of which the tenor entry then constitutes the concluding statement (see, for instance, ex.1, bars 1–17). Typically, however, the tenor entry is not treated as the culmination of such a development, as it usually was in the previous generation: that point now tends to be deferred until later in the cantus-firmus statement (ex.1, bars 29–31), sometimes even over a tenor passage that may not obviously invite it. It might be too much to say that Obrecht had become wholly indifferent to the structure of the cantus firmus, but he does seem to have sought the challenge of creating musical designs which, although accommodating the structural voice-part, owed little or nothing to its predetermined shape and layout.

As if to step up that challenge (or perhaps to display his sheer resourcefulness), Obrecht now preferred to treat pre-existing melodies in the most rigidly schematic fashion – employing techniques of mensural transformation, augmentation, inversion, retrograde, sampling and segmentation, and thereby forcing himself to operate within the constraints of the utterly arbitrary end results. This new preference represents a significant break from his earlier practices. After the *Missa 'Petrus apostolus'* Obrecht had moved away from schematic procedures, prominently applying free elaboration in masses such as *Beata viscera*, *Sicut spina rosam*, *De Sancto Donatiano*, *Salve diva parens*, and (if it is early) *Adieu mes amours*. Now, however, the procedures returned, though with the musical stakes greatly increased. To create a 'wall of sound' around a predetermined cantus firmus (as in the masses *Petrus apostolus* or *De Sancto Martino*) would have posed no particular challenge to a composer of Obrecht's skill. (In his earliest works, the principal artistic challenge for him had been to maximize the variety of consonant sonority within an unchanging polyphonic texture.) To invent a purposeful and coherent musical design, on the other hand, was a task to which few composers beside himself would have been equal. Obrecht was not to be outdone in this regard until the publication of Josquin's *Missa 'Hercules dux Ferrarie'* in 1505. By then, he himself had all but completed the corpus of his mature masses, which included such cycles as *Plurimorum carminum* I and II, *De tous biens playne*, *Fors seulement*, *Grecorum*, *Pfauenschwanz* and *Je ne demande*, and which had culminated in such masterpieces as *Fortuna desperata*, *Libenter gloriabor*, *Malheur me bat* and *Rose playsante*.

Although there are important differences between these works, their common stylistic profile can be recognized by a number of distinguishing traits: (1) the markedly increased emphasis on cadences, often effected by restatements of the same cadence in regular succession (ex.1, bars 1–13), or, at climactic points, by stretching out a cadential progression over a longer passage (bars 15–17 and 28–31); (2) the articulation of the musical discourse in self-contained phrase units, arranged in chains and often linked through literal restatements of the same material (bars 1–17 and 31–49); (3) the use of textural changes and cadences to underscore that articulation; (4) the almost unrelentingly exuberant melodic style, in which individual lines keep outlining triadic figures with formulaic rhythmic patterns, and frequently initiate motivic sequences or repetitions; (5) the sensitivity to tonal relationships across larger formal periods.

However, the mature style is more than the sum of its distinguishing traits. The key-word is *design*, and the traits themselves acquire their significance only in the context of Obrecht's new

sense of formal musical design. He has decisively moved away from the mid-century aesthetic in which (to exaggerate slightly) the sonority of each moment had to speak for itself, and carried no implications beyond the inevitability of its having to give way to the next sonority. (If formal expectations played any role at all in that aesthetic, they usually had to do with one of three things: the periodic shifts between full and reduced scoring, the structure of the text, or such short-term organizational devices as imitation and sequence.) In Obrecht's mature style, on the other hand, it is the position of each moment within an overarching musical design that determines how it will be treated, and (one assumes) how listeners were encouraged to hear it. Thus, what was important about the ending of a piece is not that it marked the moment at which the performance discontinues, but rather that it established closure in terms of the work as a whole. That is why the final cadences of individual movements tend to receive extraordinary emphasis in Obrecht's mature masses, and in some cases get a separate coda section all to themselves. (This latter tendency can be observed already in the Gloria and Credo of the *Missa 'Ave regina celorum'*.) Similar sensitivity is apparent in the opening sections, however, which Obrecht was likewise careful to treat in a fashion appropriate to the overall compositional design (as in ex.1, bars 1–17).

The historical and musical significance of all this could hardly be overestimated. Apart from anything else, Obrecht's mature style embodied a fundamentally new conception of the nature of the musical work. To appreciate this, it may be useful to make a comparison with mid-century styles of composition in the cantus-firmus mass, as exemplified, for instance, by the influential English *Caput* mass. Compositions that dwell on kaleidoscopic successions of consonant sonorities do not encourage being construed as works (though modern analysis habitually attempts to do so), but rather as performative events. In performance their style might not have been distinguishable in many cases from that of polyphonic improvisations – and the latter, of course, are by definition not works. Listeners did not seek to discern 'the composer's voice', but rather heard and valued the actual voices of singers – and it is these, invariably, to which they drew attention in their eyewitness reports, to the virtual exclusion of works and authors' names. Obrecht's mature masses, on the other hand, seek to communicate at every turn their status as works by making transparently audible the compositional logic devised by the author. Listeners were thus encouraged to discern that logic 'beyond' the consonant sonorities in whose particular arrangement it is expressed.

