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‘His name will be called John’: reception and symbolism in Obrecht’s *Missa de Sancto Johanne Baptista*

THE *Missa de Sancto Johanne Baptista* (hereafter, the *Sancto Johanne* Mass) was long considered to be an anonymous Mass for the early 16th-century papal chapel, owing to its lack of attribution and its survival in only one Vatican source (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. Cappella Sistina 160 (hereafter, cs160)).¹ It is well known that this manuscript was prepared at the Alamire scriptorium along with two related sources (cs34 and cs36) and sent to Pope Leo X, probably between 1516 and 1519.² Based on its multiple *cantus firmi* and on other stylistic grounds, the *Sancto Johanne* Mass is now attributed to Jacob Obrecht between c.1485 and c.1491; it has also come to light that this Mass is extensively modelled on Antoine Busnoys’s *Missa L’homme armé* from the later 1460s. Rob Wegman has suggested that the *Sancto Johanne* Mass might have been commissioned by a private endowment in the city of Bruges, where the composer wrote at least two other Masses with multiple *cantus firmi*.³ Although numerous churches in the Low Countries had altars dedicated to John the Baptist, a definitive endowment or other precise context for Obrecht’s Mass awaits discovery.

For all the attention that has been paid to the origins of Obrecht’s *Sancto Johanne* Mass, little has been said about the reception of the work by Leo X. This article brings to light the special meaning of John the Baptist for the recipient of this Mass, who was not simply devoted to the forerunner saint, but embodied the role of a ‘precursor’ himself in the early 16th-century papacy. In addition, this study revisits the distinct borrowings of the *Sancto*

Johanne Mass. Obrecht’s selective use of elements from Busnoys’s well-known *L’homme armé* Mass illuminates some heretofore unnoticed symbolic structures within the *Sancto Johanne* Mass. These features combine to reorientate the *L’homme armé* template towards one for John the Baptist.

If the survival in no fewer than seven manuscripts is any indication, Busnoys’s *Missa L’homme armé* had considerable appeal. It became the basis not only for the *Sancto Johanne* Mass but also for Obrecht’s own *L’homme armé* Mass from the late 1480s, all three works sharing a common mensural scheme. Moreover, the tenor in Obrecht’s *Sancto Johanne* Mass assumes the precise rhythmic layout of that found in Busnoys’s unfolding of the *L’homme armé* melody.⁴ Most striking in the *Sancto Johanne* Mass, however, is the fact the composer supplanted the *L’homme armé* tune with eight antiphons from the nativity feast of John the Baptist (24 June), which are fitted masterfully into the rhythmic design of Busnoys’s *cantus firmus*. As Wegman has explained, this full-scale modelling on a pre-existent Mass—from the perspective of rhythm alone—is rare for the 15th century and provides us with a new dimension of intertextuality to consider with late 15th-century compositions.⁵ Each of the eight antiphons is fully texted, possibly to be articulated by the singers.

Several antiphon texts among the eight stitched into the fabric of Obrecht’s *Sancto Johanne* Mass bring together strands of the first chapter of Luke’s gospel describing events around the life of John the Baptist, especially his conception (Luke i.13–15) and circumcision (Luke i.60–7).⁶ The emphasis in the

antiphon texts is not simply on the early life of the Baptist but, more importantly, on the name and naming of John.⁷ One of the antiphons—*Johannes vocabitur nomen eius* ('His name will be called John')—is marked for importance, as it is repeated three times in the Mass (Table 1). Not only did Obrecht arrange this antiphon symmetrically in bookend positions in the Mass (first Kyrie and last Agnus), but he also bisected the Mass with this antiphon in the very middle of the work (the 'Et incarnatus' of the Credo), a moment that has produced much discussion in the parallel case of Busnoys's Mass.⁸

In addition to the dominant antiphon *Johannes vocabitur nomen eius*, other antiphon texts participate in the emphatic naming of John in Obrecht's

Sancto Johanne Mass. In fact, five of the eight antiphons contain a form of the word 'Johannes' in their texts, and, significantly, these five John-naming antiphons are heard in seven of the ten subsections of the Mass that contain the *cantus firmus*. One of the antiphons from the Credo, *Innuebant Patri eius*, conveniently contains the text 'Johannes est nomen eius' as part of the Baptist's narrative, providing not only increased aural emphasis on the name of John but also unmistakable reference to the 'governing' antiphon of the Mass (*Johannes vocabitur nomen eius*). Also, in a striking case of compositional assertiveness, Obrecht overrode the traditional text at the end of the antiphon *Apertum est os Zachariae* in the first Agnus Dei setting, substituting the mantric

Table 1 *Cantus firmus* identification and distribution in Obrecht, *Missa de Sancto Johanne Baptista*

Mass section	Antiphon as <i>cantus firmus</i>	Translation	Scriptural source
Kyrie I ^a	[<i>Johannes vocabitur nomen eius</i>]	'His name will be called John, and many will rejoice in his nativity'	Luke i.13–14, 60
Kyrie II	<i>Inter natos mulierum</i>	'Among those born of women, none has arisen greater than John the Baptist '	Matthew xi.11
Gloria ('Et in terra')	<i>Iste puer magnus</i> (sung twice)	'This boy will be great in the sight of the Lord, for His hand is with him'	Luke i.15
'Tu solus Dominus'	<i>Reges videbunt</i>	'The kings shall see and the princes will rise up and adore the Lord your God, who has chosen you. Alleluia.'	Isaiah xlix.7
Credo ('Patrem')	<i>Elisabeth Zacharie</i>	'Elizabeth of Zechariah bore a great man, John the Baptist , Precursor of the Lord'	[Luke i.13] ^b
'Et incarnatus'	<i>Johannes vocabitur nomen eius</i>	'His name will be called John, and many will rejoice in his nativity'	Luke i.13–14, 60
'Confiteor'	<i>Innuebant Patri eius</i>	'They signalled to his father, to find out what he would like to name him. He wrote saying: His name is John. '	Luke i.62–3
Sanctus	<i>Puer qui natus est / Inter natos mulierum</i> ^c	'This boy who was born, is greater than a prophet: this is the one, about which the Saviour said, "Among those born of women. . ."'	[Matthew xi.9 or Luke vii.26] ^d / Matthew xi.11
Agnus Dei I–II	<i>Apertum est os Zachariae</i>	'The mouth of Zachary was opened and he prophesied saying, " John is his name "'	Luke i.64, 67
Agnus Dei III	<i>Johannes vocabitur nomen eius</i>	'His name will be called John, and many will rejoice in his nativity'	Luke i.13–14, 60

^aThe opening folio of the Mass is missing, so the superius and tenor (*cantus firmus*) are lacking.

