Sacred Music

The Mass: Machaut’s Mass of Our Lady. To understand the emergence of the polyphonic Mass as a central genre in Renaissance music, we must briefly step back to the twelfth century. When composers such as Leoninus and Perotinus began enhancing chants for the Mass with polyphony, they focused on the Proper. After all, chants from the Proper—such as Gradual Viderunt omnes—made the service unique on that particular feast day. As time went on, however, and polyphony became more elaborate, the focus of attention moved more in the direction of setting the five sections of the Ordinary (polyphony for the sixth section, the Ite Missa est, was rarely composed). Such a move made practical sense; why compose complicated music for one feast day, when the Ordinary is appropriate for almost each and every day?

By the early decades of the fourteenth century, composers serving the pope, who had moved his court to the French city of Avignon in 1309, were actively engaged in writing polyphonic settings for the Ordinary. About forty of these movements have survived. While that is a small number, these compositions appear in multiple sources distributed over a wide geographical area, indicating a significant dissemination of this music. Scholars believe some of these settings of the Ordinary were intended to be performed together in the same service, creating what is called a Mass cycle. A cyclic Mass is one in which the various parts of the Ordinary are joined together by common musical ideas. It is unknown whether one composer wrote all the movements in these early Masses or whether each movement was composed by a different individual. Throughout the fourteenth century, the musical connections in Mass cycles were tenuous at best, but that changed dramatically during the Renaissance.

Machaut’s Messe de Nostre Dame (Anthology 34) is important in the history of Western music for several reasons. It is the first Mass cycle that we know was written by a single composer. While that is important, there are also aspects that illustrate the subtle nature of fourteenth-century cyclic composition. For example, the chants Machaut selected to serve as the basis for the tenor line in each movement were appropriate for Masses venerating the Virgin Mary. The four-part texture is consistent in all the movements: the tenor and contratenor move more slowly, whereas the upper two voice parts frequently include passages of hocket and syncopation. Machaut based four of his six movements on the compositional principle of isorhythm. Further, a distinctive motive provides a more aurally perceptible unifying gesture. In this landmark work, Machaut foreshadows the trend for musically unified Mass settings that soon dominates the compositional activities of Renaissance composers.

Cantus firmus Mass. The cantus firmus Mass is a type of cyclic Mass that bases all five of the movements on one melody, most often placed in the tenor line. This recurring melody, called a cantus firmus, can be either a chant or a secular song. The name of the cantus firmus then serves as the title of the Mass (e.g., Missa L’Homme armé is based on the tune L’Homme armé). Indeed, the choice of cantus firmus, even a secular one, could provide musical relevance for a particular occasion, such as a wedding, or inspiring knights to join a Crusade. This potential for creating a unified, large-scale composition fascinated Renaissance composers. The thematic relationship between movements was certainly apparent to those who first sang and heard
these Masses, but unlike today’s concerts and recordings of polyphonic Masses that eliminate intervening liturgy, sections of the Ordinary were separated by monophonic chants of the Proper as well as by Scripture reading, prayers, and the celebration of the Eucharist. From Machaut to Mozart and beyond, Masses were intended for use, not as repertoires for concerts.

Cantus firmus Masses did not emerge among the composers working for the sophisticated papal court at Avignon, nor in fact with continental musicians, but with the English. Leonel Power (c1380–1445), who spent much of his career at Canterbury cathedral, composed one of the first examples of a cantus firmus Mass, the Missa Alma Redemptoris Mater. Surprisingly, this Mass does not appear in that venerable collection of English polyphony, the Old Hall Manuscript, but in an Italian source. Power’s Mass was not the only example. Scholars believe that in 1420 the Missa Da gaudiorum premia, attributed to John Dunstaple (c1390–1453), served as the nuptial Mass for Henry V of England and Catherine of Valois (“Kate” in Shakespeare’s play Henry V). Although the composers were English, there was ample opportunity for them, and their music, to interact with composers on the Continent. A number accompanied their English lords as they marched through France during the Hundred Years’ War, and they were present at the Council of Constance (1414–1418), a pan-European assembly of church officials and government representatives that sought to conclude the disastrous “Great Schism” (a confusing period during which two and sometimes three rival popes simultaneously claimed the throne of St. Peter) by agreeing on one pope.

Guillaume Dufay was the first significant continental composer of cantus firmus Masses. He wrote two in the 1450s: Missa Se la face ay pale (based on his own secular ballade of the same name) and Missa L’Homme armé. In both Masses, Dufay first augmented the rhythmic structure of the original cantus firmus melody and then concluded the movement with the tune in “real time.” In the latter work (Anthology 45b) the first phrase of the cantus firmus extends for twenty-four beats; the final statement, beginning in m. 81, requires only twelve. A result of this rhythmic diminution is that the melodic identity of cantus firmus becomes audible rather than serving as a subtly perceived method of musical organization.

