FAST FACTS

• The Renaissance in music stretches from about 1430 to the early 1600s.

• The most important musical development in this period was polyphony. This means music made up of several independent melodic lines that are played or sung simultaneously. Although each musical line has a different rhythm, they all fit together to make up one harmonious whole.

• All of the lines in polyphony are equally important: there’s not one that’s the tune, with the rest just background. Different lines might be more prominent at different moments in the music, but the overall effect is of a smooth, seamless interweaving of musical parts.

• Most Renaissance polyphony has four or five lines of music. Some of the more complicated pieces have up to eight or even twelve vocal parts, but few have equalled the achievements of Jean de Ockeghem, with his 36-voice canon Deo gratias, and Thomas Tallis, with his 40-part motet Spem in alium.

• The most famous piece of Renaissance sacred music is the Miserere by Gregorio Allegri. It’s called ‘Miserere’ because that’s the first word of the Latin text: ‘Miserere mei, Deus’ (Have mercy on me, O God). Many composers set these words to music, but Allegri’s version is the one that was sung regularly in the Sistine Chapel. They thought so highly of it there, that they wanted to keep it for their own exclusive use, so the church authorities prohibited anyone from making any copies of the music. It wasn’t until 1770 that Allegri’s Miserere ‘escaped’: the 14-year-old Mozart, on a visit to Rome, heard a performance and then went away and wrote the music down from memory.

1638

• Galileo has been under house arrest for five years, for saying that the sun, not the earth, was the centre of the universe.

• The world’s first public opera house, the Teatro San Cassiano in Venice, is one year old.

• Birth of Louis XIV, the ‘Sun King’; he will become King of France just four years later, reigning for 72 years.

• Death of John Harvard, a 35-year-old English clergyman who had settled in Massachusetts barely a year earlier. He leaves his library and half his estate to the local college – the future Harvard University.

• Sweden, a major European power at this time, extends its empire to the New World, establishing a settlement in the Delaware Valley.

• And in Rome, Gregorio Allegri’s new setting of the Miserere is heard in the Sistine Chapel.
Sacred music of the Renaissance

From the first was seen a great host of trumpeters, of players on the lyre and the flute. Each one of them... had adorned himself in raiment sparkling with light... in a perfect fusion of this venerable gathering together of such beautiful music and harmonious chords... Yea, in such a wise that the melodies of the angels and of divine paradise, and the songs descending from heaven unto us here below, by means of so incredible a sweetness, rightly seemed to murmur in our ears something of the ineffable and of the divine...

Thus wrote Giannozzo Manetti of the events of 25 March 1436: the consecration of the dome of Florence Cathedral amid immense pomp and splendour. The dome itself was a marvel of engineering. Brunelleschi, inspired by the construction feats of the ancient Romans, had found a way to support the massive weight of the structure, 40 metres in diameter and a remarkable 56 metres high: an octagonal ribbed dome with a reinforced double shell. Central to the ceremony was a miracle of musical composition: the motet Nuper rosarum flores by French composer Guillaume Du Fay.

The work is an isorhythmic motet, a musical style grounded in the medieval aesthetic which saw music and geometry as equal branches of knowledge. Such motets are constructed on a rhythm pattern which is repeated, often independently of the melody to which it is sung. In Nuper rosarum flores, there is a double isorhythm (reflecting the double dome of the cathedral): two interlocking rhythmic patterns, in the two lowest voices. The isorhythm is sung four times, each time taking a different note value as the basis of the pattern. So the shortest note in the pattern, a dotted semibreve the first time, is a semibreve the second time, then a minim, then a dotted minim: a ratio of 6 : 4 : 2 : 3. The temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, as described in the Old Testament, was built in the same proportions: 60 cubits long, with a main hall 40 cubits long in front of the inner sanctum, 20 cubits wide and 30 cubits high. And the cathedral in Florence had been constructed to reflect those same proportions.