^bThe antiphon text only loosely resembles the first part of Luke i.13: 'Elisabeth pariet tibi filium. . .'

^cThe first part of the antiphon *Puer qui natus* is heard at the opening of the Sanctus. The 'Pleni sunt' has no *cantus firmus*, but the remainder of antiphon (beginning with 'Inter natos') resumes at the 'Hosanna'.

^dThe scriptural concordance only occurs with the second part of the antiphon 'plus quam prophetam'.

text 'Johannes est nomen eius', a point taken up below.

Despite being saddled with setting eight antiphons in the *Sancto Johanne* Mass, Obrecht was obviously eager to imprint the name of John across the work. The frequent and overt naming of the Baptist in the Mass on the whole suggests that the person who provided the endowment for the work was named 'John' (Jean, Jan, Jehan, Johannes, etc.). Wegman has put forward two possible candidates—Jean Cordier (singer and friend of the composer) and Jan Obrecht (Obrecht's relative and guardian)—who could have reasonably commissioned such a Mass. Both would appear to have the necessary personal connection to the composer (and financial means) to establish a privately endowed Mass and move the composer to such an impressive compositional undertaking.⁹ Unfortunately, the documentary evidence is lacking to support further speculation about the patron of the *Sancto Johanne* Mass.

While the scholarly community has been stalled on questions about the original context of this elaborate but enigmatic Mass, little has been written about the reception history of the work. As the mysterious 'John' dedicatee of Obrecht's *Sancto Johanne* Mass remains uncertain, no less important is the 'John' who received the lone surviving manuscript with this Mass almost three decades after its composition—Giovanni de' Medici (Pope Leo X). Whether it was part of a Habsburg–Burgundian gift of thanksgiving for the Golden Rose bestowed on Archduke Charles (late 1515) or a strategic offering to influence the election of Charles as Holy Roman Emperor (1519), cs160 was tailor-made for the pope. With its multiple depictions of the coat of arms for Leo's papacy throughout the manuscript and retrospective works from a past age of polyphony, cs160 in particular represents a critical document that alluded to the past with an eye towards the future.¹⁰ In this manuscript, the celebrated Precursor in the *Sancto Johanne* Mass in this case would have been understood as none other than Leo himself, who, as scholars have shown, was often compared to John the Baptist.

Leo X: precursor and reformer

Elected at the young age of 37 and the last non-priest to ascend to the papacy, Giovanni de' Medici

followed a long papal tradition of assuming a new name as pontiff. In doing so, he selected one symbolic of his native city: the heraldic lion—*leo*, known in Florence as the *Marzocco*.¹¹ Reigning from 1513 until 1521, Leo X was best known for his excommunication of Martin Luther at the dawn of the Reformation. His other deeds and qualities have received less attention but form a more complete biographical picture. The second son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the new pope revitalized the city of Rome through his ardent promotion of literature, science and the fine arts. The centrality of artistic patronage in Leo's entourage will surprise no one, given that his father spared no expense in surrounding himself with the most reputable musical talent available. While poets showered the pope with verses for exorbitant sums, musicians were also among those treated lavishly in the papal curia. Leo attracted the finest musical practitioners and compensated them so well as to bankrupt the papal coffers at the time of his death.¹²

His extravagant habits and insatiable humanistic pursuits notwithstanding, Leo X was a devout Christian, attending daily Mass and fasting regularly. A Florentine at heart, he was especially dedicated to the John the Baptist, the protector of his native city and patron saint of the famous Florence Baptistery. The Baptist's nativity feast in June, a day associated with the summer solstice, was as significant a day in the pope's calendar in Rome as it was in Florence.¹³ On this day, Florentines in Rome—the new pope notably among them—gathered both to dine festively and to be entertained by horse and buffalo races. A first-hand account even survives from Leo's chronicler Marcantonio Michiel, indicating that the pontiff specially hosted cardinals and ambassadors on St John's Day for lunch and dinner in the Castel Sant' Angelo, followed by an evening filled with music and fireworks.¹⁴

The name Giovanni, the Florentine heritage, and the elaborate festivities on John the Baptist's nativity day in Rome are seemingly mild connections to the saint and do little to establish Leo's embodiment of the Precursor. John, after all, was one of the most common names in the Christian world. But art historians have recently demonstrated that contemporaries went to some lengths to establish an explicit connection between Giovanni and his

namesake patron saint: for many, the pope exemplified various attributes of Christ's forerunner. When Giovanni was named a cardinal in 1489, the great Neoplatonic humanist and founder of the Florentine Academy Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) used the dedicatory letter of his Latin translation of Jamblichus's *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* to laud the future pope with an unmistakable reference to John the Baptist from Scripture (John i.6–8): 'This is a man of Florence sent by God, whose name is John, born of the heroic stock of Medici. This man has come for testimony that he might bear witness about the greatest authority among us of his father, the magnanimous Lorenzo'.¹⁵ Also, upon Leo's 1515 *entrata* into Florence, the pope travelled past a temporary structure with an inscription noting that the city was at once under the protection of two lions (Pope Leo and the *Marzocco*) and two Johns (Giovanni de' Medici and John the Baptist).¹⁶

