

Pierre de la Rue's *Missa Pourquoi non:* A Case for Re-Evaluation

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The last twenty-five years have yielded significant insights into the life, times and—most importantly—the music of the Habsburg-Burgundian master Pierre de la Rue. All the sacred works are now available in scholarly editions, and many fine recordings of his music have been committed to compact disc. La Rue has also attracted a good deal of scholarly attention, even controversy, and his place as a major figure at the time of Josquin is now surely secure. There is still much work to be done, however, and not only with the secular music that has yet to be compiled and edited in its entirety. Even the Masses, the core of la Rue's output, are only superficially known. Of the thirty Mass settings that are securely attributed to la Rue, nearly a third have never been recorded, and recordings of half of the remaining Masses are either no longer available or problematic for other reasons. Until we have recordings of all of these Masses, and multiple recordings of the finest examples, this fascinating repertoire will probably still remain elusive for anyone outside this specific area of musicological research. One of these lesser-known Masses of la Rue is the so-called *Missa Almanca*. It will be the purpose of this paper to argue that this work has been incorrectly named, and should be re-titled *Missa Pourquoi non*, after the chanson of the same name by la Rue himself, on which it will be shown to be based.

The naming of Masses according to the original title of the pre-existing material on which they were based has long been the accepted scholarly practice. Honey Meconi has thoroughly documented this for the Masses of la Rue,¹ so no further discussion on conventions relating to the practice is necessary here. What is interesting, however, is the rejection by modern scholars—Meconi included—of a sixteenth-century ascription indicating that the Mass in question is based on the *Pourquoy non* chanson, and therefore justifying it being named accordingly.

In the preface to his edition of this Mass, T. Herman Keahey identifies the work as *Missa Almanca*,² and addresses the issue of the

¹ Honey Meconi, "Habsburg-Burgundian Manuscripts, Borrowed Material, and the Practice of Naming" in *Early Music Borrowings*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 111-124

² Two of the six sources for this Mass designate the work as *Missa Almanca*, a name which suggests—at least for the creators of these manuscripts—that the Mass may be based on some unknown Germanic model.

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conflicting identification of the Mass in the early sixteenth-century source (CS45)³ as follows:

[the scribe in CS45] identifies the work as *Missa Pourquoi non*, thereby suggesting that it is related to the chanson of that name, probably the one composed by la Rue himself. At first glance this seems possible, for the outline of the opening motive and the order of the voice entries are shared by both chanson and Mass, but [Keahey argues] similarities between the two are largely limited to the opening motive and it seems unlikely that La Rue's chanson was the actual model. This title has more interest as an indication that some of La Rue's secular music was well known to the scribe of CS45 than it does as an actual identification of the model for the Mass.⁴

Moreover, Meconi asserts that the relationship between the Mass and the chanson is “nonexistent”.⁵ She concurs with Keahey that the model for the work—*Missa Almanca*—is ‘unknown.’ Meconi also notes that the chanson *Pourquoy non* was well known and widely circulated at the time—presumably not long

³ CS45: Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Cappella Sistina 45, ff. 85v-99r; “P. de la Rue”. Tenor text: “Kyrie pourquoy non”. Tabula: “Missa Pourquoi non Pe. Dela Rue”. This is the same manuscript that Meconi refers to as VatS45. The exact date of this is unknown, although Meconi tentatively dates it between 1511 and 1514.

⁴ Nigel Davison, Herman Keahey, and Evan Kreider. *Pierre de la Rue: Opera Omnia. Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae* 97, I. (Stuttgart: American Institute of Musicology/Hänssler-Verlag, 1989), pp. XXX-XXXI. Keahey acknowledges a ‘conflicting view’ in modern scholarship, by Helen Dixon: Helen Dixon, “The Manuscript Vienna, National Library, 1783” in *Musica Disciplina*, XXIII (1969), 105-116. This commentary is limited to just one evaluative sentence, however, and is hardly definitive: “[the Mass] is based on la Rue's own chanson ‘Pourquoy non’. It makes wide use of a head-motive, and also of imitation, particularly in the trio sections.” Dixon, p. 105.