The melody of the isorhythm phrase is based on the Gregorian chant Locus iste, the text of which is an affirmation of the overwhelming holiness of the house of God. Around this, two upper voices weave an elaborate filigree singing a hymn in praise of the pope, Eugenius IV, who was dedicating the cathedral; and of the Virgin Mary, patron saint of the cathedral (Santa Maria del Fiore).

Du Fay stands at the gateway between Medieval and Renaissance music, able to incorporate the contemporary developments in contrapuntal techniques into such traditional genres as the isorhythmic motet. By the time of Josquin des Prez, however, the pace of stylistic change had picked up dramatically. His Ave Maria... virgo serena, like Du Fay’s Nuper rosarum flores, is based on a plainsong melody, but the differences are striking. There is no longer any sense of a hierarchy of function, no grounding cantus firmus delineated from decorative upper parts. Here, the melody which opens the piece is immediately passed through all four voice parts, from soprano through alto and tenor down to the bass line, in a simple two-part canonische structure that blossoms into full four-part polyphony.

The text, though it begins with the angel Gabriel’s greeting to Mary (from the gospel according to Luke 1:28), is not the standard Ave Maria text of the Catholic liturgy, but rather a devotional poem in praise of the Virgin, Annunciation by the Archangel Gabriel, Purification (later renamed Presentation), and Assumption of the Blessed Virgin into Heaven. It has been suggested that the work was composed for Josquin’s patron Cardinal Ascanio Sforza, to take with him on a pilgrimage to Loreto, an important shrine to the pope, Eugenius IV, who was dedicating the cathedral; and of the Virgin Mary, patron saint of the cathedral (Santa Maria del Fiore).

When Englishman Thomas Tallis, a century after Ockeghem, was challenged by Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, to equal the feat of an Italian composer who was reputed to have written ‘a songe ... in 30 parts’ (whence the Italians obtained the name to be called the Apices of the world) wch beeinge songe mad a heavenly Harmony,’ it was not Ockeghem’s work (even allowing for inaccuracies of geography – Ockeghem never worked in Italy) or even Josquin’s 24-part Qui habitat in adiutorio which prompted the challenge, but most likely a piece by the now largely forgotten composer Alessandro Striggio, who had visited England in 1567 and brought with him a 40-part motet Ecce beatam lucem.

Tallis’ response, Spem in alium, is written for eight choirs of five voices each, a palette of sound colours used boldly yet sensitively to create a music that blends luxuriant detail with massive power. The work begins with a single voice, soon joined by a second and a third until all of the first choir is singing; the voices of the second choir take over smoothly and the music moves around the whole ensemble, gradually bringing in the richer tones of lower voices. The slow-moving but never static harmonies have great dignity and gravitas, like strong pillars around which individual voices weave their slender and often ornately detailed melodic lines.

The text is technically liturgical – it is written for a responsory sung at Matins as part of the Historia Judith – but it was not a text commonly set to music and, in fact, Tallis does not set it in a liturgical fashion (which would have required a repetition of the passage beginning ‘qui iacessit’). The first performance seems to have been given in Arundel House, the Duke of Norfolk’s London residence; the symbolism of the brave Israelite woman Judith begging Holofernes, the commander of Nebuchadnezzar’s armies, and cutting of his head would have been especially appropriate in the context of Henry VIII’s confrontation of the monasteries, the Protestantism of Edward VI, the Restoration of Catholicism under Queen Mary and the strategic manoeuvres leading to the discipline of Elizabeth’s new

Pierre de la Rue and Josquin appear side by side in Molinet’s list of master composers in his poem Nymphes des bôis, a déploration or lamentation on the death of Jean de Ockeghem (which was in turn set to music by Josquin). More forward-looking than Du Fay, Ockeghem was the true father of Renaissance music, a technical genius whose mastery of counterpoint, sensitive handling of four-part vocal texture, and expressive bass line – he was famous for his own fine bass voice – provided a model for an entire generation of composers across Europe. Among his most intricate creations are the Missa Cuiusvis Toni, designed to be performable in any of the available modes, and the Missa Praelationum, constructed entirely in canon with each part in a different time signature, and with the canon in each section built on a different interval – the different voices starting on the same pitch in the first section, then a tone apart, then a third apart, all the way through to canon at the octave. Regardless of the level of complexity, Ockeghem’s writing remains seamless, a gradually evolving soundscape articulated by familiar melodic shapes.

