

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Early Music: *Giants of the Flemish Renaissance*

Saturday, November 20, 2010, 8:00PM

The Flemish or Flanders school is a very broad category for the collection of composers hailing from the Low Countries of Northern France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. One of the greatest accomplishments of the composers of the High Renaissance was the development of the principles of imitation. Each phrase of text is given its own "point of imitation," repeated in turn by each voice part before moving on to the next phrase in a continuously overlapping series. With this technique of imitation in place, the composers we feature tonight used every opportunity to set text in far more rich and elaborate fashion than that of their predecessors.

Josquin Des Prez is rightly considered to be the great patriarch of the Flemish style, marrying compositional technique with a unique sense of dynamic range of the human spirit. **Absalon fili mi** is the lament of David over the violent death of his son, Absalon and the anguish is painfully apparent in the setting of the text "sed descendam in infernum plorans" ("(I) bid to descend into hell weeping").

Thomas Crecquillon is a sadly underperformed representative of this Flemish school. Due in part to questionable attribution from manuscript to manuscript, Crecquillon's output has oft been credited to his better-known contemporaries, most notably Pierre Manchicourt and Jacob Clemens ("non Papa"). This setting of the **Lamentations of Jeremiah** truly sets Crecquillon apart as a splendid polyphonist. The text of the bitter Lament of the prophet Jeremiah provides a treasure trove of text to paint and is so done exquisitely in this case. While the original text is Hebrew, the body of the text is sung in Latin. What remains is the Hebrew letter at the head of each chapter. Much like an illuminated manuscript, each letter is delicately crafted in slowly developing polyphony before the Latin text takes over to express the utter despair, destruction, and loss. The Christian Church took these texts referring to the destruction of Jerusalem for their use as devotions in Holy Week adding a refrain calling for a return to the faith, "Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God."

Antoine Brumel, like most of the Franco-Flemish composers, eventually found his way to the courts of Italy. In his **Requiem Mass (Missa pro defunctis)**, the influence of the concise and economical nature of the Italian style is very evident. All rules of imitation are precisely followed and texts are set plainly such that the elegant function of harmony provides the ornamentation more so than the polyphonic imitation. In contrast to the well-known and beloved setting by Tomás Luis da Victoria, Brumel's is a very functional setting of the Requiem. Simple in structure and form, the real compositional fire of the Mass is saved quite literally for the extensive centerpiece, the *Dies irae*.

The "Tudor" period refers to composers who were active during the reign of the House of Tudor (1485-1603) in England, and to their general style of music, often referred to as Tudor polyphony. More than conveniently categorizing the music of a specific period, however, "Tudor polyphony" embraces an epoch of change and development in English music, a gradual transition from various techniques used in medieval music to complex, many-voiced polyphony. With this broad swath of 150 years of composition, we hope to encapsulate the essence of this music: imitation, rhythmic variation, false relations (where the movement of two parts results in a simultaneous semitone clash, a typical feature of early English renaissance polyphony), unexpected harmonies, and a gift for expressing in music the essence of the text. And, not least, it demonstrates all of these composers superb ability to write for the voice: this is wonderful music to sing.

John Dunstaple was one of the foremost composers in late medieval England, and also perhaps the one whose works are best documented. Though much of his output is lost, numerous copies of Dunstaple's works have been found in German and Italian manuscripts, a fact that testifies to his continental reputation. Dunstaple's music makes abundant melodic and harmonic use of intervals of thirds and sixth and full triads, as can be heard in **Speciosa facta es**, a sound regarded as typically

English. Lionel Power is the first known Master of the Choristers at Canterbury Cathedral and a contemporary of Dunstaple. The fanfare-like **Beata progenies** serves as delightful proof that functional pieces such as this simple psalm antiphon stand alone.

The fate of the earliest offering on this program, the **Flos regalis** from the so-called Worcester Fragments, reminds us that our knowledge of early English music owes as much to chance discoveries as it does to academic research. The Worcester Fragments is a collection of various 12th-century manuscripts, which after having served their initial musical purpose, were subsequently re-used as book binding material.

Despite the prodigious output of music during the middle ages, the greater portion of it was destroyed during the Reformation. The Eton Choirbook (compiled between 1500 and 1505) was one of few collections of Latin liturgical music to survive the Reformation. From this collection comes Walter Lambe's **Stella Caeli**, representing a stage in the development of polyphony in which we encounter the use of imitation, cantus firmus techniques (in which a pre-existing melody forms the basis of a polyphonic composition), and false relations. Also from the Eton Choirbook comes William Cornysh's **Ave Maria Mater Dei** with its delightful rhythmic idiosyncrasies, representing a later stage of polyphonic development; here there is more use of imitation, fewer false relations, and a departure from cantus firmus techniques.

Christopher Tye, whose serenely moving **In Pace** opens the second half of this program, represents a later Tudor style than Cornysh and Lambe. The calm and gentle mood of Tye's polyphony which cradles a vulnerable cantus firmus in the top voice is perpetuated in the interspersed unison chant, sung as if from a distance, from another world that we will never fully fathom.

—notes by Geoffrey Williams with Andrew Smith