THE RENAISSANCE: MUSIC: AND THE CHURCH

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There is much to support the idea that English church music came of age in the fifteenth century. It was then that the responsibility for the performance of liturgical polyphony passed from groups of soloists to choirs, and it was then too that considerable resources were set aside to maintain large, professional choirs, both of men and boys, whose duty it was to sing the daily Offices and Mass. It was moreover a time when wholly new concepts were brought to bear on the arts, concepts that had fascinating parallels in almost every field of human endeavour.

We tend to speak loosely of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (and even the later part of the fourteenth century) as the age of the Renaissance. Interestingly, the term is not one – like Baroque, Classical or Romantic – that was coined by historians in later times, but was currently in use in various forms during the actual period that it defines. Fifteenth century man felt, indeed, that he was living through an era of rebirth, and he used such words as restauratio, renovatio, and renascimento to express this[1]. As the humanist, Matteo Palmieri wrote, 'in these modern times the arts again flourish, having been refined and perfected by many masters'. Dante, Petrarch and Giotto were commonly regarded as amongst the first of the great masters, but there was also a strong feeling that progress was continually being made. The idea of progress was particularly notable in music; as the distinguished theorist, Tinctoris put it, in his *Liber de Arte Contrapuncti* (1477), 'unbelievable though it may seem, not a single piece of music more than forty years old is worth hearing. Whether this is due to some divine influence, or whether it is that composers are now more assiduous in their studies, the fact is that there are now innumerable composers, amongst whom are Ockeghem, Busnois, Regis, Caron and Fauges, who glory in having studied their heavenly art under John Dunstable, Gilles Binchois and Guillaume Dufay'.

1 Discussed in John Larner, *Culture and Society in Italy* (Batsford, 1971)

What was it that Tinctoris so admired in the music of his contemporaries, and why did he choose to draw so firm a line between the music of his day and all that had gone before? A particularly fruitful approach to this problem has been provided by Edward Lowinsky in his study, 'The concept of physical and musical space in the Renaissance'[2]. The author possibly draws too sharp a dividing line between the Renaisance and the so-called Middle Ages, falling into the trap that Renaissance historians had themselves fallen into. For as W. R. Southern has shown in his fascinating book, *The Making of the Middle Ages*[3] the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries can equally be regarded as an era of rebirth. This having been said, Lowinsky's parallels between the arts and sciences in the Renaissance has much to tell us. Lowinsky takes as his central idea, Dagobert Frey's observation that the transition from Middle Ages to Renaissance was characterised by a change from successive to simultaneous vision. It would perhaps be more exact to say that the period was one in which human vision widened tremendously, notably in the ability to see an object or concept as a totality rather than as a succession of discrete parts. In astronomy, for instance, Copernicus rudely shattered traditional concepts of the structure of the universe when he proposed that the sun was at the centre of the system, and not the earth. When challenged by his critics as to why the stars moved so slowly about the sky, he argued that these were so distant from the earth that even their annual orbits could not be distinguished. He claimed that his new theory provided a far more coherent view of the universe than the existing theories had done, and he claimed that it bound the heavens 'so closely together that nothing could be transposed without disrupting the other parts, and indeed without disrupting the entire system'. His revolutionary proposals, as is well known, aroused considerable hostility, and even the liberal Luther exclaimed, 'the fool will discredit the entire art of astronomy . . ; has he forgotten that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth!' Ideas as to the make-up of our planet were similarly revolutionised during the late fifteenth century. Bishop Pierre d'Ailly (Bishop of Cambrai when Dufay was a chorister there) suggested that the spherical earth comprises five distinct zones; the outer zones (the first and fifth) were too cold to live in, and the central zone (the third) too hot. Human beings, he concluded, could only inhabit one of the two temperate zones, since the bible tells us, Christ came to save all men; access to the other temperate zone was of course barred by the torrid zone. Columbus carried a copy of d'Ailly's book, *Imago mundi*, with him on his travels annotating it as he went. That men were prepared to prove or disprove philosophical speculation by practical experiment suggests a close parallel to the Copernican attitude, which sought to arrive at a comprehensive or simultaneous understanding of things – in this case, the geography of the earth. In this particular instance, the experiment called for not a little curiosity, and considerable courage.

