

Mille regretz Josquin des Prez (1450/1455-1521)

The Renaissance, stretching from the end of the medieval period in 1400 to the beginning of the baroque era around 1600, was a period of immense change in European culture. It was marked by significant developments in all areas of society including a burgeoning interest in humanistic thought, an increase in innovation and discovery, the growth of business and commercial interests with a corresponding rise in the middle class and the religious and political challenge to the Catholic Church that culminated in the Protestant Reformation. The change was no less momentous in music. Led by the musicians of the so-called Franco-Flemish school, a designation that describes several generations of major composers from France, Belgium and the Netherlands, a new international musical language was forged, in part due to the increased ability of musicians to travel within Europe. The invention of the printing press also made anything written, including music, cheaper and more accessible.

Josquin des Prez is widely considered to be the central figure of the Franco-Flemish school and the first master of the high Renaissance style of polyphonic vocal music that emerged during this time. Although little is known about his life, much is known about his reputation. He received high praise from many quarters including from Martin Luther who wrote, “He is the master of the notes. They do as he wills; as for the other composers, they have to do as the notes will.” Music theorists of the day considered his style to represent perfection.

Josquin wrote both sacred and secular vocal music in all the forms known at the time: masses, motets, chansons, even frottole, which were Italian comic or amorous songs. It is believed that many composers copied his style and passed their work off as his, probably to increase their sales. This and the fact that Josquin liked to solve compositional problems in different ways in different compositions makes definitive attribution of works to Josquin difficult. The piece heard today, *Mille Regretz*, a chanson set for four parts, is generally considered to be his work. The plaintive mood of the piece is created by the use of the Phrygian mode. Simply and beautifully written with a universal theme, it was wildly popular in its day. Almost five hundred years later, the power of its simple message and the beauty of its writing are still deeply moving.

Revey venir du printemps Claude Le Jeune (1528-1600)

Claude Le Jeune was the most famous composer of secular music in France in the late 16th century. His first recognized work appeared in 1552 when four chansons under his name were published in anthologies of works by several composers. By 1564 when he moved to Paris, he already had an international reputation, having been designated as a “contemporary composer of excellence” in a manuscript copy of a work by Orlando de Lassus, one of the three most famous and influential European musicians (with Palestrina and Victoria) at the end of the 16th century. At some point in his young life he became a Protestant and, as such, part of a persecuted minority at that time in France. In 1570 he joined the *Academie de musique et de poésie*, led by Jean-Antoine de Baïf, a zealous Catholic and the author of a sonnet praising the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in which many thousands of Protestants were murdered. Despite their religious differences which, given the tenor of the times Le Jeune probably kept to himself, Le Jeune worked with Baïf and set his poetry, written in a style known as *vers mesurée*, for at least the next ten years.

Vers mesurés were French verses written in classical metres. The nature of the French language made an exact correlation impossible, but Baif and his *Academie* did achieve a version that came close to reproducing the metrical patterns of Greek and Latin verse. Le Jeune was a master of the corresponding

musique mesurée, whose goal was to reflect musically the stressed and unstressed syllables of the French Language. Since the meter of the verse was flexible, the result was a musical style which did not fit well into a set meter and which sounds to the ear to have rapidly changing meters. These “Parisian” chansons, as they were known, are lighter and more homophonic than pieces written in other styles of the day. They were sung a cappella and were usually written for between three and eight voices. The piece heard today is from what is probably Le Juene’s most famous collection of thirty-three airs mesurés and six chansons, all settings of text by Baïf, entitled *Le Printemps*.

Troisième leçon de ténèbres pour le mercredi saint, François Couperin (1668–1733)

Born into a prominent musical family, Couperin is best known as a composer of keyboard music, having been harpsichordist to King Louis XIV and organist to the Chapelle Royale. However, his *Troisième Leçon*, a sacred vocal work written in an intensely personal style in contrast to that favored in the Royal Court, is widely considered to be one of the pinnacles of Baroque vocal music. The two vocal lines call for the performers to execute superb ornaments, a large variety of rhythms, and dissonances in free-form virtuosity, all in service of the text. Published in 1714 for the abbey at Longchamp near Paris, it is likely that excellent singers were available to Couperin, as it was fashionable for Paris opera goers to attend services at the abbey during Lent when the Paris Opera was closed.

The piece is a setting of the *Lamentations of Jeremiah*, which contain some of the most desolate verses in the Old Testament. Jeremiah’s outcry at the devastation of Jerusalem during Nebuchadnezzar’s siege symbolizes (in the Catholic tradition) the loneliness of Christ after being abandoned by the Apostles. The text is part of the nine Tenebrae readings (“*Leçons*”) which occur during Holy Week (“pour le mercredi saint” refers to its intended use on Wednesday of Holy Week). Couperin set all nine readings, but sadly only three survive. Each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, set in an extended melisma (following the tradition of Renaissance settings of this text). The verses feature supremely expressive flights of the two solo soprano voices, which evoke aspects of the “tragédie lyrique” style of Couperin’s time, to fuse spiritual devotion with a dramatic sensibility.