



Emblem of a Musical Renaissance? Reassessing Josquin Des Prez's *Miserere mei, Deus*

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'The basic conflict between "evolutionism" and "revivalism" has remained unsettled. It assumes a special significance in the field of music' (Strohm 347).

The period from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century marked a pivotal transformation in philosophical, cultural and artistic thought. Originating in Italy before disseminating throughout Europe, the Renaissance ignited a spirit of inquiry, creativity and exploration that challenged the rigid structures of medieval thinking. In his book, *In Renaissance and Revolution: The Remaking of European Thought*, Joseph Mazzeo suggests that the Renaissance emerged as a reaction against the medieval focus on religious dogma, emphasising the ideals of humanism and the potential of the individual (Mazzeo 1965). However, the definition of a musical Renaissance remains a topic of debate, as discussed by Reinhard Strohm in Philippe Vendrix's *Music and the Renaissance*, which distinguishes between musical 'evolution' and musical 'rebirth' (Strohm 2001). Nonetheless, a notable shift towards humanism, innovation, structural unity and individualism characterises the period. Josquin Des Prez (ca.1440-1521), otherwise referred to as a 'historical progenitor' by Christopher Ruth in *Hymns and Hymnody: Historical and Theological Introductions*, was a Franco-Flemish composer (Ruth 2019). He wrote both sacred and secular compositions that not only embodied Renaissance ideals but also laid the groundwork for the future of polyphonic music in early music history. Through the lens of Josquin's 'Miserere mei, Deus' (1503), its innovative features: text expression, rhetoric devices, humanism, and harmonic innovation, offer a glimpse into the complexities and ambiguities that are emblematic of the musical Renaissance.

The period between the 'medieval gothic and modern baroque' is a turning point in music history that questions the thought behind medieval motets (Leichtentritt 1915). With the rise of the Christian Church as a dominant institution emerging in the thirteenth century, medieval motets and masses were composed to accompany the liturgy and were thus 'formally and rhythmically fitted to ready-made patterns' (Lowinsky 1954). A defining pattern was the employment of the *cantus firmus*, in which motets were anchored in a

continuous melody in the tenor voice, often borrowed from Gregorian chant, and ritualised in medieval motets. The Renaissance can be seen as an ‘emancipation’ from this ritual, implicating a rebirth of musical thought as a key stylistic shift with the adoption of innovative compositional techniques (Lowinsky 1954). Josquin’s ‘Miserere mei, Deus’ exemplifies this shift; based on Psalm 50 (in Septuagint numbering), which is an ‘opening cry for mercy’, Josquin alters the text by using the words ‘Miserere mei, Deus’ as an ostinato after each verse (Brothers 2008). The musicologist Patrick Macey highlights that this use of repetition emancipates from the ritualistic constraints of the *cantus firmus*, and instead utilises it as a symbol to foreshadow the text and enhance its meaning as it is ‘thoroughly drawn into the texture of the other voices’ (Macey 1985). However, it could be argued that the ostinato still creates a clear and recognisable framework, akin to a *cantus firmus*, and thus could disagree with the notion of ‘musical expression free from all shackles’ (Lowinsky 1954). Nevertheless, Josquin does not strictly adhere to the same liturgical function of a *cantus firmus*, as he instead emphasises the emotional weight of the penitential nature of Psalm 50, which evokes the persistent, pleading nature of the prayer. It further creates a sense of constancy and solemnity, as if the plea for mercy is a heartbeat of the motet. The use of said ostinato, repeated twenty-one times, creates a verse-refrain structure that deviates from the standard Psalm text and could be interpreted as a paraphrase of the chant, which ‘would have been considered sacrilege in earlier eras’ (Ruth 2019). This aligns seamlessly with the Renaissance ideal of expression through polyphonic innovation that is less anchored in textual fidelity, and the changing attitude to music in the Renaissance.

Similarly, to highlight the vitality of text expression symbolic of the Renaissance, it is notable that the text of Psalm 50 is a metaphor for ‘washing away sin’, which is emblematic of purification (DiFransico 2015). The ostinato that Josquin employs evokes the ritualistic nature of spiritual cleansing, making his motet an aural mirror of the Psalm’s meaning.

