

# THE THREE MARYS

## Liturgical Drama and Polyphony from Medieval France

Eya: Ensemble for Medieval Music  
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### PROGRAM

EMPLORANT ME COUVIENT CHANTER

Anonymous Trouvère, Chansonnier de la Vallière,  
France, 13th c.

SCENE ONE: THE PROCESSION

*Les Trois Maries*, Ordinaire d'Origny-Ste.-Benoîte,  
France, 14th c.

KYRIE

*Messe de Tournai*, France, 14th century

SCENE TWO: THE MERCHANT

*Les Trois Maries*

AU DOZ MOIS DE MAI/CRUX, FORMA PENITENTIE/  
SUSTINERE

*Motet*, Montpellier Codex, France, 13th c.

SCENE THREE: APPROACHING THE TOMB

*Les Trois Maries*

NEUMA

*Clausula*, Bamberg Codex, France, 13th c.

SCENE FOUR: WHOM DO YOU SEEK?

*Les Trois Maries*

SANCTUS  
BENEDICTUS

*Messe de Tournai*

SCENE FIVE: MAGDALENE'S LAMENT

*Les Trois Maries*

PART I *Infelix ego misera*

PART II *Douce dame, qui si plourés*

PART III *Mulier, quid ploras?*

AGNUS DEI

*Messe de Tournai*

VICTIME PASCHALI LAUDES

*Prosa*, Las Huelgas Codex, Spain, 14th c.

SCENE SIX: THE REVELATION

*Les Trois Maries*

PART I *Eya! nobis internas mentes*

PART II *Dic nobis, Maria*

## PROGRAM NOTES

“When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.” Mark 16:1

Here is where our story begins.

At the heart of this program, *Les Trois Maries*, more generally known as the *Ludus Paschalis* (Easter play), was created at L'Abbaye d'Origny-Ste.-Benoîte, a once thriving and wealthy Benedictine convent in the countryside of northern France. In performing the piece, we sought to expand its dramatic elements — placing it within a broader musical-historical context and complementing its themes of loyalty, kindness, sacrifice, and love.

The piece we present to you is in some ways rather common. The Easter story of the three Marys' visit to the sepulchre, known as the *Visitatio Sepulchri*, was the first biblical narrative to be expanded into a liturgical drama during the Middle Ages. The first record of this dates from a 10th-century manuscript originating at St. Gall, a prominent musical center of that time. It began as a few lines of text inserted before the Introit of the Mass for Easter morning: *Quem queritis in sepulchro, Christicole?* This is the conversation between the angels and the women at the tomb where Christ was laid following the crucifixion. Hence a new devotional form began its musical and textual evolution, from this short statement of lyrical embellishment into fully-fledged liturgical drama.

As this new form began to spread in popularity, other biblical narratives were dramatized with more elaborate musical and textual settings. Many plays survive from the medieval period, often passed from place to place, each newly composed version borrowing some things from this, some from that. By the 16th century, the practice of church drama was widespread throughout Europe, with manuscripts traveling to and from England, France, Germany, northern Italy, Sicily, Poland, and beyond.

The majority of the play from Origny is borrowed material. A large proportion is composed of liturgical chants commonly in use during Eastertide alongside content gleaned from other versions of the *Ludus Paschalis*. These include a number of musical references from several German sources, as well as neighboring French provinces, including several other Benedictine convents.

But this particular play is not ordinary. It has been guided by a thoughtful and inspired hand. The arc of the drama is eloquently paced and the music is highly expressive. Whilst *Les Trois Maries* does contain a good deal of pre-existing material, it is notably the only one of its kind to include two scenes written in the vernacular (French). The first of these scenes (“The Merchant”) includes an exchange with the three Marys and the spice merchant they meet (running an errand!) en route to their destination. The second (“Magdalene’s Lament”) is an extraordinary moment: a personal — and painful — portrayal of Mary Magdalene conversing with the Angels who attempt to console her. There is a touching tenderness within this drama. In these moments we witness the profound layering of the centuries and commonality of human experience. There is the potential not only to make a meaningful and authentic connection with the players of the 14th century, but also to relate to the personal experiences of ancient biblical personages during a ground-shattering moment in their lives.

The Origny *Ludus* is preserved in a manuscript dating from the early 14th century, now in Saint-Quentin Bibliothèque Municipale, entitled *Livre de la Trésorerie*. This book was compiled in early 14th century at the Origny convent, and its purpose was to translate the Ordinale (a fundamental liturgical instruction book for any religious institution) from Latin into French. The project was overseen by abbess Isabelle d’Acy (1286-1324), who wisely sought to offer the nuns in her charge, most of whom were ladies of noble birth, a document to help further their understanding of the liturgy and to foster inclusivity. (It must be terribly challenging for a nun in the Middle Ages who doesn’t speak or read Latin!) The novel addition of the two aforementioned dramatic scenes in *Les Trois Maries* serves to strengthen the connection of the women with the biblical Marys, and especially Mary Magdalene: who could be more brave, steadfast, and true?