Other composers followed Dufay’s example, especially in the composition of L’Homme armé Masses. Among the many were Busnoys, Ockeghem, Josquin, and even Palestrina. Composing a L’Homme armé Mass became a means of demonstrating professional accomplishment, not unlike athletes having their records posted on the gymnasium wall. Busnoys, for example, wrote six different L’Homme armé Masses, in which the tune appears not only in its original version but also in retrograde, inversion, and retrograde inversion. Of course, composers wrote a host of cantus firmus Masses based on other tunes, Obrecht’s Missa Sub tuum presidium (Anthology 51) being but one example. In Obrecht’s Mass, the organizing principle is expanded to include multiple cantus firmi appearing in different voices.

Other organizational styles. In addition to writing cantus firmus Masses, Johannes Ockeghem (c1410–1497), arguably the greatest master of counterpoint in the history of Western music, also composed cyclic Masses that are not based on a preexistent tune. In these compositions, the organizing principle is an idea rather than a melody. Perhaps the most famous example is his Missa Prolationum (Anthology 47), in which each section consists of a mensuration canon. These canons consist of the second voice imitating the first but in a different meter. The obvious difficulty is that as the voices gradually diverge, the harmony must still remain consonant. Further, the distance of canonically imitation expands in each section. In the Kyrie the
canon is at the unison for the opening Kyrie, expands the harmonic distance to the second for the Christe, and the third for the final Kyrie. In another Mass, Missa Cuiusvis tone (Mass on Whichever Mode), Ockeghem wrote in such a manner that the notes of the Mass could fall into any mode by changing the accidentals, which means that the same score could sound completely different depending upon which mode the singers chose for that service. Despite these esoteric compositional puzzles, Ockeghem’s music is more than some sort of musical Sudoku; they are beautiful works of art.

From Medieval to Renaissance: The motet in transition. From Machaut to Dufay, isorhythmic technique dominated motet composition. As the Middle Ages evolved into the Renaissance, it was not uncommon for composers to demonstrate their skill by writing complex motets in which all the voice parts have an isorhythmic character, a technique known as pan-isorhythm. Dunstaple’s motet Veni creator spiritus is one well-known example wherein isorhythmic technique permeates all four voices. Yet, even as the complexity increased, isorhythm as a compositional technique was dying away. One late work is Dufay’s motet Nuper rosarum flores (Anthology 39), composed for the dedication of the Florence Cathedral in 1436. Dufay based the color of his isorhythmic tenor on the chant appropriate for church dedications, “Terribilis est locutus.” This color occurs four times during the duration of the motet. Instead of a talea pattern that requires several repetitions to coincide with the color, as was the usual practice, the talea in Nuper rosarum corresponds to the number of pitches in the color. There are four statements of the isorhythmic tenor in the motet, but each statement is proportionally reduced (6, 4, 2, 3), a musical structure that replicates not only some of the cathedral’s important architectural dimensions but also those of the ancient temple of Solomon.

The English style. In contrast to the theory espoused by continental theorists that harmonic consonance should emphasize open octaves and fifths, English music had long used full triads. Triadic harmony pervades one early example, Sumer is icumen in (Anthology 40), which dates to around 1250. The English also developed a harmonic style known as descant, in which a line is harmonized by a succession of first inversion chords, to use modern musical terminology. The English composer credited with bringing this new style to the continent during the early years of the Renaissance was John Dunstaple (c1390–1453). His most famous and widely disseminated motet is Quam pulchra es (Anthology 42). Aside from the final chord, the harmonic language of Dunstaple’s motet is fully triadic, no more visibly and sonically apparent than in the two sustained chords that set the imperative word of invitation “Veni” (“Come”). Further, the musical “sweetness” is enhanced by the limited use of dissonance and brief passages of descant. Dunstaple’s music so captured the imagination that one prominent Renaissance theorist proposed, in effect, throwing all music written by previous composers into the trash heap.

Toward a new style. As the isorhythmic tradition gradually disappeared, it was replaced not by a single dominant style but by several. One of these is what we now call the motet-chanson, a work in which the upper voices sing a vernacular text over a Latin chant in the tenor, such as Dufay’s Lamentatio sanctae matris ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae (see Anthology 44). Other styles were also concurrent, such as one that paralleled the cantus firmus technique of the Mass. Another, later developing style was the paraphrase motet, in which a composer embellishes a preexisting chant melody. This melody is often placed in the top voice, but it is not relegated to a single part. Indeed, it can infuse the melodic character of all the voices. Basiron’s motet Salve, Regina (Anthology 49) exemplifies this style.
Secular Music

**Italian Trecento.** Secular polyphony flourished in Italy during the Trecento, a period paralleling the French Ars nova. Yet in spite of some surface similarities with the French *formes fixes*, the Italian forms were different in musical style. As if foreshadowing by three centuries the melodic lyricism of Italian opera, Trecento polyphony favored a more melismatic style of singing. Further, harmony began to emphasize thirds and sixths (6/3 chords). Therefore, despite the initial similarity of musical forms, Trecento composers did not merely adopt the French *formes fixes* and give them Italian names.