Striking evidence from the visual arts further intertwines Leo X and Christ's forerunner. In Raphael's well-known portrait *Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi* from 1517 or 1518 (illus.1), scholars have already noted a strong 'Johannine' subtext to the scene, which subtly confers qualities of the Precursor saint onto the pope. In this painting, whose function has been the subject of intense debate, a few critical details trigger the overtones of John the Baptist within the full image. Most obvious is that fact that the Bible is open at the first chapter of John's gospel, which reveals God's salvational plan beginning with the Baptist: 'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him . . . The true light that enlightens every man was coming in to the world' (John i.6–7, 9).¹⁷ Ficino's letter parodied these very verses from the gospel of John when describing Giovanni de' Medici. In addition to this discernible textual connection to John the Baptist, others have pointed to additional features from Raphael's portrait that establish a clearer relationship between Leo and the Precursor saint. The pope's obvious gaze to his right suggests that the focus should be on another figure, a possible metaphor for the pope searching for either one who is greater than him (i.e. a Messiah) or a new age with him as the church's appointed pastor.¹⁸ The two cardinals Giulio de'

Medici and Luigi de' Rossi were also the desired successors to the Medici pope, not to mention his cousins, which is not unlike the consanguine relationship between John and Jesus. Further, attention has been drawn to the peculiar use of light in Raphael's well-known portrait, which allows the verses from the gospel of John to emerge prominently at the visual surface. The chamber is noticeably dark, but a light, which comes only from above, is strictly thrown on the arms and hands of Leo and Luigi, as well as the evangelist's prophetic verses. Leo was a beacon for greater things to come in the papacy, just as John the Baptist gave testimony to the Light of the World ahead of Christ's advent.¹⁹

The 'Johannine' qualities of Leo X in Raphael's portrait may be expanded to include the role of reformer that is exemplified in both the pope and the Precursor. While the Medici family had re-established itself as a formidable dynasty in Florence, Leo's election to the papacy represented a foray into the ecclesiastical realm where another dynasty could be constructed.²⁰ Though history has shown him to be somewhat indecisive when it came to the plight surrounding Luther, the Medicean pope took other notably bold actions of reform. Leo X issued several transformative decrees during the Fifth Lateran Council and even made advances towards the unification of Eastern and Western Christendom with his confirmation of the patriarchs of the Ethiopian and Maronite churches in 1514 and 1515 respectively.²¹ Even within his own pontifical duties, he broke with tradition. In the annual *mandatum* foot-washing ceremony, he reportedly told his master of ceremonies that he did not want to wear the silk and velvet vestments of his predecessors, arguing that 'he wished above all to reform himself within and without so that he could also the better reform others'.²² A comparison with John the Baptist is again hard to resist. The Forerunner saint was not only a 'wild man' of the New Testament, ruggedly dressed in coarse clothing made of camel hair and sustaining a diet of locusts and wild honey (Matthew iii.4 and Mark i.6), he was also sent to reform his people and 'prepare the way' for the Messiah (Mark i.2–3).

The trio of manuscripts delivered to Leo from the Alamire workshop contained various cues to honour the recipient's Medicean heritage and papal



1 Raphael Sanzio, *Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi*, 1517–18 (Florence, Uffizi / Bridgeman Art Library)

status;²³ cs160 in particular opens with a donor portrait of Leo attended by a cardinal holding the papal crown (illus.2)—a validation of the legitimacy of his election.²⁴

Obrecht's Mass in particular makes cs160 the most 'Johannine' of the three manuscripts sent to the pope. While the *Sancto Johanne* Mass does not appear first in the manuscript and is now missing its first folio, which might have contained a telling illuminated miniature, the Kyrie does contain the Medici coat of arms for Leo X within the initial 'C' of the contratenor part on the recto of the Mass's first opening (illus.3). Significantly, the *Sancto Johanne* Mass is also the first non-Marian Mass in cs160 and falls ahead of Masses for Christ, the Trinity, and even an additional Mass for Mary composed by Obrecht (*Missa Sicut spina rosam*).

The *Sancto Johanne* Mass was also arguably one of the most musically ornate of the Masses among the trio of manuscripts sent by the Habsburg-Burgundian court. It is not the only Mass with multiple *cantus firmi* sent to Leo, but the Mass does employ more *cantus firmi* than any other of the 20-odd Masses across the three manuscripts.²⁵ As the structural 'cousin' of Busnoys's well-known Mass, it is also one of the boldest compositions to be modelled on a pre-existent work. The texts of the eight antiphons were not hidden beneath the surface, but presumably sung by the voice carrying the *cantus firmus*, making audible the overwhelming emphasis on the name John in performance. Beyond the impact of the aural cues for the Baptist (and, by association, the 'John' dedicatee), there remain more subtle illustrations of the Precursor saint in the



2 Leo X attended by a Cardinal. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. Cappella Sistina 160, f.3r (detail) (© 2011 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, by permission of Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, with all rights reserved)

3 Opening of Obrecht, *Missa de Sancto Johanne Baptista*. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. Cappella Sistina 160, f.49r. (f.48 has been pilfered) (© 2011 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, by permission of Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, with all rights reserved)

musical construction of the Mass. In his studies of Obrecht's *Sancto Johanne* Mass, Rob Wegman has called for an interpretation of this work not as an instance of 'musical *imitatio*', but one in symbolic terms that acknowledges the dissolution of the military or Christological symbolism associated with the *L'homme armé* melody.²⁶ The remainder of this article highlights two key structural properties of the work that are well known to scholars but have not occasioned comment when considered in light of the Johannine reorientation of Busnoys's original setting.

Musical decollation and the voice of Zechariah

In his *Sancto Johanne* Mass, Obrecht preserved the mensural plan (i.e. the same mensuration in all voices at all times), the rhythm of the *cantus firmus*, and the sectional divisions of Busnoys's *Missa L'homme armé*. He further retained the descent of the *cantus firmus* to the bassus in the Agnus Dei, a point that has been overlooked in the literature on the Mass. In the Agnus Dei of Busnoys's Mass, the composer gave the *L'homme armé* tune to the bassus but presented the melody in inversion. At this moment in Obrecht's Mass, the composer similarly sent one of his eight *cantus firmus* melodies to the bassus, beginning the new melody precisely 14 breves into the first Agnus, true to Busnoys's *L'homme armé* model. Obrecht's migrant *cantus firmus* declaims the antiphon *Aperturn est os Zachariae*—an encapsulation of Luke i.64, 67 (Table 1)—in 'prime form' (not inverted, or retrograded). In sustaining this important structural element with modifications, Obrecht not only continued to demonstrate the extent of the interconnectedness between these Masses but also began to expose the theological symbolism in the new work. When the descended *cantus firmus* is viewed through a Johannine lens, one finds a clearer compositional dialogue between the two Masses.