⁵ Honey Meconi, “Habsburg-Burgundian Manuscripts, Borrowed Material, and the Practice of Naming” in *Early Music Borrowings*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 114.

after its composition—and that this currency was likely responsible for what she also suggests to be the erroneous ascription of the Mass as *Missa Pourquoi non* in CS45:

But the scribe of the Vatican manuscript thought he knew what the model was, for he named it *Missa Pourquoi non*. *Missa Almanca* begins in a manner very similar to *Pourquoy non*; the four voice enter in imitation in the same order [A, S, T, B], always at the distance of two breves, and with the same opening motif as the chanson: a rising fourth followed by a falling second. The pitch durations are even the same, though not the exact rhythm. Although the Mass is a whole tone higher than the chanson, the imitative intervals are very similar: up a fifth for the superius, then down an octave for the tenor entry. In the chanson, the bassus enters a fifth below the tenor; in the Mass, the bassus is the same pitch as the tenor. To the scribe (or to whoever wrote his exemplar), a Mass that began this way must surely be based on the famous song *Pourquoy non*.⁶

Superficially, especially if any conclusion is based entirely on the head-motive alone, the evidence for *Pourquoy non* as the model for the Mass may appear tenuous, however, closer examination will reveal relationships between the two works that are both unexpected in their nature, and compelling in their verisimilitude. Before examining the seemingly tenuous, however, there is one passage tying the two works together that seems strangely obvious, although this ‘obvious’ occurs in unexpected places and has thus far escaped the notice of modern commentators.

⁶ Honey Meconi, “Pierre de la Rue and Musical Life in the Habsburg-Burgundian Court.” OUP, New York, 2003. pp. 152-3.

While preparing an edition of the *Missa Almanca* for a performance in late 2005, I was struck not only by the obvious mastery and beauty of the piece, but also by two distinctive passages that starkly reminded me of the ending of the *Pourquoy non* chanson. In working on the edition I had not been immediately struck by conspicuous links between the chanson and the Mass in the most likely places—head-motives, cadential structure, *cantus firmus* usage etc. Instead, I was surprised to find la Rue quoting, virtually verbatim, the *last compositional gesture*

of his chanson on two separate but unmistakable occasions in the Mass itself. The first of these occurs at the very end of the *Kyrie*, mirroring its placement in the chanson. The second can be found in the middle of the *Credo*.

In the original chanson the passage appears as a set of imitative dialogues at the fifth between the upper three voices, commencing at measure 60 (the motive henceforth to be identified as the ‘dialogue motive’):

Example 1:

60

rir, sans guer don

ac - que - rir, ac - que - rir, sans

ac - que - rir, sans guer

sans guer - don ac - que -

64

ac - que - rir?

guer - don ac - que - rir?

don ac - que - rir?

rir, guer - don ac - que - rir?

dialogue motive

variant

(b)

The versions of this motive that appear in the *Kyrie* and *Credo* of the Mass transcend mere recollection. To those intimately familiar with the chanson these passages demand recognition of their ancestry, albeit in a somewhat more evolved form in the case of the *Credo* excerpt:

Example 2: *Kyrie* Version:

Example 3: *Credo* Version:

In all three of these examples, from both the chanson and in the Mass, not only is the key melodic shape and its use in imitation virtually identical, but so is the function of the top note as a suspension/intensification over the prevailing harmony.⁷

⁷ Clearly in the case of the chanson this is represented by D resolving to C as a 6-5 progression within the context of an F tonality. The imitation at the fifth renders a 2-1 in the tenor

Given that at least one contemporary source linked *Pourquoy non* with this Mass, the striking similarity between these passages surely confirms a link of some kind between the two works. But part. In both the Mass excerpts the same thing is observable with the A to G representing a 6-5 suspension in relation to the prevailing C tonality (obvious in the *Kyrie* excerpt, only marginally less so in the *Credo* excerpt). The suspension effect in both cases is heightened by the addition of a parallel part providing a 4-3 progression simultaneously.

there is other evidence that this passage was of particular importance, evidence which might also shed further light on what appears to be la Rue's self quotation at this point.