Even for Ockeghem, the 36-part canon Deo gratias represents an extraordinary achievement: four choirs of nine voices, each choir singing its own line in a nine-fold canon line. The Superius and Altus choirs (here sung by the sopranos and tenors respectively) come to rest one after another on a single, swelling C, under which the Tenor and Bassus choirs continue to weave their own canonic lines until the piece finally settles on a glorious F major chord. American music theorist Edward Lowinsky points to the medieval Christian mystical tradition of liturgical music as the echo of angelic hymns, inspired by Old Testament accounts of angels unceasingly calling out the praises of God to each other, as if with a single voice. Lowinsky suggests that this image may have been Ockeghem’s inspiration for his Deo gratias, a constant chain of canonic entries suggesting the angels’ unending and overlapping repetition of the simple shout of praise, ‘Thanks be to God!’ This could also explain Ockeghem’s decision to write nine voices in each choir, a symbolic representation of the nine orders of angels (Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels and Angels).

Curiously, the score of Deo gratias was lost, and Ockeghem’s immense achievement became no more than scarcely believable rumour in the following centuries; Fetis, author of the seminal eight-volume Biographie universelle des musiciens (1860-65), scoffed, ‘I will say it again, a composition like that was absolutely impossible.’

It was not until 1928 that the score of Ockeghem’s Deo gratias was rediscovered and published, though the work had been known since Bach. Even today, the score is rarely performed in its original form, most versions being arranged for smaller forces.

It was a difficult time for church musicians. Tallis worked under four monarchs and experienced the traditions of Catholicism under Queen Mary and the strategic manoeuvres leading to the discipline of Elizabeth’s new...
church establishment in 1558. He survived by adapting his music to the times: early Latin polyphony that he
was written during the reign of Elizabeth. A devout Catholic, he managed somehow to avoid the persecution
his younger brother Charles received the same honour.

English-language ceremonial anthem to the text ‘Sing and glorifie heavens high Majesty’, in which form it was
stored the pages.

being arrested for possessing

out his Catholic agenda in full detail: the complete mass propers (introit, gradual, tract, offertory, communion)

for private, even secret, worship. It is an intimate and concentrated work; as Byrd wrote in the dedication of

Gradualia, ‘There is a certain hidden power, as I learnt by experience, in the thoughts underlying the words

for the major feasts of the church year, Marian feasts and Marian votive masses. There is a record of someone

half in Latin, half in German, is said to have been sung by angels to the mystic Heinrich Seuse (or Suso):

or The Muses of Zion (1605–10) which contains 1,244 chorale settings for anything from two voices to a dozen or more.

The motet begins with an austere beautiful two-part canon between soprano and alto; as tenor and bass
join in, the music suddenly blooms briefly into a major tonality before returning to the more subdued imitative
counterpoint which forms the basis of the work. A similar moment of glorious stillness is created with the
major chord at ‘O beata Virgo’, the motet ends with a dance-like yet dignified triple-time Alleluia and a final
flourish of descending scale passages.

It comes as no surprise that the composer of this music of awe and wonder, ordained a priest in 1575,
drew back from the busyness of court and cathedral life in Rome (where he had succeededPalestrina as
chapelmaster in the Roman seminary) to become a member of the quasi-monastic Oratory of St Philip Neri,
before returning to Spain to take up a position as chaplain at a convent of strictly cloistered nuns in Madrid.
And yet contemporary reports describeVictoria as being of a ‘naturally sunny’ disposition, disinclined to remain
downcast for long; the poignancy of O magnus mysterium should not be taken as typical of his style.