Furthermore, Josquin's use of 'word painting' uses melodic movement to enhance the text's devotional quality (Black et al. 2013). Josquin employs gradually descending melodic lines with each repetition of the ostinato, beginning on an E and gradually moving stepwise down the scale. This embodies the act of bowing down in dismay and lowering oneself in humility, which effectively foreshadows the penitential spirit of the text. As the motet progresses, the melodic phrasing of the final 'Miserere' in the phrase descends in itself, to further stress its importance in the Psalm (Bujic 1993). It evokes a sense of heaviness and potentially reflects the gravity of repentance, elevating the meaning of the text while gravitating away from the rigid-structured medieval motets. This melodically descending movement, recognised in music theory as *catabasis*, not only serves a musical function but also reflects the concept of *catabasis* in ancient Greek and Classical mythology, describing the journey to the 'underworld' (Tormey 2018). This concept of descent 'illustrates servitude, humility or infernal notions', which intertwines with the metaphorical meaning in Josquin's 'Miserere mei, Deus' (Koutsobina 2008). This ideology foreshadows the shift towards humanism during the Renaissance, and Josquin's humanist-centred expression in 'Miserere mei, Deus'.

The Fall of Constantinople (1453), can be seen as a catalyst for the Renaissance, where the arrival of Greek scholars brought a wealth of knowledge to Western Europe, sparking a renewed interest in classical antiquity that interspersed the ecosystem of Renaissance thought and culture (Link 2023). This influx of knowledge contributed to the rise of humanist thinking, which is seen through the revival of ancient Greek and Roman philosophies with the 'rebirth of classical letters', leading to a more accurate and nuanced understanding of classical thought (Strohm 2001). Humanism emphasised 'emergent individualism', highlighting the 'emotional and ethical powers of music' that emerged during the Renaissance, reinforcing Josquin's emotionally expressive adaptation to Psalm 50 (Tomlinson 2023). The philosophical foundations of this movement traces back to Plato's

views on the importance of reason and inquiry, which underpinned the Renaissance ideals of human potential and individuality (Jowett 1888). Although much of Josquin's life remains obscure, he was present in Italy by the time humanist thinking had already 'seeped into the consciousness of political and economic elites' (Baker 2015). Immersed in this new philosophical thought, Josquin's perspective on music composition was inevitably influenced, and his innovative approach 'led to the creation of an entirely new musical language' (Black et al. 2013). Where, in the Middle Ages, the focus of musical composition was aimed at communal religious feeling, Renaissance music captures humanity in forms of fragility, humility, and hope or divine for mercy as a 'compensating for [...] happiness', all of which are present in 'Miserere mei, Deus' (Kircher 2022).

Besides the ostinato used as a structural and rhetorical device to convey emotion, another such example is the use of *caesuras*, which are creative pauses in music that allow space for the audience to reflect (Hepokoski et al. 1997). After the line 'Cor mundum crea in me, Deus', appearing halfway through the text, Josquin effectively inputs a *caesura*. This phrase translates to 'Create for me a pure heart, O God', which is a moment of hope and divine for mercy as a plea for spiritual renewal, reflecting the psalmist's desire for inner transformation and redemption (Bible Gateway 2021). Josquin purposefully leaves the listener on a short pause to enhance the rhetorical impact of the motet. The pause invites introspection, encouraging the audience to consider their spiritual state and desires for purity and renewal, which emphasises the importance of personal reflection and individual experience. This focus on individual emotional experience aligns with the Renaissance humanist ideals (Tomlinson 2023). The collective experience the listeners have in this moment of fragility can be seen as a collective unified experience. Further, this use of silences in Josquin's motet epitomises Josquin's adaptability in fusing a concept originating in classical literature with sacred music in a way that evokes 'the changing status of music

from a mathematical craft to a poetic art' (Schlagel 1996). This could be analysed almost as a form of musical breathing, encapsulating the human emotion as a style of Renaissance music, as discussed by Patrick Macey, reinforcing a perspective of poetic mindset, adding colour to the text on Josquin's 'Miserere mei, Deus'.

