

Missa Primavera

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: June 8, 2021, virtually, by Matt Haimovitz. Commissioned by The Primavera Project for Matt Haimovitz.

Duration: 4'

Instrumentation: Cello solo

The premise of The Primavera Project was to commission a series of short solo cello works as companion pieces to painter Charline von Heyl's "reimagining" of a famously enigmatic painting by Renaissance painter Botticelli, *Primavera*. This invitation presented a particular challenge, which was to respond to an artwork that was already a response to another artwork. After trying a few triangulations of signification in my head to no avail, I finally found the way forward by "rectangulating": bringing in yet another artwork, Renaissance composer Josquin dez Pres's *Missa Hercules Dux Ferrariae*, itself full of layered meanings. This work has special significance for me, since in my other musical life as an early music soprano, I performed and recorded the *Missa Hercules Dux Ferrariae* with the acclaimed vocal ensemble Pomerium. Both Botticelli and Josquin were able to create luminously beautiful works that also, within their construction, celebrated wildly complex networks of cryptic meanings that art historians and musicologists, respectively, have been decoding with glee ever since. Singing Josquin is like being inside a superbly illustrated fantasy novel, full of color and magic and symbolism.

I leaned into the surplus signification and symbolism inherent in the project itself. Josquin, composing in Italy around the same time as Botticelli's heyday, created his *cantus firmus* (the core melody that underpins the structure of the composition) by matching the actual vowel sounds of the name of his benefactor (Hercules, the Duke of Ferrara) to the corresponding vowel sounds of the solfège syllables: Re (Her-) Ut (cu-) Re (les) Ut (Dux) Re (Fer-) Fa (ra-) Mi (ri-) Re (e). I followed suit and generated my own *cantus firmus*, also gleaned from the name of the commissioner (and, coincidentally, with the painting): Mi (Pri-) Fa (ma-) Re (ve-) La (ra). With this underpinning in place, I was able to explore and reimagine many other features of Josquin's masterwork, as von Heyl has done with the Botticelli masterwork. She has, for example, taken patterns from figures' clothing and created foregrounded objects from them; I took ornamental passages of the Josquin – aspects of the antecedent work that seem to function primarily as texture – and expanded them into foregrounded sound objects. In this way I could bring some of my own favorite, fleeting details of the piece into high relief, always celebrating Matt Haimovitz's warmth and passion as a soloist, and his joyful curiosity as a fellow thinker.

– Lisa Bielawa

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