

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Early Music – The Birth of the Renaissance: Guillaume Dufay

Saturday, February 27, 2010 at 8:00PM

Art historians have traditionally maintained that it is possible to identify a re-birth, or renaissance, in the creative output of the great European artists in the early years of the 15th century; as Jakob Burckhardt described it in the 19th century, this was the age of “the discovery of the world and of man.” In the visual arts the term “Renaissance” is generally taken to imply a deliberate imitation of Classical patterns that were popular in Greek and Roman times well over a thousand years before. Undoubtedly in the architectural designs of Brunelleschi, such as the magnificent dome of Florence Cathedral, and in the sculpture of Donatello, inspired by the ancient authors, a lineage with antiquity stands out that makes the idea of a “renaissance” irresistible. Painting is harder to define, since there were virtually no surviving ancient models offering comparison. Nevertheless, from the writings of Classical authors such as Pliny, the public came to demand a high degree of fidelity to nature and a search for the perfect form that had eluded artists in recent times, a call that was answered by the scientific rigor of the Florentine painter Masaccio. It was his work that inspired the great artists of the High Renaissance—especially Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael in Italy, and Dürer in Germany—to achieve a style notable for its ease of manner and a graceful harmony that stood out in marked contrast to the strained efforts of preceding generations.

However, it has proven extremely difficult in music to define exactly what is meant by the term Renaissance; musicologists are wisely reluctant to commit themselves to naming exact dates or pieces that mark the beginning of the “new age.” The truth is that in music, as indeed in other art forms, styles tend to evolve: it is very rare that a single work is responsible for an immediate transition to a new era. Yet through an examination of the life and music of one man, Guillaume Dufay, it is perhaps possible to identify a “before and after” scenario. Dufay’s earliest compositions, and in particular the motets crafted with the quintessential Medieval technique of “isorhythm” (see below), bear the hallmarks of a style that reached its apogee in the mid to late 14th century. Later works, however, have somehow arrived at a point that distinctly points the way forward to the late 15th and early 16th centuries. As one contemporary theorist, Johannes Tinctoris, explained, it was men like Dufay who prepared the ground for “the moderns.”

Dufay was probably born in or near Cambrai around the year 1400 and was a chorister at the Cathedral there from 1409-1412. Sometime before 1420 he must have entered the service of the Malatesta family in Pesaro, Italy, and there is evidence to suggest that he held positions in Cambrai and Laon between 1426-1427. In December of 1428, Dufay became a singer in the papal choir, the most famous musical establishment in Europe. Whilst in Italy he formed close associations with the d’Este family of Ferrara and he subsequently worked at the Court of Savoy. It was possible at these times to hold positions—“benefices” —in a number of different courts and churches without actually being in residence, and this makes it difficult to be sure as to Dufay’s exact movements, but it would appear that from 1440 until his death in 1474, he was based in Cambrai, with the exception of the period 1451-58, which he spent once more in Savoy.

Dufay was soon regarded as one of the most famous persons of his day, honored and sought out by musicians and others. The composers Morton and Hayne van Ghizeghem came to Cambrai, perhaps to be with him. Tinctoris spent four months there in 1460, and Ockeghem was his guest in 1463. The dedication of Cambrai Cathedral in 1472 attracted numerous composers and singers and was an occasion for great musical celebration: Loyset Compère’s epic motet, *Omnium bonorum plena*, was almost certainly written for the occasion and names Dufay as the “first” amongst all the most eminent musicians of the age. Dufay died on Sunday, November 27, 1474 after many weeks of illness.

The Program

Today’s program is loosely designed to give a chronological overview of Dufay’s musical output, yet it is readily admitted that such an approach has its limitations. While dates of composition are frequently recorded in Dufay’s early music, such information has not generally been preserved for those pieces written later than the 1430s. The positioning of the pieces in tonight’s program order is

therefore at least partially speculative. Furthermore, for all the music that has survived through the ages, a huge amount has also been lost—for example, very little music of Dufay's music that we now have can be ascribed to either the 1440s or the last years of his life. The story is the same for all the years that Dufay spent at court in Savoy.

Nevertheless, by dropping in on Dufay's music at various stages of his composing career it is possible to take an over-arching view of stylistic development in the 15th century. The church music of the early years is firmly rooted in Medieval techniques: isorhythm (a repeating rhythmic pattern in one or more supporting parts which acts as a foundation for more florid upper lines) is a feature of the grand motets, while more intimate liturgical pieces are intricately constructed with angular lines moving in parallel motion, often with spectacularly complicated rhythmic interplay between the lines. In later pieces the flavor of mathematically-constructed music has receded into the background, to be replaced by increased lyricism in the individual voices and a more equal status between the various parts.

