

About the Program

There was much about the Roman Catholic theology of the mass that Luther found objectionable. While Roman Catholic dogma understood the eucharist as a sacrifice, Luther argued that Christ was sacrificed only once, and that the eucharist was a rite of memorial and thanksgiving for this unique act. As a consequence of these objections, he published a short treatise in 1522 (*Formula missae*, or *Formula of the mass*) in which he advocated the retention of the Latin mass, while suggesting a number of places at which it should be revised to reflect his understanding of the theology of the eucharist. In particular, he did away with all reference to the mass as a sacrifice. This involved editing certain parts of the canon (the great prayer of consecration) and the complete excision of others, such as the offertory.

Since Luther's *Formula missae* contained only suggestions rather than prescriptions, it is difficult to know exactly how far individual Lutheran clergy went in the practice of their liturgy. At this time, radical spiritualist elements had threatened to get out of hand at Wittenberg and elsewhere, and Luther tended to remain as close to traditional forms as possible, to avoid causing offence to simple believers who would be alienated by sudden and drastic change. For example, he insisted that much of the traditional plainsong be retained, and the propers of major feasts, especially those concerned directly with Jesus, such as Christmas, Easter and Ascension. However, he proposed that the sequence might be removed where this promoted excessive veneration of the saints. He also suggested that the congregation could sing songs in German, though he regretted that only few of these existed, and that there were not many good poets to write new ones.

In 1522, Luther wrote his first vernacular hymn, and during the next couple of years he wrote further hymns (and the melodies to which they were to be sung), many based on the psalms or mediaeval hymns. Luther's memorable melodies served to communicate and imprint the pungent theology of his texts. In 1524, the composer Johann Walter published his own settings of several of Luther's melodies. From the very start, these evangelical hymns thus existed in two distinct forms: as melodies for congregational singing, and in polyphonic versions or varying degrees of complexity, for three to six voices, to be sung by a professional choir. It is likely that performance of the polyphonic versions was one means of teaching these new songs to the laity.

In 1526, Luther published a more thoroughgoing revision of the liturgy of the eucharist, this time in German. In this work he insisted that the Latin rite be maintained in places where there were schools and where Latin was understood. Although this Latin Lutheran rite was still performed into the eighteenth century, the cliché of Luther as the champion of the common man and translator of the bible into German has obscured the Latin form of the Lutheran liturgy from popular consciousness.

In the present program, we have attempted to dig back to the beginnings of the Lutheran liturgical reform, after the publication of Luther's Latin mass but before the publication of the German rite. The result is a more traditional, more *Catholic* Luther than we are accustomed to seeing. We have used the evidence available to imagine how a Christmas mass may have been performed at Wittenberg in the mid-1520s. Since we do not know much about the musical repertoire of the parish church at Wittenberg, we chose polyphony from choirbooks commissioned by Friedrich the Wise for use in the castle church at Wittenberg.

In the *Formula missae*, Luther recommended that German congregational hymns could be inserted at various points in the liturgy, supplementing or even supplanting traditional Latin elements. We have included one polyphonic arrangement by Walter.

For the mass ordinary we chose the *Missa carminum*, attributed to Henricus Isaac (†1517), which is transmitted in a manuscript copied for Duke Friedrich the Wise, Luther's patron, for use at the castle church at Wittenberg (Jena choirbook 36). The title of this attractive mass refers to the fact that it integrates a number of popular melodies into the polyphonic texture, including Isaac's own famous *Innsbruck ich muss dich lassen*, *Bruder Conrad*, and *Wer ich ein falk*. In its way, then, this mass reflects the Lutheran desire to bring the liturgy closer to the people through the use of familiar 'folk' melodies.

The propers (Introit, Alleluia, Communio) are transmitted in a Weimar choirbook (now in the university library in Jena) without a composer ascription. When the Wittenberg printer Georg Rhau published these propers (probably from the same manuscript) in 1545, he ascribed them to Adam Rener, who had grown up as a choirboy at the court of Maximilian I, and who later entered Friedrich's court chapel. While some have questioned this ascription, whoever wrote these propers, the fact remains that they were known and performed at Wittenberg in the early sixteenth century, and that they became even more widely available after they were printed there in a publication intended for the Lutheran liturgy.

We conclude with the splendid Christmas motet *Preter rerum seriem* by Josquin Desprez, whom Luther himself called his favorite composer. Once again, by championing a composer who might be seen as the epitome of the “old school,” the great reformer showed that he was also a great mediator.

~ Grantley McDonald

Cappella Pratensis would like to thank musicologist and singer Grantley McDonald for conceiving and working out this program.

About the Artists

The vocal ensemble Cappella Pratensis – literally ‘Cappella *des prés*’ – champions the music of Josquin des Prez and the polyphonists of the 15th and 16th centuries. Based in the Dutch city of 's-Hertogenbosch (also home to the painter celebrated in this program), the group combines historically informed performance practice with inventive programs and original interpretations based on scholarly research and artistic insight. As in Josquin’s time, the members of Cappella Pratensis perform from a central music stand, singing from the original mensural notation scored in a large choirbook. This approach, together with attention to such factors as the chant origins of the polyphonic repertoire, the modal system on which it is based, the influence of solmization, and the linguistic basis, creates an intense engagement with the music.

Besides regular appearances at concert venues in the Netherlands and Belgium, Cappella Pratensis has performed at leading international festivals and concert series throughout Europe, North America and Japan. The group has been ensemble-in-residence at Harvard University, the Fondation Royaumont (France), and Boston University, giving courses, presenting concerts and working with distinguished musicians. The group’s CD recordings have met with critical acclaim and distinctions from the press (including the *Diapason d’Or* and the *Prix Choc*).

Cappella Pratensis also passes on insights into vocal polyphony and performance from original notation – both among professionals and amateurs – through masterclasses, multi-media presentations, collaboration with institutions, an annual summer course as part of the Laus Polyphoniae festival in Antwerp, and training young singers within the group itself. The ensemble is a partner with the universities of Leuven and Oxford in the digitization and valorization of all the brilliant musical sources made in the workshops of the early sixteenth-century music scribe Petrus Alamire.

www.cappellapratensis.nl