In this sense the mature masses could be said to invite 'understanding' on the part of their listeners – a novel concept first articulated by Tinctoris in his *Complexus effectuum musices* (early 1480s):For the more one has attained perfection in [music], the more one is delighted by it, since one apprehends its nature both inwardly and outwardly: inwardly through the intellective faculty, through which one understands proper composition and performance, and outwardly through the auditive power, through which one perceives the sweetness of consonances. As this comment implies, there was nothing to be 'understood' about consonant sonority *per se* – except (for those who had read Boethius) its basis in arithmetical proportion, though even this revealed God's creative purpose rather than that of any human composer. Obrecht's mature style, on the other hand, foregrounded the composer's creative purpose by shifting the aesthetic focus onto intelligible compositional design. In this design one might discern the composer's voice resounding, as it were, through the singers' voices. And it was this design that would now come to be regarded as the defining dimension of the musical work *qua* work, and the touchstone of its intrinsic quality – reducing consonant sonority to a mere surface quality, satisfying only to the undiscriminating ears of inexperienced listeners. Once again the underlying ideology had already been articulated by Tinctoris in his *Complexus effectuum musices*: 'However, music brings less joy to those who perceive in it nothing but sound, and who indeed are delighted only through the outer sense'. In Obrecht's mature masses, too, consonant sonority is no longer its own justification: it can be too much of a good thing, and hence it must be handled with discretion, lest it might distract from

the musical argument. The masses are notably leaner and thinner-textured than previous settings (in ex.1, for instance, only a third of the section is fully scored), and the individual lines tend to be differentiated more sharply – making an early work like the six-part *Salve regina* seem almost excessively luxurious by comparison. (It was undoubtedly a piece of the latter kind that Cortese had in mind when he expressed reservations about Obrecht's motet style.)

The point here is not that Obrecht was somehow implementing a programme for stylistic renewal advanced by Tinctoris, but rather that both were responding in different ways to fundamental changes in aesthetic sensibility affecting European musical culture at large. The conceptualization of the musical work as object (*res facta*) and the increasing valuation of musical authorship, involving notions of personal style, authorial intention and creative freedom, are phenomena that can be traced back to the 1470s if not earlier. Moreover, the mature style was not without precedents in either Obrecht's own works or those of others. Even an older figure like Ockeghem – the prime representative of the 'wall of sound' aesthetic in the 1460s and 1470s – experimented with leaner textures and a more purposeful sense of musical design in his late *Missa 'Au travail suis'*. And the concern with musical closure had already been anticipated in the well-known phenomenon of the 'drive to the cadence': as illustrated, for example, by Ockeghem's *Missa 'Ecce ancilla Domini'* (and by Obrecht's emulation of that work, the mass *De Sancto Donatiano*), this was the stepping up of rhythmic and melodic energy before its release in the final cadence. Early sensitivity about musical closure is suggested also by a closely related device: the 'sounding out' of individual voice-parts within the final sonority (as, for example, in the Naples *L'homme armé* masses), as if to mitigate the harsh abruptness of the cadence. These two devices, the drive to the cadence and the sounding out of voice-parts, were typical of the Ockeghem-Busnoys generation and disappeared gradually thereafter. (Spectacular late examples can still be found in Obrecht's masses *Caput* and *L'homme armé*, and some works by Isaac.)

However, not even these precedents can obscure the fact that Obrecht's contribution in the years around 1490 represented a fundamentally new artistic vision, and was unparalleled in its originality. This is not to imply a negative view of the older aesthetic, which we have typified here, for the sake of comparison, in terms of the idea of the 'wall of sound'. The point is that the very paradigms of musical composition, perception and judgement changed profoundly during the 1470s and 1480s, rendering any direct comparison across this major shift problematic. In terms of the new aesthetic sensibilities, however, Obrecht's mature style represented a strikingly imaginative response. For that reason it must count as one of the most significant developments in the history of late-15th-century musical style.

5. Later compositions.

The picture of stylistic consistency and homogeneity presented by the mature style gives way to one of greater diversity in the later motets. Among these, the four-part *Inter preclarissimas virtutes* seems to offer the closest parallel to the mature masses. It is based on a chant fragment (*Estote fortes in bello*, from the Common of Apostles and Evangelists) which is notated and treated exactly as in such segmentation masses as *Je ne demande*, *Rose playsante* or *Malheur me bat*: five successive statements in each of the first two sections, sixfold augmentation in the first statements followed by successive reduction until the notes have the same durations as the other voices. *Inter preclarissimas virtutes* was conceived a musical 'letter of application' addressed to an unnamed ecclesiastic, presumably a pope, evidently with a view to securing his patronage.