The madrigal was the first secular polyphonic music in Italy. It shares the same musical structure as the French Ballade (AAB), but the poetic pattern is distinctly different. The two A sections (occasionally a third A is added) each consist of three lines of poetry, which are then followed by a two-line ritornello, designated as B. Jacopo da Bologna’s madrigal *Non al suo amante* (Anthology 37) typifies the genre: the poetry is by the Italian humanist Francesco Petrarch, the music for each poetic line begins and ends with a melisma in the upper voice, the texture consists of two-part polyphony, and the concluding cadences of each section resolve the third of the penultimate chord to the unison.

While most madrigals dealt with the topic of love, another genre, the caccia, usually focused on another activity that often engenders a passionate devotion: hunting. Appropriately enough, this genre is frequently canonic, with the second voice “chasing” the first. The third secular genre of the Trecento, the ballata, was associated with dancing. Like the French virelai, the ballata employs an AbbaA form. Opening with a refrain, known as the ripresa (A), it is followed by two piede (bb), a volta (a) that sets new text to the opening musical refrain, and then a concluding statement of the ripresa. (See *Or su, gentili spirti*, Anthology 38.) This genre was especially popular; there are more than twice as many ballate as madrigals and caccie combined. A third of all existing ballate were composed by Francesco Landini (c1325–1397), a blind organist and composer active in the city of Florence. While the beauty of his music was so highly regarded that birds were said to stop their singing to listen, today we most often associate Landini with the cadence that bears his name. It frequently appears at significant points in his compositions.

**England.** While the most significant English contributions to the development of early Renaissance music were in the sacred genres of the Mass and motet (see above), the modern Christmas carol traces its roots back to this period. It is true that few modern carols have tunes from the nineteenth century rather than medieval or Renaissance periods, such twentieth-century composers as Holst, Britten, and Vaughan Williams often set Medieval Latin and English texts. We associate carols with the Christmas season, but they could be sung at any time of year, could have secular or sacred texts, and could be performed in either the church or the home. As a general rule, carols consisted of a musical refrain called a burden that alternated with strophic verses. In the Agincourt Carol (Anthology 41), a song celebrating the astonishing victory of Henry V and a tiny English army over the armed host of France, an opening two-part burden precedes the first verse, and then a three-voice burden separates the subsequent stanzas.

**The French chanson.** The generic French word for “song” is *chanson*. Because this genre, vocal music set to a French text, stretches over many centuries, there are numerous poetic and musical categories. During the early Renaissance the chanson was a polyphonic composition for three or four parts that continued using the medieval
*formes fixes* (ballade, rondeau, and virelai) established by Machaut. Evidence regarding
the performance of the Renaissance chanson suggests two styles: all parts could be
sung, or a soloist could sing the cantus while instruments played the lower parts.

The most famous Burgundian composer of the early Renaissance, Dufay, wrote
eighty chansons in addition to his more substantial Masses and motets. His contem-
porary, Gilles Binchois (c1400–1460), specialized in composing secular love songs
despite being a celibate member of the clergy. While Binchois wrote many lively
tunes that would delight his pleasure-loving patron, Philip the Good, the sorrowful
lament *Dueil angoisseus* (Anthology 41) exemplifies many aspects of this music:
uncomplicated rhythms, clear text declamation, a graceful melodic line, short
phrases, and a slower moving tenor and contratenor that support the melody.

In the generation following Dufay and Binchois, composers such as Ockeghem
and Busnoys incorporated the newer imitative style of sacred music into their chan-
sons. The result was an alteration from a cantus-dominated texture to one in which
all the voices were structurally equal. Ockeghem’s canonic rondeau *Prenez sur moi*
(Anthology 46) is perhaps an extreme example of imitative rigor. More typical is the
virelai *Je ne puis vivre ainsy toujours* (Anthology 50) by Antoine Busnoys (c1435–
1492). There is some direct imitation between the voices in the opening of the
chanson, but subsequently the parts are treated with greater flexibility. In the A sec-
tion, for example, the imitation between the soprano and tenor lines is sometimes
separated by a distance of three beats, sometimes by two. Throughout this section
the contratenor variously engages in exact repetition, occasionally suggests inver-
sion of the phrase, and sometimes doubles one of the voices a third below. One result
of this emphasis on imitation was the eventual demise of the venerable *formes fixes*
as a basis for the chanson—imitation suggested voices pushing forward, not looping
back to repeat a previous section.