At which point it seems appropriate to emphasize a key point that will hopefully become evident to the ears. Medieval music, from which Dufay's music emerged, is not simple or simplistic. Nor is Renaissance music, represented by Dufay's later works, more "advanced." Our principal aim in this concert is to document a transition of styles, not to make a case for how music may have "progressed" or "advanced" in this period. For in the 25 years that the Orlando Consort has been singing together, we have come to recognize that the imagination, invention, virtuosity, and achievement of Medieval composers is entirely the equal of composers of any subsequent generation.

The Music

The Consort will provide spoken introductions to pieces during the concert. Nevertheless, the following notes may prove to be helpful in setting the scene for the performance of the major item at this concert—the movements from the *Missa Sancti Jacobi*—and as a source of biographical information regarding the other composers featured in the program.

Musicologists have narrowed the possible compositional date of the *Missa Sancti Jacobi* to the second half of the 1420s. The Mass may have been composed for the church of St. Jacques de la Boucherie in Paris, a regular starting point for pilgrimages to Compostela in Spain, the location of the remains of St. James (*Jacobi, Jacques*). However, the curate of the church, Robert Auclou, moved from Paris to Italy in the late 1420s and it is possible that Dufay composed the piece having met Auclou in Rome or Bologna. An alternative suggestion proposes that the Mass, or at least a part of it, was commissioned by Pietro Emiliani, Bishop of Vicenza, in the late 1420s. History records that Emiliano was happy to pay pilgrims to walk to Compostela to venerate St. James on his behalf.

The *Missa Sancti Jacobi* is an unusual work for its period in that Dufay set the "Propers" of the Mass (*Alleluia, Offertorium, and Communio*) to polyphony as well as the "Ordinary" (*Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei*). The connection to St. James is made most obvious in the Alleluia—the text invokes the Saint to protect those at sea. However, there is a further possible allusion in the compositional technique exhibited in the short Communion known as "fauxbordon" (literally meaning "false burden," or "false tune"), a style in which one voice part tracks another at an interval of a fourth. This is one of the first—indeed, possibly the very first—uses of this device and terminology in music history and it is tempting to believe that it is intended as a pun on the word "bourdon," or pilgrim's staff. Indeed, Barbara Hagg has pointed out that at the Mass which pilgrims attended before their departure for Compostela they would have had these staffs blessed following Communion.

Jean Tapissier (sometimes known as Jean de Noyers) was a poet and musician. He worked for Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, at the close of the 14th century and traveled as part of the Burgundian court to Milan and Avignon before taking charge of a choir school in Paris.

Conflicting early reports give Loyset Compère's birthplace as St. Omer, Arras and somewhere in the nearby county of Hainault. Whichever is true, however, he came from that area on the present Belgian-French border in which most of the leading composers of the 15th century grew up. There are good reasons for thinking that he may have studied in Paris in the years around 1460, but it appears that towards the end of the decade he had joined the court circle in Burgundy. Soon after that Compère travelled to Milan, where he sang in the chapel of Galeazzo Maria Sforza from July 1474 until the Duke was assassinated at the end of 1476. During those mere 18 months Compère

appears to have been unusually productive; it was almost certainly in Milan that he composed his three surviving cycles or “motetti missales”—motets to be performed in place of the movements of the Mass—since there is no other place where this genre is known to have been cultivated. With its Italian text, there is every reason to imagine that *Scaramella* dates from this period of Compère’s career.

Antoine Busnoys (or Busnois) was born in northern France and worked in Tours in the early part of his career before first moving to the Burgundian chapel in 1467 and joining it officially in 1471. Perhaps the most unexpected revelation of contemporary documents is that Busnoys spent much of his decade of service to Duke Charles the Bold accompanying him on military campaigns, thus involving him in sieges that lasted up to a year. Upon the untimely death of Duke Charles on the battlefield at Nancy in 1477, Busnoys remained at the court in the service of Charles’s daughter Mary, and then entered the service of her consort Maximilian I of Austria. He served there sporadically until 1483, when his name disappears definitively from the court records. His name, qualified with the adjective “deceased,” appears in an entry dated November 6, 1492 in a now lost register of chapter acts of the collegiate church of St. Sauveur in Bruges, where he evidently held the post of cantor.

Jean de Ockeghem is a major figure in any account of 15th-century polyphony. Little is known of his early years and musical training and much of what we know about his later life is in his capacity as a trusted diplomat. Unlike many composers of his time, Ockeghem did not travel much, possibly a direct consequence of his stable employment as treasurer of the church of St. Martin in Tours, a post awarded to him by Charles VII of France in 1459. The travels that he did make, such as that to Bruges and Damme in 1484, may have been for diplomatic or musical reasons—a visit to Spain in 1470 was certainly made for the former purpose.

—notes by Angus Smith