The five-part *Laudemus nunc Dominum*, written for the dedication of a church, must have existed by 1496, when it was singled out for its prominent declamatory writing by the theorist Johannes Herbenus of Maastricht. It is a characteristically joyful and exuberant work which, although based on a conventional scaffold tenor, sounds remarkably modern in its regular alternation between rapid text delivery in the homophonic declamations, and the breathtaking energy of the more contrapuntally involved passages. The cantus

firmus drops in and out with little apparent effect on the musical argument as a whole. The five-part *Mater patris* is very similar in musical conception. Although one of its voices is no longer extant, the work is similarly based on a cantus firmus in long note-values, around which the other parts enunciate the text of the Marian hymn *Mater patris* with unrelenting energy and drive. Like many later works by Obrecht (including *Inter preclarissimas virtutes* and several of the mature masses) this piece is conceived in C almost throughout, with no opening section in perfect tempus as had been customary up to the 1490s. The same is true of *O preciosissime sanguis*, which provides perhaps the best illustration of Obrecht's mature tendency to create musical designs that owe little or nothing to the structure of the cantus firmus: the two plainchant melodies in the tenor pursue their predetermined course within a musical context that seems to follow a logic entirely of its own.

If the four-part *Salve sancta facies/Homo quidam* was composed for an endowment in Bruges, as Strohm has suggested, it must surely date from Obrecht's second period of activity there in 1498–1500. Just as in the *Missa 'Malheur me bat'*, which existed by 1497, the pre-existing melody (the responsory *Homo quidam* for Corpus Christi) is stated in the top voice. The contrapuntal context in which it is embedded is strikingly similar to that in the mass. (Compare, for instance, bars 142–5 of the Credo with bars 22–5 of the motet.) The setting begins with a point of imitation that apparently provided the inspiration for the almost identical opening of Josquin's *Inviolata, integra et casta es* (1510s), which in turn was to be imitated by several other composers.

New stylistic directions are apparent in two other late motets by Obrecht, both printed by Petrucci in 1505. The four-part *Quis numerare queat* is conceived as a musical sermon (addressed to 'you Frenchmen' in the most authoritative source), and was evidently written for a service of thanksgiving after the cessation of war – possibly the withdrawal of an invader or the ending of a civil war. The poem was set to music also by the French court composer Loyset Compère, who turned it into a conventional tenor motet based on a canonically treated cantus firmus. Obrecht's setting, on the other hand, was freely composed, and cast in a style that can only be described as rhetorical. Syntactical units of the text are articulated by firm cadences or half-cadences, simultaneous rests or changes of musical procedure. Key phrases are projected by homophonic, declamatory writing or underlined by striking musical gestures: imitations, triple rhythms and changes in texture. The occasion for the piece may have been the Peace of Etaples (November 1492), which ended a shortlived invasion into France by Henry VII of England. Obrecht is known to have travelled through France in 1492.

The four-part *Laudes Christo redemptori*, a freely-composed setting of the text of a sequence for Easter, could well be among Obrecht's latest works. The motet is almost prophetic in its consistent application of the technique of pervading imitation, with individual points of imitation articulating phrases of the text. Highly significant (and in Obrecht's oeuvre unique) is the wider spacing of the voice-parts, and the tendency to avoid crossings between them. The motet was apparently conceived in the so-called *a voce piena* texture, in which each of the voices occupies a distinct modal range, which was to become universal in the 16th century.

As this brief survey suggests, Obrecht seems to have shifted the focus of his creative ambitions in later years to the motet. It was in this genre that he developed new ideas and approaches, and partook in later trends. (It is perhaps significant that Cortese was to single out Obrecht as one of the major motet composers of his time, a view that has often puzzled modern observers.) In the masses, on the other hand, it would appear that the composer had made his mark by the early 1490s, and was content thereafter to continue operating within the framework of the mature style. The only major exception may have been the *Missa 'Sub tuum presidium'*, a work of immense structural complexity, apparently written for the feast of the Assumption. It is based on a recurring plainchant cantus firmus, laid out in the top voice with almost uncompromising strictness, along which other plainchants are added in the course of the setting, gradually thickening the initial three-part texture

until the culmination in the seven-part Agnus Dei. As Marcus van Crevel discovered several decades ago, Obrecht introduced two minor modifications into the otherwise rigid cantus-firmus groundplan, thereby fixing the overall length of the work at exactly 888 semibreves (with Kyrie and Gloria taking up 333 semibreves, and Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei 555).