In the *Missa Pourquoi non* of Mathieu Gascongne, who was a contemporary of la

Rue and Josquin, there is no dispute amongst scholars that the model employed is indeed la Rue's chanson of the same name. What becomes fascinating, however, is what turns up in his setting right at the end of both the *Kyrie* and the *Gloria*: a clear quotation of the 'dialogue motive' from the very end of la Rue's chanson, just as we have observed in la Rue's Mass:

Example 4: Gascongne: Kyrie conclusion

The image shows a musical score for the Kyrie conclusion by Mathieu Gascongne. It consists of three systems of music, each with four staves: two vocal staves (Soprano and Alto), a Tenor staff, and a Bass staff (basso continuo). The music is in a 2/2 time signature and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are written below the vocal staves.

System 1 (Measures 79-84): The first system is marked with "la Rue's 'dialogue motive'" above the vocal lines. The lyrics are: "son, Ky - - ri - e - le - i - son, Ky - - ri - e - le - i - son, Ky - ri - e - le - - son, Ky - ri - e - le - -".

System 2 (Measures 85-90): The second system is marked with "variant" above the vocal lines. The lyrics are: "- ri - e, Ky - - - variant ri - e, Ky - ri - e - i - son, Ky - - - ri - e, Ky - - ri - ri - e - lei - son, Ky - - ri - e -".

System 3 (Measures 91-96): The third system is marked with "variant" above the vocal lines. The lyrics are: "- e - le - i - son, Ky - ri - e - - (s) - le - i - son, - e, Ky - ri - e - le - i - son, Ky - ri - e - le - i - son, Ky - - ri - e - le - i - son, - lei - son, Ky - ri - e - le - i - son, Ky - - ri - e - lei - son".

Example 5: Gascongne: *Gloria* excerpt

133

la Rue's 'dialogue motive'

in glo - ri - a De - i Pa -

in glo - ri - a De - i Pa - - -

la Rue's 'dialogue motive'

in glo - ri - a De - i Pa - tris, Pa -

variant b

in glo - ri - a De - i Pa - tris, De - i

138

variant a

- tris, De - i Pa - tris. A - - men.

- - - tris, Pa - tris. A - - men.

la Rue's 'dialogue motive'

tris. A - - - - - men.

Pa - tris, Pa - tris. A - - - - - men.

At the very least this confirms that there was something special about the ending of la Rue's chanson. Whether this is simply a recognition of the distinctive nature of the passage, or whether it reflects prior knowledge of the similar usage of the same motive in la Rue's *Pourquoy non* Mass, we shall perhaps never know. Certainly the ascription by the scribe of **CS45** identifying the Mass in question as the *Missa Pourquoy non* gains credibility with this information,

suggesting that a closer look at other features of the Mass should be undertaken.

As already noted, the similarities to be observed between the head-motives in both la Rue's Mass and his chanson do not of themselves definitively confirm kinship between the pieces, and the skepticism of later scholars is understandable. The span of a rising fourth which then falls back to the third (motive ① below) is a figure that is

common in the music of this period, so taken alone this does not establish kinship. Closer examination, however, reveals a more convincing basis for considering the derivation of the Mass from ideas exposed in the chanson.

In the Mass, motive ① is immediately developed in the form of an intensifying variant (motive ①+)

which, by extending the compass of the opening melodic gesture, allows for the contrasting descending gesture (motive ②) to balance the combination of the two forms of motive ①. The symbiotic relationship of these two motives (and their subsequent variants later in the Mass) is no accident, as can be seen by the virtually exact repetition of the same material at the opening of the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo* and *Agnus Dei*.

Example 6a: *Kyrie*

Example 6b: *Gloria*

(Examples 6c–6e on next page.)