On most repetitions of 'Miserere mei, Deus', Josquin uses the compositional technique of imitation where the *cantus* and *altus* follow the tenor at staggered intervals, echoing the plea for mercy throughout the different intervals, further emphasising the devotional quality of the text. One such example is in bar 58, which sees the first tenor voice begin, followed by the *altus* along with the second tenor in bar 59, and finally, the third tenor halfway through bar 59. His 'pervasive' use of imitation fosters a dialogue between the voices, promoting an idea of shared purpose, which aligns with the Renaissance emphasis on continuity and the value of individual contributions while simultaneously participating in a unified musical narrative (Ruth 2019). Furthermore, the Renaissance attitude towards music endues the importance of the individual and the composer's personality being able to shine through the music, highlighting his 'compositional personality' reflective of humanist ideals (Leichtentritt 1915; Rodin 2015). The effect of imitation also enhances the way in which Josquin weaves in and out of polyphonic texture, a symbolic feature of Renaissance music (Macey 1985). This technique allows different voices to stand out, without the attachment to a *cantus firmus*. In bar 71, we see a detachment from the tenor, representing a transition into homophonic texture in the *cantus* and *altus*, over the words *contra me est semper*, meaning 'conscious of my sin' (Bible Gateway 2021). This moment of introspection becomes highlighted due to the lack of the tenor voice, emphasising the individuality and lack of support evoked by the text, underlining its fragility and humility. In contrast, in bar 40, Josquin employs polyphonic texture to emphasise the urgency and fervency of the plea for forgiveness, allowing the mercy to feel more desperate and impassioned. This notable

innovation, in turn, resonates with the artistic spirit of the Renaissance. Furthermore, although there was a previous polyphonic setting of Psalm 50 by Johannes Martini, it was known as a 'functional piece' only set for three voices, and its lack of innovation allows Josquin's 'elaborate' version to stand out (Macey 1985). This could, however, point to a more evolutionist point of view of the piece's position as a gradual development of compositional techniques.

The break from Pythagorean tuning - where the use of the intervals of 'thirds and sixths [were] considered dissonances, for mathematical reasons only' - is significant in the 'emancipation' from medieval structured motets (Lowinsky 1954). In bar 16 of the motet, Josquin employs a minor sixth in the imitation between the *cantus* and the *altus* over the words 'magnam misericordiam', meaning 'Great Compassion' (Bible Gateway 2021). This evolution during the Renaissance, where sixth intervals are regarded consonant, imbues a sense of harmonic warmth, reflecting the positive connotations of the words 'great' and 'compassion'. This reflects a deeper understanding of harmonic progression seen during the Renaissance, encapsulating the departure from the mathematically orientated Middle Ages, further outlining a musical 'rebirth' of thought demonstrated by Josquin (Strohm 2001). One might argue that this could be representative of a development of ideas building on top of each other to gradually eradicate Pythagorean tuning. The tuning system of just intonation, based on 2:1, 3:2 and 5:4 ratios, is 'an extension to Pythagorean tuning' and built upon this is mean-tone temperament, which adjusted the ratios for consonant intervals, reflective of that in Josquin's work (Malone 2017). This indicates a development of pre-existing technique, rather than a stark break from tradition, foreshadowing an 'evolution' in music rather than a 'rebirth' (Strohm 2001).

If the Renaissance is understood as a 'rebirth' in music, it suggests a period marked by laying new foundations for the future of musical expression (Strohm 2001). Josquin played such a pivotal role in this process that his work was known as a model known as the '*ars perfecta*', translating to a 'perfected art' (Ruth 2019). His influence was pinnacle for later composers of the likes of Palestrina, an Italian composer of the late Renaissance, who refined and polished Josquin's compositional innovations, particularly in terms of counterpoint and harmony (Jeppesen 1970). However, with the invention of the printing press in 1455 - a revolutionary vehicle for the dissemination of music - some could say that Josquin had an advantage in musical transformation that 'cemented his status as a pivotal figure' (Kirkman 1999). This could lead to the notion that this technological breakthrough may in itself have acted as a catalyst for the Renaissance, rather than the notable advancements at the time.

In conclusion, Josquin des Prez's '*Miserere mei, Deus*' encapsulates the duality of the musical Renaissance, highlighting both a 'rebirth' of artistic ideals and an 'evolution' of compositional techniques, as encapsulated by Strohm (Strohm 2001). Josquin's innovative use of text expression, harmonic progressions, and rhetorical devices reflects a significant departure from medieval structures while building upon previous musical practices. The complex interplay of continuity and innovation is not only emblematic of the shifting paradigms of the time but also positions Josquin as a pivotal figure whose influence shaped the future of polyphonic music.

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