WHAT WAS HUMANISM, AND HOW DID IT AFFECT MUSIC?

The term was formulated by scholars in C19 and was not one in general use during the ‘Renaissance;’ itself a concept that has become controversial as historians re-evaluate the many achievements of what used to be known as ‘the dark ages.’

Earlier generations taught that humanism or ‘the new learning’ subsisted in a rediscovery of classical Greek literature and architectural remains; hence ‘renaissance = rebirth. What this amounted to was that classical mythology entered literature and the arts, but its effect on sacred music is hard to quantify. Whereas the madrigal – ‘Canzone ‘matricale’ came to deal with many quasi-classical literary themes: Palestrina and rore found ways of writing ‘spiritual madrigals’ usually around the ‘song of Songs or the cult of Mary.

It is not until we arrive at late C16 and the beginnings of opera that music designed on principles of the ‘new learning’ can be discerned; in this case the result of debates in the ‘Camerata’ on ancient philosophy! The Oratorians moved in very quickly early in the next century with oraratorio.‘ The church usually came in late on music as in most other aspects of life, insisting particularly after the counter-reformation, onclear separation between sacred and profane music, but this occurred well after our period of study.

One thing needs to be clear: ‘humanism’ whatever historians thought it was, had nothing to do with the sense in which we use the term today. Although magic, alchemy astrology and numerology contributed to learning at the time, pure atheism did not.

Coming at the question from a spiritual angle, it’s possible to discern an entire movement away from formal religion that expressed itself over several centuries prior to ‘the new learning’ in many and varied ways. There was never separation between sacred and secular as we understand it, and in purely historical terms ‘secular’ denoted religious practice outside that of the monastic orders only. It can be argued that Protestantism and the Reformed church movements may have brought a better grasp of theology and liturgy than was generally around in the late middle ages and it was Nicolas Ridley who lamented that parishioners usually had little or no understanding of what was going on in church.

A reading of Chaucer’s ‘Canterbury tales’ and especially the Prologue illustrates many aspects of how differently religion impacted on daily life. If you love Chaucer try reading Bocaccio, from whom he took a few yarns, but there are many more that illustrate the practice and application of the sacred in daily life.

By 1400 local pride often subsisted in the celebration of immemorial cults of saints otherwise unknown to the Vatican: from C13 the ‘secular clergy’ friars [= brothers] went out into the world and the local church generated all kinds of associations and individual roles that bled well into the parish it served while the main religious orders generated fraternities and associations among the laity often in honour of saints or biblical themes.

Relationships and counselling could be received from Friars, anchorites and their female equivalents such as Mother Julian; most of these individuals, supported by the community, made themselves available for prayer ministry and spiritual guidance which went with the role in which they were being supported.

Pilgrimages and all the rigmarole around them were a well established institution and not only for the very pious; preachers such as San Bernardino and Savonarola in Italy, and in particular the ‘Lollards’ went to the heart in a way that the pulpit couldn’t match in the encouragement of personal piety.

All of these phenomena fostered a trend away from theology of the Parisian scools of C13 and from the rather impersonal spirituality of the mediaeval church, towards a more private person-centred devotion practised informally in fraternities but largely in the home, aided by small books of prayer and other devotion, particularly to Mary. Little household altars, books of hours for the rich and even ‘prayer nuts; tiny spherical wooden lockets that opened to reveal the tiniest biblical scenes.

There was a lively tradition of sacred song; on pilgrimage; Chaucer’s group would have sung as well as tell stories; the Italians had the ‘lauda’; the Germans ‘Lesen’ [from songs that ended with ‘Kyrie eleison;] England had carols not necessarily only for Christmas[!] and the Spaniards ‘Cantigas’. Everywhere there were songs with moralising texts often to encourage almsgiving and well-loved courtly songs found their way into the ordinary of the Mass, while the occasional ‘contrafactum’, writing sacred texts to secular songs, became something of an industry.

Viewed this way, it should be clear that advocates of reform – Wyclif in England, Huss in Bohemia and later Luther were probably able to push on an open door, particularly when few of these movements originated from the upper strata of society. With the distinction that we insist upon today between the sacred and the secular being virtually non-existent in the late middle-ages, movements such as the peasants’ revolt of 1381 and the ‘Jacquerie’ in C15 France were invariably encouraged and supported by local hedge priests, friars or what the church chose to call ‘heresiarchs’ as in C13 southern France

Regarding the actual sound of music, Pope John 22nd, a notorious grinch, had issued a bull in 1322 forbidding the use of ‘sensuous’ intervals such as the third and sixth in church music, but secular song had been using these for generations, not to mention that extemporised part-singing would almost invariably include them. In our period it was the English composers of the ‘contenace Angloise’ who brought these intervals into church music from early C15.

The use of these intervals in polyphonic music intensified the ability to generate climax and anticlimax by means of harmonic rhythm and textural contrast as the number of sung parts increased. There was also greater freedom among singers who were valued for ability to improvise and ornament their lines.

Music printing from early C16 hastened the dissemination of the best composers’ work and brought about very much greater musical literacy than before, and music, always taught in universities as part of the quadrivium, alongside maths, astronomy and theology, with emphasis on theoretical and philosophical contexts, could now be shared as a pleasant pastime for amateurs. According to Castiglione’s treatise on ‘The Courtier,’ as a necessary accomplishment among many, a gentleman at court was expected to read music at sight and be able to play a musical instrument well so relatively simple music for amateur enjoyment became a winner for publishers all over Europe.

For four generations, from the time of Johannes Ciconia to Philip Rogier, whom composed for Phillip iii of Spain in early C17, these Franco-Flemish composers travelled all over western Europe and often scooped the top jobs, not a trend most likely to endear them to native talent, and two major political and religious upheavals put the lid on them.

First came the reformation which affected music in several ways: the Lutheran tradition was already getting established from the very best native German and Franco-Flemish influences by the time of the diet of Worms in the 1550’s, when a compromise was hammered out by which each ruler of a state – and there were hundreds in Geerman – could choose which denomination their subjects must adhere to. Luther’s opponents already twigged in his lifetime that music – congregational unison singing – was winning more hearts than his theology, and this revolutionary audience participation in the liturgy won plenty more.

Finally, in mid C16, the Counsel of Trent issued various fiats on musical style: Melisma, the singing of seemingly endless melody on one syllable, was to be discouraged so that congregations could understand the words. All but five of the mediaeval sequences were to be abolished, and localised liturgical uses were to be banned, except those that could be traced back to before 1327, such as the Ambrosian rite in Milan and the Mozarabic in Spain.

If we de-construct all of this, bearing in mind that the vast majority of attendees at Trent were Italians, it is possible to discern that on the whole what was being thrown out derived from Franco-Flemish trends, and what was being advocated as reform favoured Italianate musical style.

The other fatwa that really made travelling south a poor career move was actually a perfectly legitimate and necessary injunction for clergy endowed with benefices should not absent themselves from them for any significant length of time. While this was aiming to stop an abuse that had been rife in the middle ages, most northerners working for courts and cathedrals in the south would angle for a rich benefice from the proceeds of which they could spend a happy retirement, and once that was taken away musicians might have to keep working at ever-decreasing salaries in less and less prestigious environments as they aged. .

With the polychoral style arising in Rome and Venice, in the last quarter of C16, and the ‘stile moderna’ spreading from Italy all over Europe, the Franco-Flemish musicians and their work disappeared very largely into the archives.