Example 6c: *Credo*

Pa - trem om - ni - po - ten - tem, fac -

Pa - trem om - ni - po - ten - - - tem, fac - to -

to - rem cae - - - - - li

- - - rem cae - - - - -

Example 6d: *Agnus Dei*

A - - gnus De - - - - i,

A - - gnus De - - - - gnus - - - - i,

Example 6e: *Pourquoy non*

Pour - quoy non, pour

Pour - quoy non, pour -

Pour - quoy

Pour -

Closer examination of the musical building-blocks of these two works now leads us to one of the most interesting aspects of both the chanson and the Mass: the regular, stylized, even mannerist highlighting of what today would be referred to as a sort of “suspension” figure⁸ (usually 6-5), which in the short chanson alone occurs on eighteen occasions.⁹

It is true that the mechanics of this style of polyphonic composition often result in such mild passing points of harmonic intensification, but rarely to this extent. The expressive impact of the repetitive use of this technique is unmistakable, even on first hearing. These points of intensification—for that is how they always function—could only have resulted from conscious manipulation on the part of the composer.¹⁰ Some are more overt than others, but there can be little doubt that one of the main vehicles for emotional communication la Rue relies on is this primarily harmonic effect.¹¹

It is only by examining these gestures that the ending of *Pourquoy non* truly makes sense, as the piece seems to end just as it has gotten started. The imitative entries that appear at measure 60 (already described) seem, on the face of it, to have come from nowhere but this is not the case as a link can be drawn from these to motive ②, with

⁸ These are not all true suspensions, but this technique of intensification is a stylistic characteristic of la Rue's, and its use here is almost obsessive.

⁹ Each instance is marked with an asterisk in the edition which appears at the end of this paper. Note that in two instances towards the end, the transposition of the melody line in question down a fifth renders the 6-5 suspension as a 2-1. The point still remains valid, however.

¹⁰ While the music of the Hapsburg-Burgundian composers in the central Renaissance was primarily driven by linear considerations, harmonic issues were also very much in the forefront of theoretical discourse, and therefore also certainly composer's methodology as well.

¹¹ Take, for example, measure 35. La Rue's response to the anguish of the text is rarely more overt than this!

its descending step-wise sixth (see Example 6e above). Most importantly, the top note always acts as a harmonic appoggiatura.¹²

If this is true of the chanson and, given commonality between the chanson and the Mass in other areas, might we also expect to find this particular harmonic device in the Mass as well? It can be found everywhere.¹³

(Example 7 on next page.)

¹² As already described in endnotes 6 and 7.

¹³ Not always in the 6-5 configuration, but this is still the most prominent.

Example 7: Sanctus

This musical score is for the piece "Sanctus" and is written in 2/2 time with a key signature of two flats. It consists of three systems of staves, each with a vocal line (Soprano, Alto, and Bass) and a piano accompaniment.

- System 1 (Measures 1-7):**
 - Vocal:** The Soprano and Alto parts begin with a rest, while the Bass part starts with the word "San". The lyrics "San - - - ctus, San - - - ctus," are spread across the vocal lines.
 - Piano:** The right hand features a melodic line with three asterisks (*) above it, indicating a specific musical motif. The left hand provides harmonic support.
- System 2 (Measures 8-13):**
 - Vocal:** The lyrics continue with "ctus, San - - - ctus," in the Soprano and Alto parts, and "ctus, San - - - ctus, San - - - ctus," in the Bass part.
 - Piano:** The right hand continues the melodic motif with asterisks, while the left hand maintains the harmonic accompaniment.
- System 3 (Measures 14-19):**
 - Vocal:** The lyrics are "San - - - ctus, San - - - ctus," for Soprano and "ctus, San - - - ctus, San - - - ctus," for Bass.
 - Piano:** The right hand continues with the melodic line (marked with an asterisk) and the left hand with the accompaniment.

In the opening of the *Sanctus*, each of the asterisk-marked notes acts as some form of intensifying suspension, immediately resolved, and most of these are of the 6-5 variety. Given what we have already seen in the chanson, this is no coincidence. Even more noteworthy, however, is la Rue's choice of melodic material. The use of motive ① as a head-motive is not surprising, as this technique was common at the time. It is the

derivation of the counter-motive,¹⁴ first seen in the Tenor at the opening, that is most fascinating:

¹⁴ That this motive is more than just free counterpoint is confirmed by its use (a fourth below) in the *Bassus* (measures 5–7), the *Contratenor* (measures 13–14), as well as its exact (diatonic) repetition (up a major 9th) in the *Discantus* (measures 7–12), and its further repetition (up a major 10th) in the *Discantus* in measures 14–16: see Example 7.