The migration of a *cantus firmus* and the exploration of lower registers for the *cantus firmus* were not unheard of in Masses from the second half of the 15th century, but neither could these treatments be called conventional in composition. Anne Robertson has suggested a theological motivation for Ockeghem's placement of the *cantus firmus*

entirely in the bass range in his *Caput* Mass. Specifically, the relegation of the melody to the bass in the *Caput* tradition illustrates in music the act of Christ's (or even Mary's) 'downing' of the head of the serpent (*caput draconis*).²⁷ We can only guess why Busnoys placed the *cantus firmus* in the bassus of his *L'homme armé* Mass. Presumably, the simultaneous repositioning and inversion of the melody strengthened the *L'homme armé* or Christological connection to the defeat of a wicked perpetrator (whether Satan or the Turk).

Unlike Busnoys, Obrecht set the *cantus firmus* in the bassus with some frequency.²⁸ But this fact should not preclude a symbolic interpretation of the technique as applied in the *Sancto Johanne* Mass, since it is so heavily modelled on the work of Busnoys. Of course in the case of Obrecht's Mass, there is no reason to suspect any symbolic stamping out of an evildoer. The use of eight antiphons from the feast of John's nativity firmly situates this Mass in the Johannine realm. However, the notion of the Baptist's decollation might well explain Obrecht's preservation of the descending *cantus firmus* to the bass register for the Agnus Dei, and it may be no accident that the *Caput* tradition springs to mind, given that the decollation of John the Baptist involved a blow to his head (*caput*).²⁹ While John's nativity was an important celebration, his decollation was also especially notable among Christian martyrs, and the details of his dreadful beheading might have formed an image that rationalized this compositional technique in the Agnus Dei of Obrecht's *Sancto Johanne* Mass.

Before confining speculation to the subject of the decollation, we might inspect the text of the antiphon in the first Agnus of the *Sancto Johanne* Mass. The substance of this antiphon points us in a more fruitful interpretive direction, which I suspect was as attractive to Obrecht for its practicality as it was for its symbolism. Examination of the antiphon *Aperturn est os Zachariae* reveals that the composer took liberties as he set the text in the bassus. The altered text was no small change—Obrecht supplanted the words where the famous Canticle of Zechariah ('Benedictus Deus Israel') would begin both in the antiphon and in Luke i.68–79 with another naming of John.

Antiphon text:

Apertum est os
Zachariae
et prophetavit dicens
Benedictus deus
Israel.

Obrecht's text:

Apertum est os
Zachariae
et prophetavit dicens
*Johannes est nomen
eius.*

(The mouth of Zechariah was opened and he prophesied, saying: 'Blessed be the God of Israel' (Obrecht: 'John is his name').)

What has escaped scholarly attention is that this antiphon describes the critical moment in the narrative when the Baptist's father Zechariah is cured of his muteness. As Zechariah regains his speech to deliver the Benedictus, the antiphon finds itself in a typical singing range for a male elder—the bassus. The transported *cantus firmus* thus dramatically embodies the role of John's father in the story, confirmed by his 'speaking role' later in the antiphon. The shift of register for the *cantus firmus* is quite audible, particularly at the outset where the rhythmic activity of the upper voices is minimized, presumably in response to the first phrase of the antiphon in the bassus (ex.1). In both text and music, then, Obrecht draws attention to this transformative moment of the narrative.

Beyond the changes of register and text, Obrecht further altered the first Agnus by recasting the G-mode antiphon *Apertum est os Zachariae* into an E-mode profile. The revisions to both the text ('Johannes est nomen eius') and the music in this simple antiphon should at least cause us briefly to question the generally accepted premise of Obrecht's strict fidelity to models as a signature feature of his work. *Apertum est os Zachariae* is then followed in the second Agnus by the final antiphon *Johannes vocabitur nomen eius* (still in the bassus), which represents a return to the 'governing' antiphon of Obrecht's Mass and establishes the remarkable symmetry of this antiphon throughout the Mass. The heightened naming of John at the end of this Mass and the symbolic relocation of the antiphons to the bassus reinforce the Johannine transformation of the *L'homme armé* model. And can it be by chance that these audible aspects of the Mass took place in the Agnus Dei, the most 'Johannine' of the Mass movements? Indeed, it was John who delivered most of the words of the Agnus Dei, as he famously 'pointed out' the Lamb of God (John i.29).

Durational symbolism

A closer look at the rhythmic template of Obrecht's Mass reveals that the composer also did not strictly follow his model at all turns, the effect of which may also invoke the Precursor saint in a symbolic way. Busnoys's penchant for rationalist 'floor plans' and methodical rhythmic schemes—reminiscent of the isorythmic tradition—has long been known to scholars. The rigorous mathematical construction of the *L'homme armé* Mass in particular was recognized by Richard Taruskin, who hypothesized that the lengths of the interior Mass sections generate mathematical ratios that correspond to key Pythagorean proportions.³⁰ For all of its rigid proportionality, the composer's *L'homme armé* Mass contains a single 'egregious anomaly' (as Taruskin called it) that interrupts the scrupulous harmonic ratios of the work—the prime number 31. This number corresponds both to the number of *tempora* in the 'Et incarnatus' section of Busnoys's Credo and incidentally to the number of semibreves in the original *L'homme armé* melody (to say nothing of the number's importance in the Naples Masses, likely by Busnoys). Many have toiled over the meaning of the symbolism in the number 31 at the centre of Busnoys's Mass; the prevailing view acknowledges both its Christological significance and its possible reference to the number of chevaliers in the Order of the Golden Fleece (plus their master) during the time of Charles the Bold.³¹

