

JOSQUIN DESPREZ

[by John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, academic detectives look for the real Josquin. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

For my money, the greatest composer who ever lived was the somewhat shadowy figure of Josquin Desprez. Josquin defined the new music of the Renaissance. You've probably heard his *L'homme armé* masses. You've surely heard his little choral piece *El Grillo* -- the one that makes such a fine imitation of a cricket.

When I was in graduate school, musicologists were waging holy wars with one another over Josquin's particulars. Today a few of those particulars are in pretty good order. We know Josquin was born in the northern part of France around 1440. That rough date comes from the 1459 records of a Milan cathedral which identify him as "Jodocho de frantia biscantori." "Jodocho de frantia" was an Italian version of his name. "Biscantori" meant a young adult singer.

The spelling of his name changes from place to place and time to time. Historians finally saw that Josquin himself told us how he wanted his name spelled in a five-voice motet, *Illibata Dei*. He arranged the text to spell his name out in an acrostic puzzle.

Much of what we know about Josquin's life is spelled out that way in his music. When the Flemish composer Johannes Ockeghem died, Josquin wrote a heart-rending lament on his death. He has singers reading the roll of great composers who learned from Ockeghem and Josquin's name heads the list. If he wasn't Ockeghem's actual student, he was certainly his spiritual inheritor.

The title of a Josquin mass, the *Missa 'Hercules Dux Ferrarie'*, tells who his patron was, but this time Josquin did more. He matched the vowels of "Hercules Dux Ferrarie" to notes of the scale. The first *e* suggests the syllable *re*. The second vowel, *u*, suggests the syllable *ut* which was the medieval *do*, and so forth. He got *re-do-re-do-re-fa-mi-re*, and that binding thread runs through every movement of the mass -- Ky-ri-e e-le-(e)-i-son. The only reason we remember an obscure duke of Ferrara is that Josquin wove that odd memorial around his name.

Josquin died in 1521, just past 80. With his linguist's mind, his mathematician's mind -- his wide-ranging genius mind -- he redirected western music. At the end, he bequeathed his house and land to the Church of Notre Dame in Condé. He asked the church's singers to stop by his house during festival processions and sing his settings of the *Pater Noster* and *Ave Maria*.

From that touching gesture music historians conclude that Josquin had a choir at Condé that could handle six-part harmony. That's a small thing to make a point of, but it reminds us how hard it is to read the record of 500 years ago. Josquin wrote some of the loveliest music I know. And I'm grateful to historians for any small bits they can give me -- about the times and the person who produced such music.

I'm John Lienhard at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

Reese, G., Josquin Desprez. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Stanley Sadie, ed.). New York: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 1980, Vol. 9, pp. 713-738.

I am grateful to Carol Lienhard for considerable expertise and assistance with this episode. The only recording of *Missa 'Hercules Dux Ferrarie'* that I've been able to find is one I sang myself: *Music of Bach, Josquin, and Hindemith*, The Berkeley Chamber Singers, Music Library Recording No. 7075, 1959. Josquin's *Ave Maria*, *El Grillo* and *L'homme Armé* masses have been recorded repeatedly.

For more on Josquin see Episode [781](#). For a picture of Josquin and an extract from the *New Grove*, see the following website:

<http://w3.rz-berlin.mpg.de/cmp/josquin.html>.