Example 8:

Chanson (m. 60) Mass (*Sanctus* opening)

ac - que - rit, San - ctus, San - ctus, San - ctus,

Considering the arguments outlined above, the kinship of these motives—the 'dialogue motive' from the chanson and now this counter-motive in the *Sanctus*—appears all the more deliberate. In both complete melodic figures (brackets above the notes), the compass and movement of the music is identical,¹⁵ with the *Sanctus* example further developing the idea. Of particular importance, however, is the motive within the larger idea (brackets below the notes), which places the suspension (G → F, then Bb → A) with the tactus in the same way we have already seen both in the chanson and the Mass.¹⁶

Turning our attention back to the opening motives on the chanson, the routine usage of motive ① as a head-motive in the Mass has already been mentioned, and it can be confirmed that every movement commences with this motive. But what of motive ②? Due to its brevity, the chanson is not as thoroughly through-composed as the Mass. Despite this it would be constructive to see whether this motive is also found in the Mass. Close examination reveals material related to this idea throughout the Mass. The linearity and distinctive rhythm of motive ② appears in every movement, both descending as well as in inversion.¹⁷ Perhaps the most developed use of this idea occurs in the opening *Agnus*, where the motive can be clearly seen and developed within the counterpoint.¹⁸

¹⁵ Despite the diatonic variance.

¹⁶ That is predominantly 6-5, although sometimes 4-3. The way in which this motive continues to be developed within this opening section of the *Sanctus* is also quite extraordinary, particularly in partnership with la Rue's use of dueling sequences in the passage between measures 25 and 39. In this movement, the layering—over and over again—of these distinctive intensifying suspensions produces quite an extraordinarily emotional musical structure. The suspensions also feature in the *Pleni* and the *Benedictus* as well, and the result is overwhelming. This is surely some of the greatest music the composer ever wrote!

(Example 9 on next page.)

¹⁷ Over 70 instances of this rhythmic/melodic cell in the entire Mass.

¹⁸ Notice also the almost *ostinato* usage of motive 1 in the *bassus* from measures 16 through 22.

Example 9: *Agnus Dei*

13

qui tol - lis, qui tol - lis pec - De - i qui tol - lis, qui tol - lis pec - i, qui tol - lis

20

-lis pec - ca - ta mun - di: -ca - ta mun - di, pec - ca - ta mun - di: mi - lis pec -

28

mi - se - re - re no - bis, - se - re - re, mi - se - re - re no mi - se - re - re, - ca - ta mun - di: mi - se - re - re no - bis, no

It is a noteworthy feature of this Mass that the composer consistently employs sonorities that sound characteristic of perhaps a more modern sense of tonality than is often the case in the modal music of this period. The most significant reason for this is la Rue's exploration of parts moving in parallel 3rds (and/or 6ths/10ths). Even within some of the examples quoted above this can readily be seen.¹⁹ Further obvious examples

¹⁹ In both Example 2 and Example 3 the 'dialogue-motive' is

abound, as well as some more ingenious ones where the part-writing is manufactured to produce the same effect strictly parallel writing would have achieved, as in this passage from the *Credo*, where both the *Contratenor* and the *Bassus* parts in effect create parallel thirds (and tenths) with the *Discantus*:

used in parallel 10ths, and in Example 9 the music of the top two parts is virtually in parallel 6ths/3rds/10th throughout the passage from measure 28 to measure 32.

Example 10: *Credo*

193

- tas. Et u-nam san-ctam ca-tho-li-cam et a-po-sto-li-cam

tas. Et u-nam san-ctam ca-tho-li-cam, ca-tho-

tas, per Pro phe

tas. Et u-nam san-ctam ca-tho-li-cam

As suggested, the effect of this technique is to make the tonality seem quite modern, and the sense of sonority thereby created is common to both the chanson and the Mass. Just as the chanson ends in a distinct (in modern terms) Bb major, so too the Mass concludes in a clear F major. On the final page of the Mass, la Rue brings back one last statement of the 'dialogue

motive', briefly noted in the *tenor* and *contratenor* parts, once again reinforcing its importance and connection to the chanson:

(Example 11 on next page.)