No less a number symbolist in his compositions, Obrecht seems to have taken notice of Busnoys's 'egregious anomaly' and articulated his 'Et incarnatus' section with a slight modification. It will be remembered that this section was also a key moment in the *Sancto Johanne* Mass because of the repeat of the governing antiphon *Johannes vocabitur nomen eius*. While the layout of Obrecht's *cantus firmus* matches that of Busnoys, Obrecht truncated the total duration of the 'Et incarnatus' section to yield 30 *tempora* instead of 31, with the elimination of any activity in the surrounding three voices after the final long is reached. (Busnoys's setting indeed does not rest during or after the 31st *tempus* is reached.) Obrecht's re-reading of Busnoys's Mass ironically unleashed another rational rhythmic ground plan for the entire *Sancto Johanne* Mass and further dissolved any numerical and *L'homme armé* symbolism

Ex.1 Obrecht, Agnus Dei (I) from *Missa de Sancto Johanne Baptista*

A - gnus De - i, qui tol -

A - gnus De - i, A -

A - gnus De - i

8

- lis

- gnus De - i,

A - gnus De -

14

pec - ca - ta mun - di, qui tol - lis

qui tol - lis qui

- i, qui tol - lis qui tol -

A - per - tum est os Za - char - ri - ae, et pro - phe - ta -

21

pec - ca - ta mun - di: mi - se - re

tol - lis pec - ca - ta mun - di:

- lis qui tol - lis,

- vit di - cens: Io - han - nes

related to Christ in Obrecht's work. The composer instead struck yet another profound durational balance within the work, one that has also not gone unrecognized. Nors S. Josephson, who edited Obrecht's *Sancto Johanne* Mass in 1982 yet was unaware of the connection to Busnoys's Mass, illuminated the high degree of proportionality in Obrecht's design, charting the durations across the Mass sections that contain the *cantus firmus*, as has become customary in identifying Obrecht's proportional schemes (Table 2).³²

Josephson's simplification of these numbers reveals a large-scale view of the symmetry and balance in the duration of the movements of the Mass template achieved by Obrecht though rooted in Busnoys's model. On this very high level of temporal planning, Obrecht's structure unfolds in three large sections of 180 breves each, leaving an obvious proportion of 1:1:1 (Kyrie/Gloria; Credo; Sanctus/Agnus). That Obrecht seems to have slightly altered Busnoys's durational template while still holding his *cantus firmi* to the rhythms of the model brings this temporal detail to the analytical foreground.

On the question of the total length of Obrecht's Mass, it is useful to keep in mind earlier studies that illustrate how theology was expressed in numerical

terms through music.³³ Often cited on this topic is Obrecht's *Missa Sub tuum praesidium*, a Mass that not only uses seven *cantus firmi* and builds from three voices in the Kyrie to seven voices at the Agnus Dei (seven being the traditional number for the sorrows of Mary), but also has a conspicuous total duration of 888 breves—a symbolic number for Christ.³⁴ If Busnoy's 31 *tempora* drew the attention of number symbolists, what of the unfolding of proportional 180-breve sections in the *Sancto Johanne* Mass?

Josephson did not comment on the possible meaning behind the striking symmetry in the *cantus firmus*-bearing sections. It may be asked then if there is something theological, perhaps Johannine, about the number 180. Indeed, the number was an exceptional and pliable one in Pythagorean mathematical theory and another remnant of the isorhythmic tradition, which might explain Obrecht's attraction to it.³⁵ Importantly, however, the number 180 has significant meaning for John the Baptist. It was well known in the late Middle Ages, though all but lost on Christians today, that the nativity of John the Baptist on 24 June is separated from that of Christ (25 December) by exactly six months, an interval which historically would be regarded as 180 days in length.³⁶ This six-month separation, indeed the polar opposition, between the births of John and Jesus and an analogy specifically with the seasonal solstices in the calendar year was recognized in treatises and by medieval theologians from Augustine to Durandus.³⁷

The number 180 itself is mentioned only once in Scripture, tellingly in connection with the days of the year. Esther 1.4 reads: 'For a full hundred and eighty days, he [King Ahasuerus] displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendour and glory of his majesty'. This verse prepares the story of the deposal of Queen Vashti and the making of the Jewish heroine Esther as Ahasuerus's queen. It so happens that the king's opulence and display of power in the Book of Esther also has an analogue with the feast of John's nativity, a relationship that has been noted in Judaic commentary on Esther.³⁸ It is well chronicled that in the summer months, framed by the nativity celebration on 24 June and the feast of John's beheading on 29 August, people seized the moment to publicly criticize temporal

Table 2 Durational design of Obrecht's *Missa de Sancto Johanne Baptista*

Mass section	Section length (breves)	Mvt. length (breves)	Higher level sum (breves)
Kyrie I	18	36	= 180
Kyrie II	18		
'Et in terra'	54	144	
'Qui tollis'	72		
'Tu solus'	18		
'Dominus'			
'Patrem'	54	180	= 180
'Et incarnatus'	90*		
'Confiteor'	36		
Sanctus	36	90	
'Osanna'	54		
Agnus Dei I–II	36	90	= 180
Agnus Dei III	54		
TOTAL	= 540	= 540	= 540

*Busnoys's *Missa L'homme armé* has 31 *tempora* (in augmentation, 93 breves as read in diminution)

rulers, reminding kings and nobles of their vulnerability as sovereigns.³⁹ This period of solar reversal at the summer solstice and the rebuke of Herod at the scene of the Beheading validated this summer custom. The popular tradition of admonishing rulers in connection with the life of John the Baptist may even be echoed in Obrecht's Mass by the choice of the antiphon *Reges videbunt* ('Kings shall see [and princes will rise up and adore the Lord]'), which is the only *cantus firmus* text in Obrecht's Mass from the Old Testament.

The number 180, then, has more than one point of resonance with the Precursor saint, and it is not unreasonable to consider that, in the proportionate unfolding of 180-breve macro-sections, the astute Obrecht saw exegetical potential in the durational design of Busnoys's model. Adhering to select parameters of the *L'homme armé* template, Obrecht subtly transformed Busnoys's Christological Mass to reflect a Johannine character, both in the formal background and the *cantus firmi* sounding the name of John at the surface.