If any masses could be said to date from Obrecht's final years, they are likely to include such settings as *Si dedero*, *Cela sans plus* and especially *Maria zart*. While they still exemplify Obrecht's predilection for scaffold tenors, his musical engagement with pre-existing models now extended far beyond questions of cantus-firmus treatment and layout alone. In all three settings, material from the models infuses the other voices to such a degree (whether freely elaborated or quoted literally) that one is almost tempted to speak of parody in the cases of *Si dedero* and *Cela sans plus*. To the extent that Obrecht now departed from the idiom of the mature style, he seems to have done so mainly in response to the style of the pre-existing models. *Maria zart* is a special case in this regard, since the model, a German devotional song, was monophonic. The mass is likely to date from 1503 or 1504, when the composer is known to have passed through the very region where the devotional song *Maria zart* originated, the Tyrol, and where several other settings of the melody, including an anonymous three-part mass, turn up in the 1500s. The immoderate length of the work (it takes up more than an hour in modern performance) is dictated by the cantus-firmus layout, arranged by means of Obrecht's favourite device of segmentation. Contrary to his mature masses, however, the composer made no attempt to compose large-scale formal designs around the tenor, for instance by breaking up the counterpoint in self-contained phrase units or by introducing extended literal imitations and migrations. While the contrapuntal voices still take little notice of the presence or absence of the cantus firmus, they do so with no other apparent aim than that of extending melodic lines, or motivic imitations and sequences, almost indefinitely. In one sense this brings him closer to the 'wall of sound' aesthetic of earlier years – save that the voice-parts do not actually combine to create a wall so much as engage in a ceaseless interplay of sharply individualized melodic lines. A curious work, with no obvious precedent or later influence, it leaves one with the impression, as do most of his other late works, that Obrecht still had a great deal to offer when he died in his late 40s.

6. Conclusion.

In 1980 it was still possible for Edgar Sparks to observe that Obrecht's 'influence on later music was slight' (*Grove6*). This view is premissed on several assumptions that can no longer be sustained without qualification. One of these was that Obrecht was a member of 'the Josquin generation', and consequently that the 'later music' in which his influence should supposedly be apparent must include the works of Gombert, Willaert and Clemens non Papa. However, it is a simple matter of fact that Obrecht died in 1505, 16 years before Josquin, and that more than half of Josquin's oeuvre does not actually begin to turn up in sources surviving today until after that date. Another assumption was that Josquin's career began in 1459, and hence that several of his most significant works might have been written as early as the 1460s. However, it has now been established beyond question that no document before the mid-1470s mentions Josquin as a professional musician (or indeed at all). Moreover, less than a fourth of Josquin's works actually survive in sources copied before about 1500. The evidence of the sources thus confirms what is already apparent from other evidence, especially the virtual absence before 1500 of contemporary comments mentioning Josquin as a composer of any eminence. Simply put, his breakthrough as a composer is likely to have come only in the very last years of the century, about 10 years after Obrecht's breakthrough in the late 1480s. And the corollary is inevitable: that the 'later music' in which Obrecht's influence could have been apparent must include about half of Josquin's oeuvre even if the influence was only posthumous.

There is in fact a compelling case for suggesting that Obrecht was a major influence on Josquin. The style of the *Missa 'Hercules dux Ferrarie'*, surely not written before the early years

of the 16th century, would have been inconceivable without the precedent of Obrecht's mature masses. Josquin borrowed and transformed the fundamental conception of the mature style, as outlined above, in a setting whose artistic merit is not diminished by its debt to Obrecht. Likewise, one can still discern in the opening of a late motet such as *Benedicta es* (whose transmission begins in the late 1510s, and which is likely to date from that decade) the influence of very similar openings in the masses *Fortuna desperata* (see ex.1) and *Libenter gloriabor*. Of course, the possibility of Obrecht's influence on Josquin can only be a working hypothesis, one that cannot be fully tested until several major problems of chronology and authenticity in Josquin's oeuvre have been resolved. For now it has the merit of being consistent with the evidence, despite the obvious conflict it poses to the long-held assumption that Josquin should be credited with every major innovation that occurred during his lifetime. On the other hand, it is unlikely that we shall ever be able to appreciate the exact nature and scope of Josquin's contribution until we have identified the influences he underwent.

No such obstacles exist in Obrecht scholarship. His debts to Busnoys and Ockeghem are transparently audible in his early works, and the *Missa 'Adieu mes amours'* may well reflect a similar debt to Weerbecke and Josquin. It is precisely because of these well-established influences that we may expect to move towards a better appreciation of Obrecht's own voice – not only in these early compositions, but especially in his mature and late works, which did so much to raise the cultural prominence of 'the composer's voice' in 15th-century music.

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