Victoria must have knownPalestrina, and may have been taught by him: widely acknowledged as ‘the very
first musician in the world’, Palestrina’s music had become the model for sacred music, perfect in its
contrapuntal structure, yet also as respectful as possible of the comprehensibility of texts. (His Missa Papae
Marcelli quickly passed into popular legend as having saved polyphonic music from the zeal of the
Counter-Reformation by demonstrating that it was possible to compose polyphony in such a way that the words could
still be understood.)

Palestrina composed 104 masses, at least 250 motets and about 175 other sacred works, as well as over
140 madrigals. The Stabat Mater for double choir is a relatively late work, dating from around 1589. The text, a
meditation on the suffering of Mary standing at the foot of the cross watching her son die, had been part of
the Catholic liturgy since the 15th century. It is a fairly long poem, which led Palestrina to put aside his
usual techniques of using imitative counterpoint to stretch out his short sections of text. Instead, he created a
comparatively simple work which makes extensive use of chord textures, often used antiphonally, relying on
the play of different groupings of voices to create light and shade. Palestrina was choirmaster of the Cappella
Gulia at St Peter’s at the time, but presented the work to the choir of the Sistine Chapel, who kept it for their
own exclusive performance each Good Friday. It was not until 1771, when the English musician Charles Burney
reportedly bribed one of the Sistine singers to show him a copy, that the piece was published.

The most famous musical secret, however, is surely Allegri’s Miserere. This setting of the penitential Psalm
51 was composed by Allegri around 1638 for the Tenebrae services in Holy Week, an intensely dramatic night
office in which the candles were extinguished one by one to the solemn chanting of psalms. The
Miserere was the culmination of this ritual, during which the final candle was carried behind the high altar, leaving the church
in total darkness. Gregorio Allegri, a tenor in the Sistine Chapel choir for over 30 years, was not the only person
to write settings of theMiserere, nor did his version become the standard setting until at least ten years after
his death, but once established, it became an almost immutable tradition, and the score, which Allegri had
given to the choir for its exclusive use, was hidden away from all prying eyes.

The story of the 14-year-old Mozart’s memorisation of the work on a single hearing, thus smuggling the music
out in his own head, is well known. While this is an impressive feat, it becomes less impressive on closer
examination, since the piece basically consists of only three short passages of music: a standard plainsong
psalm tone, and two chorus passages, one twelve bars long and the other fourteen, each of which is repeated
five times. The only section which is heard just once is the last verse, in which both choirs come together in
an imposing final cadence.

The irony of all the secrecy surrounding the piece is that in fact nobody knows what Allegri’s original setting
sounded like. The two solo choirs of theMiserere were the best singers in that already elite ensemble, and
famous for their ability to embellish the melodic lines with elaborate ornamentations. To have sung just the
notes on the page would have been unthinkable.
It is not known who first sang the famous high C in Allegri’s setting, nor when it came to be standard performance practice for the piece, nor indeed what embellishments may have originally been made in the other voices, but certainly in the course of the 18th century the ability of Sistine Chapel choristers to improvise such decorations gradually diminished until it was lost entirely, and the singers simply memorised the received tradition and performed it as learnt. Today, the piece has become inseparable from its top Cs, and the ethereal beauty of the floating soprano line is for many people the work’s main attraction. Indeed, the Miserere itself is in most people’s minds the only work by Allegri, even though he was, in his own day, well known as a composer – a further irony, in view of the fact that the piece as we know it is almost certainly not what Allegri wrote.

The version most often heard today (and recorded here) is Ivor Atkins’ of 1951, based largely on transcriptions by Charles Burney and Felix Mendelssohn of what they heard at the Vatican in about 1771 and 1831 respectively. In fact the famous high C is now known to be an error, brought about by the accidental transposition of the second choir upward by a fourth, meaning this high note would originally have been a G if the work were sung in G minor. Nonetheless this version has endured through a half-century of performance practice, and despite problems of authenticity, its broad appeal is undeniable.

