Ecce beatam lucem

A motet
for 40 voices
in 5 choirs

by

Alessandro Striggio
(ca.1537–1592)

Edited by Philip Legge
The first observation that can be made from knowledge of the mass is that Striggio employed the exact same modality (the Mixolydian mode on G) and combination of clefs for his 40 voice parts in both motet and mass. The mass is clearly and explicitly divided into five choirs, each consisting of eight voices, and interestingly Striggio’s choices of clef result in slight differentiation between adjacent choirs. Each of the eight-voice choirs is essentially a double choir, or a pair of vocal quartets; hence the work has hitherto been assumed to be for ten four-voice choirs. However, only choir 2 and choir 4 have equally matched high voices (in clefs G2, C2, C3, and F3), or SATB–SATB; the bass of each half-choir is more a baritone or low tenor in range. The individual quartets in Choirs 1, 3, and 5 on the other hand, do not match up: the first four voices are again a high clef combination (G2, C2, C3, F3), and the remaining voices are in low clefs (C1, C3, C4, F4). This results in only four true bass parts (one of the baritone parts has an exceptionally low range) going below tenor C, and a preponderance of “middle” voices. The low voices are not placed symmetrically within the choir (voices 5–8, 21–24, and 37–40) resulting in a layout of high and low quarters as follows: HL – HH – HL – HH – HL.

The second interesting feature is that the mass and motet share some musical material, most notably the beginning of the Credo (scored for 8 voices) which almost exactly matches bars 3–5 of Ecce beatum lacern (scored for 10 voices). Numerous other passages are scored using similar techniques that Striggio invented to achieve his 40-part counterpoint. Aside from the mass and motet, documents refer to three performances of 40-part works by Striggio: on 13 July 1561 a "canzon a 40 voc" was performed in honour of Cardinal Ippolito d’Este’s visit to Florence; a month later on 21 August Striggio writes of "una Musica a quanta vocu" which was to praise the wedding of Guidelmo Gonzaga. Finally on 22 February 1568 a 40-part motet by Striggio was performed in Munich under Lassus for the marriage of Prince Wilhelm of Bavaria and Renée of Lorraine. This does not necessarily mean that Striggio had three different works available for the three occasions; however, it is quite possible that the motet Ecce beatum lacern was adapted for, or even all three performances. There is a strong probability the motet works of 1561 shared their music in common, but were sung to different texts. The solutio of the mass, together with the musical similarity, suggests the possibility that the motet may have existed in an Italian version with the incipit "Ecce so beatu giorno", which begs the question, was the Latin motet adapted from the Italian, or vice versa?

The motet is traditionally described as being in four choirs, of eight, ten, sixteen and six voices, which partially corresponds to the initial music entries: choir 1 begins alone (à 8) in bar 1, followed by choir 5 and the last two voices of choir 4 (à 10) in bars 2 and 3, and then all of choirs 2 and 3 together (à 16). This is sufficient to show one distinguishing feature of the motet opposed to the mass, which is that Striggio doesn’t confine vocal entries to one choir, but blurs the delineation by splitting voices off to join the adjacent group; the mass is far more regimented in keeping the choirs grouped in multiples of 8 voices. The fourth choir entry in the motet is curiously not six voices, or eight, but nine (voices 25–28 enter at bar 9, answered half a bar later by voices 29–33); here the soprano of choir 5 has been given a solo line accompanying the entire choir 4. Throughout the motet Striggio arbitrarily regroups the ensemble from the default five choirs of eight into larger divisions, four groups of ten voices, three groups of thirteen or fourteen voices, two groups of twenty voices; sometimes these numbers are boosted or reduced by the addition or subtraction of adjacent voices. These regroupings suggest two hypotheses about Striggio’s disposition of voices, firstly that he expected the choirs (as numbered here) to be adjacent to one another, 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5; and significantly, choirs 1 and 5 are never treated in a way to suggest that a circular layout is at work, with the ends of those choirs meeting in extremis.

The annotation of the continuo part mentioned above has some bearing on this. Copied by a scribe evidently ignorant of Italian, it literally reads: "Bassone canato dalla parte più basce del 40 Per / sona nimerro delcìrcalo con un bronbone No. 41, / per sustenta mento della armonia per sona / risom Organo Luilo & cimbalo auide." Max Schneider in 1918 suggested this must be a misreading of Striggio’s original text, which might have been: "Bassone casato dalla parte più basse del 40, per sonar in mezzo del circolo con un trombone No. 41, per sostentamento della armonia per sonarsi con Organo, Luilo & cimbalo o violo." [Great bass derived from the lowest part of the 40, to be played in the middle of the circle with a trombone No. 41, for sustaining the harmony, i.e. sackbut No. 41, Organ, Lute & harpsichords or viols.] However, as we have seen there is no musical evidence to suggest that choirs 1 and 5 are adjacent as would result from the performers being arranged in a circle. Lain Fenlon and Hugh Keyte have added one further gloss, that since neither the motet nor the mass suggest the circular layout, perhaps the scribe made one further error, and Striggio’s annotation read in part “in mezzo del mezzocircolo” [in the middle of a semicircle]. In this case, the continuo instruments would be grouped in the centre of a semi-circle of singers, rather like the dot of a fermata sign, in relation to its semicircular corona.

It is noticeable from a reading of the score that not all of Striggio’s voice parts are equally difficult, and so seem either more solodic, or more likely to have possibly been given over to instrumentalists. These more ornate parts are not evenly distributed through the five choirs either; usually two or three voices in each eight-voice choir are of this type, frequently inner voices. The exception to this general rule is choir three (voices 17–24), of which only the bass voice (voice 24) is of the plainer type and restricted to slower moving, less complicated polyphony. Structurally a similar differentiation of textures and materials is evident as Striggio builds up the work out of a series of short blocks of chordally-based polyphony, some of which are explicitly repeated more-or-less unchanged. Aside from the repeat on pages 16 and 17 (originally in the parts, the music here was written out twice in full) and the echo passages to texts such as eisquae natum (bars 19–20), quam multis clara honos (bars 40–43) and sidera fulgenter (bars 44–47), another lengthy phrase appears twice to different sets of words (bars 53–61 and bars 88–96). In each case two paired phrases for 20 voices follow general pauses and an exclamation (“O!”) sung by all 40 parts; the particular re-use of this section suggests Striggio might have had a number of prepared gambits for arbitrarily lengthening or shortening a composition of this type to be able to adapt it to performances demanding different texts.

Finally, this typeset derives from the edition of Sabine Cassola, which has given me the opportunity to amend several small, obvious mistakes, and also shorten the page count by some adroit pagination. In particular, the repeat on the last two pages was originally written out in full, of course, and remarkably the only significant variances within the 41 parts, aside from the cross-over at the “first-time” bars, are to be found in the continuo part and the underlay for Soprano 3. The choir books and the continuo part are elaborated with bar numbers and rehearsal numbers from 2 to 17; these correspond to the first bar of each subsequent page of the full score. The continuo part appears in each of the five choir books, and is provided with some minimal editorial figuring to indicate several prominent suspensions and accidentals for triads that are not common chords; these do not derive from Striggio. Lastly, all of the subordinate choir parts and continuo part have a version of the text accompanying the rhythm of the continuo, provided solely for singers or players to coordinate with the ensemble.
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