

Ensemble Cantus Figuratus

Schola Cantorum Basiliensis

Perrine Devillers, Grace Newcombe, Yukie Sato_sopranos

Roman Melish, Florencia Menconi_altos

Ozan Karagöz, Akinobu Ôno, Giacomo Schiavo_tenors

Rui Stähelin, Valerio Zanolli_basses

Félix Verry_renaissance violin

Randall Cook, Anna Danilevskaia, Sophia Danilevskaia, Filipa Meneses_renaissance viols

Aki Noda_organ

Dominique Vellard_conductor

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Renaissance Motet Cycles

As contemporary chronicler Bernardino Corio remarked, duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza (who reigned in Milan from 1466 until he was murdered in December 1476) “took great delight in song”. For his love of music, and undoubtedly also in order to parade his magnificence in competition with rival rulers, Galeazzo spared no effort in building a musical chapel of unprecedented size and quality. He recruited the best singers and composers he could find in Italy and abroad, sending his agents to scout out talents as far as Flanders and the Kingdom of Naples. In the mid 1470s his chapel counted more than thirty singers, mostly Northerners, who often followed their master during his frequent movements between Milan and various castles in the duchy (Galeazzo’s astounding travelling court included, among many others, six cooks, a jester, ten professional hand-ball players, forty dog-handlers and thirty staff in charge of the hunts and the hawks).

As a result of Galeazzo’s extravagant patronage, the ducal chapel became an unparalleled compositional workshop, where such musicians as Loyset Compère (c.1445–1518) and Gaspar van Weerbeke (c.1445–1516) could experiment with new stylistic solutions. After Galeazzo’s tragic death in 1476, the activity of the Sforza chapel continued on a more modest scale, to resume its splendour when Galeazzo’s younger brother Ludovico il Moro seized the power. In the 1490s Ludovico, the patron of Leonardo da Vinci and Donato Bramante, promoted, together with his wife Beatrice

d’Este, an exuberant court-life and embarked on ambitious politico-diplomatic plans (which eventually led to disaster). It was in Ludovico’s time that Franchino Gaffurio (1451–1522), a distinguished music theorist and chapel master at the Milanese Duomo, began supervising the preparation of the large format manuscripts, commonly known as “Libroni” (big books), which partially preserve this repertoire. It is thanks to Gaffurio that the music of the Sforza chapel was not lost for history, and for our enjoyment.

Besides such pieces as Masses, Magnificats, and lamentations, Gaffurio included in the Libroni a series of special compositions that he labelled *motetti missales*. According to current hypotheses, these cycles of motets, composed during the 1470s–1490s by Compère, Weerbeke and Gaffurio himself, were performed during the celebration of a low Mass (*missa bassa, stille Messe*), as a sort of devotional soundtrack to the rite, which covered the words whispered by the priest and *de facto* substituted items such as the introit (the beginning antiphon), the Gloria in excelsis, and so on. The apex of the cycle corresponded to the Elevation of the consecrated Host: words of adoration and supplication addressed to the Real Presence of Christ were set in long-held chords (embellished in tonight’s performance according to reconstructed historical practice), which dramatically interrupted the flow of polyphony.

It is a matter of debate among scholars whether the presumed taste of Duke Galeazzo Sforza for