2 In, *Papers of the American Musicological Society*, 1941, p.57.
3 Grey Arrow Books, (1959)

In the arts may be seen a parallel widening of vision, in which a move from successive to simultaneous thinking played an important part. It was during the later-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, for instance, that the science of perspective drawing came to be understood. It was then that composers came increasingly to conceive the separate voices of a composition at one and the same time, rather than one after the other. It was also in the fifteenth century (and notably in Florence) that architects began to work with three dimensional drawings, rather than with the two dimensional sketches that had been the norm in earlier times.

As far as music is concerned, we should remind ourselves, perhaps, in the first place, of music's relationship to the sciences in the Middle Ages. It comprised one of the Quadrivium 'sciences' in medieval university studies, together with mathematics, geometry and astronomy. All four were concerned with the study of proportion as a revelation of the nature of the divine creator. It was observed that the simplest mathematical ratios produced the most satisfying consonances and the most pleasing visual interrelationships. Much of the greatest church architecture is based upon these simple ratios, which were thought to extend to the structure of the universe itself, and to give rise to the harmony of the spheres.

It is no accident that mathematical proportion, then, played such an important part in the structure of medieval liturgical music. The Englishman John Dunstable, who stands astride the medieval and renaissance eras, constructed many of his greatest church compositions on deliberately mathematical lines (he was himself a distinguished mathematician and astronomer). His four-part 'Veni sancte spiritus' is a tour de force[4]. It was successively composed, beginning with the tenor which comprises the second and third lines of the great plainsong hymn. Interestingly enough, though, Dunstable superimposed on the plainsong an arbitrary series of rhythms that brought the second line to a halt, one note too soon; he then set out a series of rests, before embarking on the third line, preceding this however, with the odd note that had been left over from line two. The third line then lacks its last two notes. Having got thus far, Dunstable then repeated the entire tenor, exactly as it stood, and after that, a further two times reducing note values and rests by a third, and finally twice again, in a further reduction of a third. The tripartite composition thus has a 3:2:1 rhythmic interrelationship. Having completed the tenor, Dunstable probably went on with the upper voice, again using the plainsong but now in its entirety and in a freely decorated rhythmic style. Of the other two parts, the countertenor was probably the last to be completed, as it contains a number of awkward

4 Published in 'The Collected Works of John Dunstable', *Musica Britannica* VIII (1953), (rev. 1975); and available separately from Stainer & Bell.

melodic progressions, suggesting that Dunstable was by that stage experiencing some difficulty in reconciling the needs of smooth melodic writing with his evident desire to secure full triadic consonance. It will be noted that the rhythmic patterns of the upper voices are largely repeated (they are substantially isorhythmic, that is) parallel to the repeated rhythmic sections of the tenor. As Dunstable set different texts to each of the three active upper voices, he can in no sense have conceived the work as a vehicle for verbal communication, nor indeed does he even attempt to reflect verbal rhythms in the musical notes to which the words are set. For Dunstable was concerned to construct a composition that would in microcosm reflect the ordered proportion of the universe, a proportion that extended even to the perfect, triadic sonority that was so much admired by his contemporaries. To this extent at least, Dunstable was already thinking more vertically than his immediate predecessors, for unlike them, he took the greatest care to relate each part with every other one, in the vertical plane.

During the course of the Renaissance, the relevance of the Quadrivium to university studies was increasingly questioned and music came to be regarded as an independent study, with degrees of its own; Cambridge awarded its first specifically music degree for instance in 1463, and Oxford was not slow to follow suit. The change is symptomatic of a changing understanding of music, in which music was increasingly regarded as an expressive art rather than as a proportional science. To understand how this could have been so it is necessary to identify some of the more significant ways in which musical thought developed during the fifteenth century. Possibly the most momentous change took place in the way that tonality and scale structure were conceived. Medieval theorists, taking their cue from ancient times, had recognised the existence of four scale patterns – the modes on d (the dorian), e (phrygian), f (lydian) and g (mixolydian); these were 'white note' scales, there being only one recognised accidental, Bb. All other accidentals were referred to as musica ficta, or musica falsa. Renaissance theorists took the radical step of recognising that modes could be constructed on any 'white' note other than B: the two new modes, the aeolian on a and the ioian on c are essentially the later minor and maior scale formations, and these became steadily more popular. A particularly clear account of the change is to be found in Glarean's *Dodecachordon*, of 1549.