That Obrecht was capable of projecting theology in musical design is without doubt. We know that he received a master's degree in the arts with significant theological content and did not hesitate to draw on theological images to embed in his

compositions.⁴⁰ Let us hope that the *Sancto Johanne* Mass will continue to garner the attention it deserves now that it has shaken off its label of anonymity and is increasingly recognized as the work of Obrecht. More specifically, the exegetical capacity of this Mass should not be overlooked when dealing with this composer and may produce further insight into his other Masses. Given Obrecht's university training and contrapuntal command, he could have realistically imbued this composition with the attendant theology concerning Christ's Precursor as he made subtle adjustments within an otherwise rigid model. Not only did Obrecht saturate his Mass for John the Baptist with an astonishing number of symbolic *cantus firmi* from the well of antiphons for the saint, but he also confronted Busnoys's model, altering it to reveal Johannine conceits. As the *L'homme armé* topos was exchanged for that of John the Baptist, Obrecht enhanced the level of intertextuality between the two works, producing in the process a brilliant encapsulation of theology in musical design of the late 15th century. It seems entirely possible that the inaudible and audible aspects of this artificial Mass for some 'John' could have resonated with Leo X and his entourage just as they did with its original dedicatee.

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1 Ff.49r–63r. The opening folio in cs160 has been pilfered, making the superius and tenor of the initial Kyrie (and possibly an illuminated miniature) unavailable for study.

The most recent edition, which reconstructs the two missing parts and sets the *cantus firmus* as the antiphon *Johannes vocabitur nomen eius*, is found in *Early sixteenth-century sacred music from the papal chapel*, ed. N. S. Josephson, 2 vols., Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae 95 (Neuhausen-Stuttgart, 1982), i, pp.1–39.

2 See F. Warmington, 'Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana Ms. Cappella Sistina 160', in *The treasury of Petrus Alamire: music and arts in Flemish court manuscripts 1500–1535*, ed. H. Kellman (Ghent, 1999), pp.133–6. On the wide range of liturgical occasions for which this

music could be used, see H. Meconi, 'The function of the Habsburg–Burgundian court manuscripts', in *The Burgundian–Habsburg court complex of music manuscripts (1500–35) and the workshop of Petrus Alamire, colloquium proceedings: Leuven 25–28 November 1999*, ed. B. Bouckaert and E. Schreurs (Leuven, 2003), pp.120–1.

3 In her 1987 dissertation, Jennifer Bloxam was the first to suggest that this Mass might be attributed to Jacob Obrecht, on account of its multiple *cantus firmi*, a striking aspect of Obrecht's work in this period. See Bloxam, 'A survey of late medieval

service books from the Low Countries' (PhD diss., Yale University, 1987), pp.443–51. Wegman more recently asserted Obrecht's authorship on stylistic grounds: R. Wegman, 'Another "imitation" of Busnoys's *Missa L'homme armé*: some observations on *imitatio* in Renaissance music', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, cxiv (1989), pp.189–202, at p.200, and *Born for the Muses: the life and Masses of Jacob Obrecht* (Oxford, 1994), pp.213–17.

4 For a rhythmic comparison of the tenors of the respective Masses, see Wegman, 'Another "imitation"', pp.195–6. The tenor in both Masses generally adheres to a different mensuration than the surrounding three voices.

5 Wegman, 'Mensural intertextuality in the sacred music of Antoine Busnoys', in *Antoine Busnoys: method, meaning and context in late medieval music*, ed. P. Higgins (Oxford, 1999), pp.175–214.

6 Several of the antiphons can be found in the service of Lauds for John's nativity feast. For the typical liturgical positions of these antiphons, see M. A. Anderson, 'Symbols of saints: theology, ritual, and kinship in music for John the Baptist and St. Anne (1175–1563)', 3 vols. (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008), ii, p.288. Although the organization of antiphons differed by geographic location, the high rank of the feast of the nativity of John the Baptist ensured many of the antiphons a relatively stable liturgical position in usages throughout Western Europe.

7 In the story of the conception, the angel Gabriel delivers the news to Zechariah that not only will Elizabeth conceive, but that his name will be John (Luke i.13). By the time of the circumcision of the Baptist on the eighth day following his birth (Luke i.59–66), there is some disagreement about what name the child should be called. With his father intending to name the child Zechariah, according to the tradition, Elizabeth corrects him and fulfills the angel's announcement, declaring that her son will be called John.

8 Wegman (*Born for the muses*, p.216, n.16) has noted the parallel prominence given to the antiphons

Martinus adhuc cathecuminus and *O beate pater Donatiane* in Obrecht's Masses for St Martin and St Donatian, respectively.

9 On Cordier's biography, see R. Strohm, *Music in late medieval Bruges* (Oxford, 1990), pp.37–8. For the life and influence of Jan Obrecht, see Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, pp.29–31 and 37–43. Yet another possible candidate proposed by Wegman (*Born for the Muses*, p.217) is Obrecht's father and famous Ghent trumpeter Willem Obrecht. His father was the first to introduce the composer to Busnoys in the late 1460s and therefore might have prompted Obrecht to engage with Busnoys's *Missa L'homme armé* as a model for the *Sancto Johanne* Mass. For an alternative view of the Mass as a dedication for the birth of the son of a knight from the Golden Fleece, see K. van der Heide, 'Polytekstuele religieuze muziek aan het Bourgondisch-Habsburgse hof als spiegel van het laat-middeleeuwse wereldbeeld' (PhD diss., University of Utrecht, 1998), pp.153–5.

10 Warmington, 'Vatican City', pp.135–6.

11 Only three popes since the year 1010 have selected their baptismal name, or variant thereof, as their papal name (Julius II, Hadrian VI, Marcellus II). See A. Gurugé and M. Kirkland, *The next Pope* (Alton, 2010), pp. 211–12.

