**Ave Maris Stella Program Notes**

Our program of music in honor of Mary, the mother of God, proceeds in chronological order from the Annunciation of Jesus's birth to her Assumption into heaven. To say that the repertory of music commemorating Mary is rich would be an understatement. In the liturgical calendar the feasts of the Annunciation and the Assumption occur on March 25th and August 15th, but with the addition of the season of Advent and the various ceremonies attendant to Jesus' birth such as the Circumcision and the Purification, in which Mary plays a substantial part, much of the year provides numerous opportunities for composers writing in the catholic tradition to pay homage to her, in music that is by turns reverential, exuberant, sorrowful, serene, festive, entreating, solemn, joyful, and ravishingly beautiful.

Marian music has been sung regularly in the catholic churches since at least the early middle ages. The hymn “Ave Maris Stella,” for instance, dates from the 11th century, and the text of Walter Frye’s “Salve Virgo” is found in the missal of a Benedictine abbey in Norwich (UK) dated approximately 1400. Such relatively long works indicate some measure of the intense devotion composers, and presumably the laity, had to Mary the mother of God. Idealized, revered, confessed to, marveled at, she remains the perfect mother image, though her feasts completely ignore her years, and perhaps trials, as Jesus’ mother during his toddler and teenage phases. In the Roman Catholic tradition, Mary's role as intercessor still is acknowledged formally at the conclusion of mass, by the spoken "Ave Maria," Hail Mary, or, during the weeks following Easter, the "Regina Coeli Laetare," Queen of Heaven, Rejoice. Lutherans and Anglicans still hold weekly evening services that always feature the Magnificat, Mary's joyful consent to bear God's son. The music can be as simple as chant or much more extended, as in multi-movement works like Bach's Magnificat or Pergolesi’s Stabat Mater.

The composers for this evening’s program were exclusively Roman Catholic with the exception of Michael Praetorius, the greatest early Lutheran composer with well over 800 works for choirs of varying capabilities, this massive output all the more impressive given that he only lived to be age 50. His “Maria Magdalena” is probably written for schoolboys, for instance. Most of the composers like Praetorius had court patronage, others had papal, some worked for powerful families (usually in Italy) and a few made their way from place to place, usually employed by churches. Walter Frye is the only one whose biographical details are almost unknown, but his music is found across Europe and continues to turn up in manuscripts from the former eastern bloc; one of his most famous compositions, “Ave Regina Coelorum,” appears in paintings and even tapestries and if that wasn’t enough, Josquin des Prez and Jacob Obrecht wrote music based on it. Guillaume Dufay, one of the more itinerant composers who went back and forth from the low countries to Italy and eventually settled at a church back in his native land, was considered the finest composer of his age, but perhaps he too learned a few things from Walter Frye. Josquin, another traveler from the low countries to Italy, borrowed heavily from his contemporaries and forerunners, quoting Johannes Regis’ “Ave Maria” without shame in his shortened version of that work.

The ancestors of many Cape Codders who came here to practice their Protestant faith independent of the state-run Church of England had little in common with the English composers on tonight’s program except for the desire to be free from the government-enforced requirement to attend Anglican church services. In the latter part of the 1500s, for William Byrd in particular, that desire meant the freedom to practice Catholicism, with support in a limited way from Queen Elizabeth. Both Byrd and William Cornysh received their musical educations in Catholic establishments and worked for the crown as singers, organists, and choir directors during portions of the reigns of monarchs Henry VIII, Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth (Cornysh died during Henry’s reign). Religious and political affairs in England during that time were in constant disarray, as the statewide Catholicism turned to Anglicanism and back and forth depending on the religious persuasion of the king or queen. Cornysh was spared the tumult, but Byrd sought, successfully though not without considerable effort, to maintain his career and reputation while keeping his faith steadfast.

Over on the continent, the popes did their best to repel the attacks of numerous reformers. In the late 1400s Dominican monk Savonarola called for an end to papal hypocrisy -- the wink-wink use of concubines, for instance, all supported by church communicants throughout the empire. There were attacks on music as well. Glorious Italianate polyphonic writing, such as Palestrina’s “Assumpta est Maria” (for the feast of the Assumption or St. Mary’s Day, August 15th), or Heinrich Isaac’s “Vultum tuum” (for the feast of the Circumcision, most likely written in Florence), was deemed too complex, the words hidden by a network of overlapping lines. Palestrina and others adapted by supplying more chordal music in which the words were clearly discernible; his double-choir “Stabat Mater” is a perfect exemplar of this new style, restrained by the chordal format yet elegant and sublime.

Catholic composers who worked in Germany were doubly lucky: they could escape the Italian reformers’ demands and adapt to the newer styles at the same time. One only has to look at the huge output by the great renaissance master Orlandus Lassus, who had spent his childhood in the low countries, much of his early adult life in Italy, and then the rest of his life in Munich where he was in the service of the Duke of Bavaria, to see how happily prolific he could be in the land where Lutherans and Catholics mixed with some good cheer. Lassus wrote an enormous number of Magnificats, Ave Marias, and the 6-voice “Regina Coeli Laetare” heard this evening with its bell-like entries is one of at least eight such prayers on that text from this singer turned composer, each one unique.

-- Cheryl K. Ryder