Composers also began to explore the potential of a fully chromatic system and the feasibility of an equal-tempered scale, such as had been described by the classical theorist, Aristoxenus, a translation of whose work on the subject was published towards the end of the fifteenth century. A particularly striking practical result of this was a two-voiced composition by Adrian Willaert, first organist of St. Mark's, Venice 'Quid non ebrietas'[5]. This is the first work to attempt to sail, as it were, round

5 E. E. Lowinsky, 'Adrain Willaert's Chromatic Duo re-examined', *Tidischroft voor Mizickwetenschap* (Amsterdam 1965)

the tonal world through the remote keys. The actual modulatory scheme that Willaert followed was somewhat erratic, just as the course of geographical exploration had been, but in a very crude way it covers the cycle of fifths from f to f. Without such exploratory work, later musical structures depending on the principle of modulation and key contrast could not have been developed. It is a curious accident that Willaert produced this piece in the very year that Magellan completed the first voyage round the world: 1519!

As far as the arts are concerned, newly acquired techniques were used to express a new subjectivity. This is particularly evident in the field of painting, the Florentine artist Masaccio being a central figure in this development. His fresco of the Holy Trinity, in the church of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, dating from about 1425 shows a complete mastery of three-dimensional techniques[6]. Although painted on a flat surface the perspective really pierces the wall in a new and startingly realistic manner. The technical brilliance of the work is easy enough to appreciate. Of even greater interest however is the way in which the various figures in it relate to the crucified Christ, and to God in majesty above. It is a donor painting, and portraits of the donors are to be seen at the base of the triangle. Previously it had been the custom in religious works of the kind to represent the donors on a much smaller scale than the main characters of the composition, nor was much effort made to portray them at all realistically. In the Trinity composition, however, Masaccio has drawn the donors, Lorenzo Lenzi and his wife on the same scale as the figure of Christ and, moreover, he has placed them in particularly prominent structural positions – at either end of the base of the pictorial triangle. The donors seem, in short, to be personally involved in the momentous event. Not long after this, Dufay completed his remarkable 'Ave regina coelorum', inserting into the text of the votive antiphon a personal prayer for salvation: 'Miserere tui labentis Dufay, ne peccatorum ruat in ignem fervorum'. Fascinatingly, the music, which has up to this point been in the Ionian mode of c, moves into what can only be described as the key of c minor, a, e and b all being flattened. Later theorists and composers were to find the minor mode particularly appropriate for the expression of sorrowful and penitential feelings; detailed instructions on this matter were published by many musicians notably Zarlino and Thomas Morley.

Josquin des Prez, so his contemporary Pietro Aron assures us, was one of the first great composers to perfect the musical equivalent of three-dimensional draftsmanship; the difficult technique of 'simultaneous' composition. In such a work as his deeply moving 'Absalon fili mi', there is no mathematically structured cantus firmus. Each line of the desolate text generates its own melodic motives; its declamatory shape conditions

6 Discussed in John Pope-Henessey's *The Portrait in the Renaissance Phaidon* (1966)

the rise and fall of the melodic line: its verbal stresses generate equivalent musical rhythms; its bitter thoughts are mirrored in bitter harmonies, full of suspended and accented dissonance. And towards the close there is a memorable passage of word painting in which 'sed descendam in infernum' is mirrored in a descending melody that progresses downwards in a sequence of fifth-related progressions, through g, c, f, and b flat. All this was possible only because every line of the setting was conceived simultaneously; there was no successively conceived tenor to fetter the harmonic progress of the music, or to limit the range of rhythms and intervals available to the composer. The text becames the framework on which the setting is built, and it is presented in both an audible and emotionally sympathetic manner. This was the approach that composers were eventually to adopt in writing music for the reformed English rites, where such emphasis was placed on personal understanding and involvement.

The Address was illustrated by reproductions of some of the paintings mentioned and also by tape recordings of music referred to.