Another quite prolific composer known for a single work is Antonio Lotti. Born in Germany, he moved in his teens to Venice where he remained for the rest of his life, except for one two-year stint in Dresden. Lotti’s career as a composer of sacred music was firmly grounded at St Mark’s Basilica, where he was first a member of the choir, then organist and eventually maestro di cappella, and he wrote numerous masses and other sacred choral works. Of all his works, however, only his settings of the Crucifixus text (for from five to ten voices) – some of which come from the Credos of complete mass settings – have stood the test of time. Of those, only the eight-part Crucifixus is at all well known today. Although Lotti was a contemporary of J.S. Bach, the piled-up dissonances of this Crucifixus have something of the flavour of Monteverdi, on the very cusp between Renaissance and Baroque, even if some of the harmonies seem almost Classical. Perhaps also Lotti’s involvement with opera – he wrote over 20 works for the stage – accounts for the richly dramatic gestures of this motet.

Nevertheless, this Crucifixus – like all the works on this disc, across the centuries of political and theological turmoil, through reformations and counter-reformations – seems in its own way to murmur to us ‘something of the ineffable and of the divine’, just as Du Fay’s Nuper rosarum flores did for the people of Florence in 1436.

Natalie Shea
Ave Maria ... virgo serena

Hodie vicarius
Nuper rosarum
Ave Maria
Ave cujus
Ave cujus
Ave vera
Nostra fuit
Jesu Christi et Petri
Condecorarunt perpetim.
Pie et sancte deditum
Tibi virgo caelica
Hieme licet horrida
Ex dono pontificis
et benedictus fructus ventris tui.
benedicta tu in mulieribus,
Dominus tecum:
miserere mei. Amen.

Nova replet laetitia.
Caelestia, terrestria,
Solemni plena gaudio,
Dominus tecum, virgo serena.

Ave Maria ... virgo serena

O dulcis, O pie, O Jesu, fili Mariae
in mortis examine.
Esto nobis praegustatum
cujus latus perforatum
unda fluxit sanguine.
vere passum immolatum
in cruce pro homine,
Ave verum
Memento mei. Amen.

Angelicis virtutibus
Ave praeclara
Nostra fuit purgatio.
Cujus purificatio
Sine viro foecunditas,
Ave pia
Verum solem praeveniens.
Nostra fuit solemnitas
Hoc idem amplissimum
Sacris templum marbris
Sanctique liquoribus
Consecrare dignatus est.
Igitur, alma parens
Nati tu et filia,
Virgo deus virginum
Tuus te Florentiae
Devotus orat populus,
Ut qui mente et corpore
Mundo quicumquam exorat,
Oratione tua
Cruciatus et meritis
Tui secundum carnem
Nati Domini sui
Grata beneficia
Veniamque reatum
Accipere mereatur. Amen.

Anonymous devotional poem
inspired by Luke 1:28

Ave verum corpus

Ave verum corpus, natum de Maria Virgine:
vere passum in immaculam in cruce pro homine,
cujus latus perforatum
et admirabile sacramentum,
Este nobis praegustatum
in mortis examine.
O dulcis, O pie, O Jesu, fili Mariae
miserere mei. Amen.

Anonymous hymn for the Feast of Corpus Christi

Ave Maria

Hail Mary, full of grace,
The Lord is with you, serene virgin.
Hail to you, whose conception,
Full of solemn joy,
Fills the heavens and the earth
Anew with rejoicing.
Hail to you, whose birth
Was our solemn festival,
As the morning star
Heralds the true sun.
Hail to you, in your humility and goodness,
Fruitful without a man:
Your Annunciation
Was our salvation.
Hail, true virginity,
Immaculata castitas,
Whose purification
Was our cleansing.
Hail to you who excel in all
Angelic virtues
Whose Assumption
Was our glorification.
O Mother of God,
Remember me. Amen.

O Mother, glory of virgins,
and daughter of your Son,
portare Dominum Jesum Christum,
Atheulal!