Example 11: *Agnus Dei*

134

-na no - bis, do - na no -
do - na no - bis pa - - cem, do - na no -
- - cem, do - na no - bis pa - - - cem, do - na no -
-na no - bis, do - na

The analysis of la Rue's manipulation of compositional material presented in this paper may strike some as assuming a more sophisticated methodology on the part of the composer than we should be willing to acknowledge so long after the fact. We know, however, that composers of this period were capable of amazing feats of intellectual complexity in their compositional method, and perhaps we have not yet given such composers their due in terms of how they organized both small and larger-scale structures, particularly within their longest and most ambitious pieces.

The evidence presented in this paper: la Rue's quotation within the Mass of the last compositional gesture in his own chanson *Pourquoy non*; Gascongne's similar use of that same material; the demonstrated kinship of the head-motives; and the repeated use in the Mass of compositional methods of intensification derived from the chanson; the particularly close relationship between the 'dialogue motive' and the counter-motive that is so essential in the exposition of the *Sanctus* of the Mass; all lead

to the conclusion that the scribe of **CS45** was indeed correct in naming this Mass by Pierre de la Rue the *Missa Pourquoi non*.

Editor's Note: Kempster's recording of the la Rue *Pourquoy non* chanson can be heard on the Ensemble de la Rue recording, "One" on the Arktos label. The author's world premiere recording of la Rue's *Missa Pourquoi non* with the University of New Hampshire Chamber Singers remains available through the University of New Hampshire Department of Music.

Pourquoy non
Pierre de la Rue (c.1452 - 1518)

First system of the musical score. It consists of four staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics: "Pour - quoy non, _____". The second staff is a vocal line in bass clef with lyrics: "Pour - quoy non, _____". The third staff is a lute line in bass clef with lyrics: "Pour - quoy _____". The fourth staff is a lute line in bass clef. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 2/2. There are asterisks and a flat symbol above the notes in the first staff.

Second system of the musical score, starting at measure 7. It consists of four staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics: "pour - quoy non, ne veuil je mo -". The second staff is a vocal line in bass clef with lyrics: "pour - - quoy non, ne veuil je mo - rir,". The third staff is a lute line in bass clef with lyrics: "non, ne veuil je mo -". The fourth staff is a lute line in bass clef with lyrics: "Pour - quoy non, ne veuil je mo - -". The key signature and time signature remain the same. There are asterisks and a flat symbol above the notes in the first and second staves.

Third system of the musical score, starting at measure 13. It consists of four staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics: "- rir? Pour - quoy". The second staff is a vocal line in bass clef with lyrics: "mo - - rir? Pour - quoy non, _____". The third staff is a lute line in bass clef with lyrics: "rir, mo - - rir?". The fourth staff is a lute line in bass clef with lyrics: "rir? _____". The key signature and time signature remain the same. There are asterisks and a flat symbol above the notes in the second and third staves.

20

non, pour quoy non, ne

pour quoy non, ne

Pour quoy non, ne

pour quoy non, ne

26

doy je que - - - rir, que-rir, que - - -

doy je que - rir ne doy je que - rir.

doy je que - rir, que - rir, que - - -

doy je que - rir, ne doy je que - -

32

- - - rir. La fin de ma dou - len - te vi -

La fin de ma

- - - rir. La fin de ma

- - - rir. La fin de ma dou - len -

39 (b)

e. Quant j'ai - me
 dou - len - te vi - e. Quant j'ai -
 dou - len - te vi - e.
 - te vi - e. Quant j'ai - me qui ne m'ai -

45 *

qui ne m'ai - me my - e, quant
 - me my - e, quant j'ai - me qui ne

51

j'ai - me qui ne m'ai - me mye. Et sers sans guer -
 - ne m'ai - me my - e. Et sers -
 quant j'ai - me qui ne m'ai - me my - e.
 m'ai - me mye. Et sers sans guer - don ac - que -

57

don ac - que - rit, sans -
 sans - guer - - don ac - que - rit, ac -
 Et sers sans guer - don ac - que -
 rit, guer - don, et sers sans guer -

62

guer - - don ac - que -
 que - rit, sans guer - don
 - rit, sans guer - - don ac -
 don ac - que - rit, guer -

65

que - rit?
 ac - que - rit?
 (b) que - rit?
 don ac - que - rit?