12 On the pontificate of Leo X, see H. M. Vaughan, *The Medici popes: Leo X and Clement VII* (London, 1908), pp.100–284, and E. Duffy, *Saints and sinners: a history of the popes* (New Haven, 1997), pp.201–5. For studies specific to music at the court of Leo X, see A. Pirro, 'Leo X and music', *Musical Quarterly*, xxi (1935), pp.1–16, and B. Blackburn, 'Music and festivities at the court of Leo X: a Venetian view', *Early Music History*, xi (1992), pp.1–37.

13 For a description of these activities after the return of the Medici from exile in 1513 and after the election of Leo X in 1513, see B. Masi, *Ricordanze di Bartolommeo Masi, Calderaio fiorentino dal 1478 al 1526*, ed. O. Corazzini (Florence, 1906), pp.141–4. More generally, on the celebration of the feast of St John the Baptist in Florence, see R. Trexler, *Public life in*

Renaissance Florence (New York, 1980), pp.240–63.

14 Venice, Biblioteca Correr, Ms. 2848, ff.335v–336r, cited in Blackburn, 'Music and festivities', pp.33–4.

15 See Marsilio Ficino, *Opera omnia*, ed. P. Kristeller (Turin, 1959), ii, bk. 2, p.897: 'Est homo Florentiae missus a Deo, cui nomen est Ioannes, heroica Medicum stripe natus, hic venit in testimonium, ut de summa Patris sui magnanimi Laurentij, apud omnes, autoritate testimonium perhiberet'. The papal master of ceremonies, Paride de Grassi (1470–1528), further connected Leo X with his namesake John the Baptist. On the Baptist's nativity feast day in 1513, Grassi specifically noted in his diary that the pope's name was John (Giovanni), neglecting to do so on the feast of John the Evangelist (27 December). See Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 12275, ff.53r and 95v.

16 J. Shearman, 'The Florentine entrata of Leo X, 1515', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xxxviii (1975), pp.136–54, at p.140. On the symbolism connecting Florence with Rome, see A. M. Cummings, *The politicized muse: music for Medici festivals, 1512–1537* (Princeton, 1992), p.67, and M. Tacconi, 'Appropriating the instruments of worship: the 1512 Medici restoration and the Florentine Cathedral choirbooks', *Renaissance Quarterly*, lvi (2003), pp.333–76, at pp.349–51.

17 'Fuit homo missus a Deo cui nomen erat Iohannes. Hic venit in testimonium ut testimonium perhiberet de lumine ut omnes crederent per illum . . . erat lux vera quae inluminat omnem hominem venientem in mundum.' On this detail in the portrait, see, for example, R. Sherr, 'Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino, as a patron of music', in *Renaissance studies in honor of Craig Hugh Smyth*, ed. P. Morselli et al. (Florence, 1985), pp.627–38, at p.632, and B. F. Davidson, *Raphael's bible: a study of the Vatican Logge* (University Park, PA, 1985), pp.12–13.

18 J. Jungić, 'Prophecies of the angelic pastor in Sebastiano del Piombo's portrait of Cardinal Bandinello Sauli and three companions', in *Prophetic Rome in the high Renaissance period:*

essays, ed. M. Reeves (Oxford, 1992), pp.345–70, at pp.368–70.

19 N. Minnich, ‘Raphael’s portrait “Leo X with cardinals Giulio de’ Medici and Luigi de’ Rossi”: a religious interpretation’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, lvi (2003), pp.1005–52, at p.1041.

20 *Ibid.*, p.1031.

21 On the papal decrees and other goals of this Council, see N. Tanner, *Decrees of the ecumenical councils*, trans. W. Pearsall (Washington, 1990), i, pp.606–25 and pp.650–5.

22 ‘velle se imprimis reformare intus et extra ut sic etiam melius possit reliquos reformare.’ This statement can be found in de Grassi’s diary of Leo X (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 12275, f.367r).

23 cs36 contains the Medici coat of arms on f.66v at the beginning of La Rue’s *Missa de virginibus*. The manuscript also uses apostolic keys throughout the music to indicate continuation signs.

24 The cardinal is misidentified, ironically, as John the Baptist in Warmington, ‘Vatican City’, p.135. Donning a red garment trimmed in ermine with broad-brimmed hat, this figure is almost certainly a cardinal.

25 In cs160, there are two Masses that each contain five *cantus firmi* drawn from Ordinary chants (Isaac’s *Missa Paschalis a6* and Josquin’s *Missa de Beata Virgine*). In cs34 and cs36, which are dominated by Pierre de La Rue’s Masses, the only Mass that has a significant number of *cantus firmi* is La Rue’s *Missa Pascale*, which employs seven plainchants from the Easter liturgy.

26 Wegman, ‘Another “Imitation”’, p.201.

27 A. W. Robertson, ‘The Savior, the woman, and the head of the dragon in the *Caput* Masses and motet’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, lix (2006), pp.537–630, at pp.584–95. Robertson has proposed this same exegetical conceit for Obrecht’s own *Caput* Mass, with its predetermined ‘serpentine’ migration of the *cantus firmus* through the voice parts in the Mass movements until its final descent to the bass voice for the Agnus Dei.

28 Obrecht places the *cantus firmus*, wholly or in part, in the bassus in half of his 30 Masses. Only five Masses have the *cantus firmus* in the bass for the entire Agnus Dei (*Sancto Johanne Baptista*, *L’homme armé*, *Caput*, *Ave regina caelorum* and *Plurimorum carminum II*). In three Masses (*Maria zart*, *Pfawenschwantz* and *Malheur me bat*), the composer sets the *cantus firmus* in the bassus for part of the Agnus Dei only to move it to a different voice for the final Agnus.

29 In the two gospels that do offer details on the decollation (Matthew xiv.8–11, Mark vi.24–8), John’s head (*caput*) is naturally an important component in the unfolding of this famous scene. Even antiphons from the Feast of the Decollation of John the Baptist emphasize the indelible image of the Precursor’s severed head on a platter. Two widespread antiphons from the Office of the Baptist’s decollation directly speak of the severed head of John: *Da mihi in disco caput* (CAO 2088) and *Petiit puella caput Joannis* (CAO 4277).