Another interesting musical aspect of this piece is the resemblance of these unique dramatic scenes to another genre prominent in northern France: the trouvère song. The Trouvères were medieval singer-songwriters. These poet-composers and their music were highly regarded in court and elsewhere, known for their elegant language and poetic imagination. The songs were generally composed in stanzaic verse, often with a refrain, and primarily centered on topics of courtly love, as well as devotional Marian poetry. Within our drama, “The Merchant” and “Magdalene’s Lament” both utilize a simple stanzaic setting with a refrain, typical of this common trouvère compositional style.

We open our program, however, with a drastically different variety of melody. *Emplorant me couvient chanter* is a devotional song fraught with dissonant moments and meandering melodic phrases, a sharp relief to the more measured, lilting rhetoric utilized in the play. Its placement at the head of the program recalls the dark cloud of Good Friday, and is the starting point for the action to begin.

Following “The Merchant,” Eya presents a motet from the Montpellier Codex. This piece is also unique in its usage of both vernacular and Latin texts. The Montpellier Codex is a monumental collection of songs from the 13th century, mostly composed in and around Notre Dame de Paris, a pre-eminent musical and cultural center of the medieval world. One of the most popular compositional forms of this period was the motet (from the French *mot*, meaning “word”). We present a “double motet” on this program. There are three voices total; two upper voices (*triplum* and *motetus* respectively) each with its own unique text which are placed above the *tenor*, composed from a small excerpt of plainchant set to a simple rhythm. It is not entirely clear how this style of motet was originally performed, especially considering its innately dense texture, and modern performers have varied approaches.

This program also includes polyphony from the Bamberg Codex and Las Huelgas Codex, both extremely important and influential sources of 13th-century polyphony. The Bamberg Codex, like its Montpellier counterpart, includes a great number of motets from the 13th century. Ironically, we have chosen a piece without text, a polyphonic melisma representing a compositional style predating the motet: *clausula*. Based on a small piece of liturgical chant which underlaid the word “neuma” (“breath”), this piece has a unique compositional structure, employing the use of hocket, a medieval compositional technique in which the upper two voices alternate between notes and rests, creating a “hiccup” effect. *Neuma* creates an evocative sound world, twinkling like the starry night sky.

A basic understanding of medieval culture is that the Catholic church was perhaps the single most influential body in operation. As musicologist Grace Frank states, “The desire that the faithful should see, hear, and understand the truths of religion pervades nearly every artistic impulse of the Middle Ages.” It is no wonder that we see such a proliferation of liturgical drama throughout Western Europe, and that the addition of dramatic ceremonies within the liturgy was an important development that we carry on to this day. However, there can be no greater element of drama within the liturgy than the Mass itself.

To punctuate the drama of *Les Trois Maries*, Eya presents several mass movements from the *Messe de Tournai*, also composed in the early years of the 14th century in northern France. This setting of the Mass Ordinary is significant in Western music history in that the Tournai movements were the first to be compiled as a unified whole. Previously, movements of the Mass Ordinary were composed piecemeal and swapped in and out by choice of the clergy (or music director, of course!). Compiling the mass movements together offers some musical cohesion (although it is generally supposed that there are differing composers within the Tournai Mass) as well as dramatic enhancement, constructing an elegant architecture within the religious service.

As mentioned earlier, *Les Trois Maries* draws heavily upon other musical sources, including the chants of the Easter Office. A significant portion of the final scene (“The Revelation”) draws directly from the Easter sequence *Victime Paschali laudes*, a haunting chant which has inspired many composers since its composition in the 11th century by Wipo of Burgundy. The Origny play utilizes the lines of the sequence as a dialogue between the Marys and the Apostles who subsequently learn of the women’s encounter with the risen Christ.

Another adaptation of this chant is found in Las Huelgas Codex. Like the *Livre de la Trésorerie* compilation at Origny, Las Huelgas Codex was also compiled in the early 14th century for a women’s convent. Las Huelgas monastery is located in the city of Burgos, Spain, centrally located along the camino de Santiago, en route to the great cathedral shrine of Santiago de Compostela on the far western shore. Remarkably still housed at Las Huelgas monastery to this day, the Codex features a vast array of musical styles, including music composed both in Spain as well as Notre Dame de Paris. The composer of the Huelgas *Victime Paschali laudes* added a second vocal line above the pre-existing chant melody. We have adapted our own version of this piece, inspired by the nuns of both houses.

ALLISON MONDEL