

GRAMOPHONE GUIDE TO

The motet

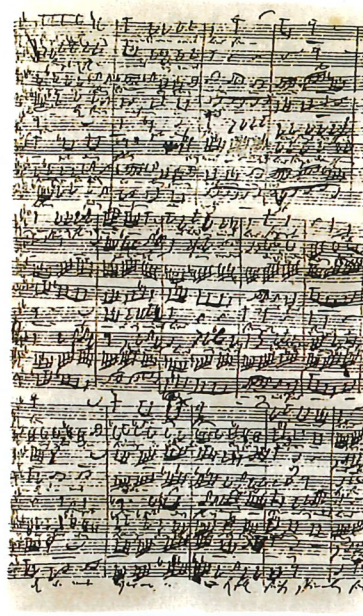
Lindsay Kemp focuses on the rich history of one of the oldest sacred vocal genres

The motet has been with us for as long as, perhaps longer than, any other named musical genre except the Mass. And for most of its eight centuries of existence, the term has meant pretty much the same thing: a piece of sacred vocal music that is not in the liturgy but can be part of a service, and is usually in Latin, usually polyphonic and usually unaccompanied. It originated in France in the 13th century, when short sections of plainchant (clausulas) might be troped with upper parts to new words (*mot*s) in Latin or French; when the clausulas also began to acquire their own words, motetus became the term for the piece as a whole. The mainly anonymous motets from medieval England and France thus often carry more than one text at a time.

The great motet composer of the 14th century was Machaut, who used isorhythms (the technique of overlapping, non-synchronised rhythmic patterns) as a constructional principle. A century later, handsome motets by composers such as Dunstaple and Du Fay were using isorhythms in all voices.

By the end of the 15th century the motet had simplified to a freer and more unified choral form constructed from imitative counterpoint and with a single text, as in the supremely polished motets of Josquin. From there, the polyphonic motet flowered as the 16th century progressed, reaching a high point of elegance in the hands of giants such as Palestrina, Lassus, Victoria and Byrd.

The Baroque era brought greater freedom. Around 1600, Giovanni Gabrieli made instrumental richness an essential element of his motets for St Mark's in Venice, and Schütz took



Bach's score for his motet 'Singet dem Herrn'

that style to Germany. And while the essential function of the motet remained, its form now diversified: in Catholic countries, motets often consciously adhered to a version of Renaissance choral polyphony (*stile antico*), but they also began to appear in a variety of vocal and instrumental combinations, from one or two voices with basso continuo (Monteverdi, Couperin), to single voice and orchestra (Vivaldi, Handel; and later Mozart), to imposing *grands motets* for soloists, chorus and orchestra

written for the French royal chapel by Lully and Lalande.

In Lutheran Germany, motets could be based on chorale melodies and texts, as in Bach's six superb examples (which inspired Mendelssohn and Brahms). Yet the genre remained associated primarily with the Latin church, and the motets of Bruckner and Verdi in their separate ways share a southern European ardency. The conservative prescriptions of Pope Pius X laid a staying hand on expressive development in the 20th century, but figures such as Poulenc and Messiaen still achieved considerable beauty. In Britain (where the Anglican church found a functional equivalent for it in the anthem), the motet has mainly been the preserve of Catholic composers such as Rubbra and James MacMillan. **G**

IN THE STUDIO

● Soprano **Anna Lucia Richter** is heading to the Swiss Radio Studios in Lugano, Switzerland, to record an album for Pentatone. The recording, to take place in January 2020, is being supported by the Borletti-Buitoni Trust (she received a BBT Award in 2016) and will feature the music of Monteverdi. Richter will be joined in the studio by Ensemble Claudiana under lutenist Luca Pianca, co-founder of Il Giardino Armonico. The recording will be released next autumn.

● Another 2016 BBT artist, the Norwegian viola player **Eivind Ringstad**, is this month heading to the UK with the pianist David Meier for Rubicon Classics. Featuring repertoire by Arthur Benjamin, Hindemith, Enescu, Vieuxtemps and Ysaÿe, the recording has as its highlight *Correspondances* by Peder Barratt-Due, from which the album takes its title; the work was commissioned for Ringstad by the BBC when he was a New Generation Artist. The album is out in October next year.

● Two Orfeo sessions are in the pipeline for the end of this month, with both recordings due out next June. The first sees violinist **Baiba Skride** heading to the Örebro Konserthus, Sweden, to join the Swedish Chamber Orchestra under Elvind Aadland to record Mozart's

Violin Concertos Nos 1 to 5. The recording will be Skride's ninth album for Orfeo, and builds on her recent Bartók collaboration with conductor Aadland, just out on Naxos. The second session sees male soprano **Samuel Marino** making his debut for the label with Handel and Gluck (including two world premieres). He'll be joined at Germany's Volkspark Halle by the Händel-Festpielorchester Halle under Michael Hofstetter.

● The Belgian-American pianist **Tedd Joselson** is at Abbey Road next month to record *Fantasy of Companionship* for piano and orchestra, a new work by Manu Martin that explores pioneering surgeon Dr Susan Lim's concept of companionship between an inanimate object and a human. Joselson will be joined by the LSO, London Voices and conductor Arthur Fagen of Atlanta Opera. The release is due in 2020.

● In July, the **Tatarstan National Symphony Orchestra** under Alexander Sladkovsky recorded Tchaikovsky's complete symphonies and concertos (including the original edition of the Second Piano Concerto) for Sony Classical. They were joined in Kazan by soloists including the pianist Boris Berezovsky. The box-set is due out next spring to coincide with the 180th anniversary of the composer's birth.