30 R. Taruskin, ‘Antoine Busnoys and the L’homme armé tradition’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xxxix (1986), pp.255–93, at p.269. A rebuttal of Taruskin’s hypothesis and methodology was issued by Wegman, ‘Letter from Rob C. Wegman’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xlii (1989), pp.437–43 (Taruskin’s rejoinder follows on pp.443–52). On Busnoys’s numerical proportioning more generally, see E. Sparks, *Cantus firmus in Mass and motet, 1420–1520* (Berkeley, 1963, r/New York, 1975), pp.236–7, and T. Brothers, ‘Vestiges of the isorhythmic tradition in Mass and motet, ca. 1450–1475’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xlii (1991), pp.1–56, at p.15.

31 A. E. Planchart, ‘The origins and early history of *L’homme armé*’, *Journal of Musicology*, xx (2003), pp.305–57, at p.312.

32 *Early sixteenth-century sacred music from the papal chapel*, i, p.xiii, incl.

n.31. Any section of the Mass without the *cantus firmus* (*Christe*, *Pleni sunt* and *Benedictus*) is not counted in this design, nor is the final long of the tenor counted.

33 Important studies of number symbolism span the *Roman de Fauvel*

through the music of Josquin. See, for example, W. Arlt, “Triginta denariis”—Musik und Text in einer Motette des *Roman de Fauvel* über dem Tenor *Victimae paschali laudes*’, in *Pax et sapientia: studies in text and music of liturgical tropes and sequences, in memory of Gordon Anderson*, Acta Universitatis Stockholmensis, Studia Latina Stockholmensis 29 (1986), pp.97–113; B. Trowell, ‘Proportion in the music of Dunstable’, *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, cv (1978/79), pp.100–41; C. Wright, ‘Dufay’s *Nuper rosarum flores*, King Solomon’s temple, and the veneration of the Virgin’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xlvii (1994), pp.395–441; and W. Elders, ‘Symbolism in the sacred music of Josquin’, in *The Josquin Companion*, ed. R. Sherr (Oxford, 2000).

34 The discovery of the ‘secret structure’, which includes not only the symbolic number of breves but also more extensive computations and claims, was made by Van Crevel in his calculations for the *Missa Sub tuum praesidium*. See M. van Crevel, *Introduction to Jacob Obrecht: opera omnia, editio altera* (Amsterdam, 1959–64), vi, pp.xvii–xxv. On the Gnostic tradition of relating the number 888 to Christ, see V. Hopper, *Medieval number symbolism: its sources, meaning and influence on thought and expression* (New York, 1938), p.63.

35 The number 180 was called an ‘abundant’ number in Pythagorean mathematical theory because the sum of its factors was greater than the number itself. One would factor out the number 10 from 180, as was customary, leaving the number 18. In the number 18, the sum of its factors (1+2+3+6+9 or 21 [excluding 18]) is more than the number 18 itself.

36 Several places in the Bible, including the Book of Revelation, reveal that a month must equal 30 days, thereby making the twelve-month year 360 days long and the six-month separation of nativities 180 days in length. See, for example, Genesis vii.11–viii.4 and Revelation xi.2–3.

37 Augustine of Hippo, ‘De diversis quaestionibus’, *Patrologiae cursus completus: series latina* [PL], ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1844–79), xl, p.42,

and Guillaume Durand, *Rationale divinatorum officiorum*, ed. A. Davril and T. M. Thibodeau (Turnhout, 1995–2000), iii, p.58. On the six-month separation in particular, see the anonymous ‘Expositio evangeliorum’, *PL*, xxx, p.568A; Anonymous, ‘De ortu et obitu Patrum’, *PL*, lxxxiii, p.1284D; and Walafridus Strabo, ‘Expositio in quatuor Evangelia’, *PL*, cxiv, p.895c.

38 The haggadic traditions on Esther i directly influenced the unusually explicit detail of John’s decollation in Mark vi.14–29. Events as specific as the Herod’s birthday banquet, the dancing girl (Salome), the offer of half the kingdom, and the severed head on a platter are each found in haggadic writings and appropriated in the gospel of Mark. On these connections, see R. Aus, *Water into wine and the beheading of John the Baptist* (Atlanta, 1988), pp.39–66, and B. D. Schildgen, ‘A blind promise: Mark’s retrieval of Esther’, *Poetics Today*, xv (1994), pp.115–31.

39 As a result, some rulers took part in the festivities to acknowledge their own vulnerabilities and submission to higher authority. Louis XI, for instance, lit the annual ‘St John’ bonfire in the streets of Paris in 1471. See J. de Roye, *Journal de Jean de Roye, connu sous le nom de Chronique Scandaleuse*, ed. B. de Mandrot, 2 vols. (Paris, 1894), i, p.260. In the early 17th century, the Lyonnais historian Claude de Rubys (*Histoire véritable de la ville de Lyon* (Lyon, 1604), pp.499–501) vividly described the practice of public denigration of temporal rulers on the summer solstice.

40 See J. Bloxam, ‘Obrecht the exegete: reading *Factor Orbis* as a Christmas sermon’, in *Hearing the motet: essays on the motet of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. D. Pesce (Oxford, 1997), pp.169–92, at pp.173–7. Beyond the 888 breves of his *Missa Sub tuum praesidium* noticed by Van Crevel, Craig Wright has shown that Obrecht embedded an astrological understanding of Christ by associating him with the constellation of Aries, the customary sign of birth and regeneration, in the Agnus Dei of Obrecht’s *Missa Graecorum* (c.1485). See C. Wright, *The maze and the warrior: symbols in architecture, theology, and music* (Cambridge, 2001), pp.118–23.

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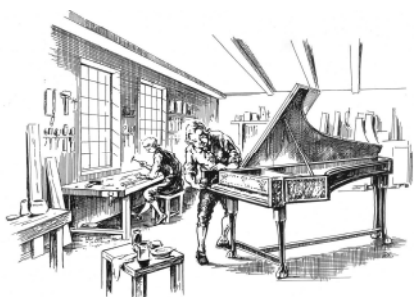
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