Matins Responsory for Christmas Day

Deo gratias

1 Corinthians 15:57 / II Corinthians 2:14

Stabat Mater

Stabat Mater dolorosa
Juxta crucem lacrimosa
Dum pendebat Filius.
Cujus animam gementem
Contristat et dolentem
Pertransivit gladius.
O quam tristis et affecta
Fuit illa beneficta
Mater Unigeniti!
Quae maeraret et dolebat,
Et trementem, dum videbat
Nati poenas incliti.
Quis est homo qui non fleret,
Christi Mater si videt
In tanta supplicatione?
Quis non posset contristari,
Pam Matrem contemplari
Dolentem cum Filio?

The grieving Mother
Stood weeping by the cross
Where her Son was hanging.
Her spirit crying out,
Mourning and grieving
Had been pierced by a sword.
O how sad and afflicted
Was that blessed
Mother of the only-begotten!
How she grieved and lamented,
And trembled, when she saw
The sufferings of her glorious Son.
Who would not weep
To see the Mother of Christ
In such torment?
Who could fail to grieve with her,
If he saw the Mother of Christ
Suffering with her Son?
For the sins of his people
She saw Jesus tortured
And scourged.
She saw her sweet son,
Dying and forsaken
As he gave up his spirit.
O Mother, fount of love,
Make me feel the power of your grief
And mourn with you.
Make my heart burn
With the love of Christ
That I may please Him.
Holy Mother, may you inflict
The wounds of the crucified one
Deeply on my heart.
Your wounded Son
Deigned to suffer for me:
Let me share his punishment.
Make me weep with you,
Grieve by the cross with you
As long as I live.
To stand by the cross with you
And join with you
In lamenting is my desire.
Brightest Virgin of virgins,
Do not be harsh with me,
Make me grieve with you.
Make me bear the burden of Christ’s death,
Make me share His Passion
And reflect on His wounds.
Make me suffer His wounds,
Let me be overcome by the cross
And the blood of your Son.
Thus inflamed and burning,
May I be protected by you, Virgin,
On the day of judgment.
May I be guarded by the cross,
Fortified by the death of Christ,
Supported by His grace.
When my body dies,
Let my soul be granted
The glory of paradise.

He was indeed crucified for us,
at the order of Pontius Pilate
He suffered and was buried.

In dulci jubilo
In sweet joy
now sing and be glad!
Our heart's happiness
lies in the manger,
and shines like the sun
in his mother's lap.
You are Alpha and Omega.
O tiny baby Jesus
I so long for You!
Comfort my soul,
O peerless child,
through all your goodness,
O Prince of Glory,
draw me to you.
Joya are there,
as in no other place:
there the angels sing
a new song
and the bells ring out
in the court of the King:
Oh, that we were there!

O salutaris hostia
O Saving Victim, opening wide
The gate of heaven to all below:
Our foes press in on every side;
Thine aid supply, Thy strength bestow.

In the court of the King:
Oh, that we were there!

I have never had hope
in any other but you, God of Israel:
after your anger comes your favour.
And you forgive all the sins of
suffering humanity,
Lord God, Creator of Heaven and Earth,
look down upon our humility.
BAROQUE & BEFORE
1 GREGORIAN CHANT
2 MEDIEVAL CHORAL MUSIC
3 SACRED MUSIC OF THE RENAISSANCE
4 ENGLISH RENAISSANCE
5 ITALIAN BAROQUE
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17 HANDEL Messiah
18 HANDEL Arias

THE CLASSICAL ERA
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20 HAYDN Music for Orchestra
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37 MENDELSSOHN The Hebrides | A Midsummer Night’s Dream
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40 SCHUMANN Symphonies 3 & 4
41 SCHUMANN Music for Solo Piano
42 LISZT Years of Pilgrimage
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58 MUSSORGSKY Pictures at an Exhibition
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THE MODERN ERA
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100 THE 21ST CENTURY

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