LENT COURSE 2025

HISTORICAL BACKGROUN

Optional reading

To help us receive and understand music from sources unfamiliar to us, it is always an idea to know something of the historical social and cultural background that gave it birth.

The Franco-Flemish ‘school’ of singer-composers who bossed the musical scene between about 1400 and 1550 arose very largely as the result of the institution in C14 France of small choir schools they called ‘Maitrises’ which differed from later models because they took in a very few boys whom they could educate individually to a very high level of attainment. Originating around large cathedrals and other religious institutions in places like Chartres Paris and Rouen, new ones sprang up in northeast France – Cambrai, Arras, Liile etc, and across the border into the southern Francophone part of ‘Benelux’ that we know as Belgium; and thence to rich commercial areas such as Flanders, Hainault and important commercial hubs; Bruges, Ghent Moulins and Antwerp.

Many alumni of these institutions naturally stayed on home ground and took jobs as precentors or simply sung in choirs. At the beginning of our period composers, however famous and useful, never identified as such, being employed for their singing voices and skills: if they could compose, so much the better! The first individual to change this and identify himself primarily as composer was Guillaume Dufay, by far the best-known figure of the early 15th century musical constellation today. A century later when agents were scouring Europe for talent, the ability and willingness to compose as directed had become a major consideration.

As with art at this time, the principal corridors of exchange ran between the two most commercially advanced parts of the continent; northern Italy and the low countries, or Netherlands where wool was imported mainly from England, and woven into tapestries, clothing and other essentials, with major seaports like Antwerp able to import every conceivable luxury and to enable shipping to come right upriver into other nearby commercial centres ready for distribution.

in the north, and Venice and Genoa for Italy.

Whilst painting in early modern times began in Italy, it was the use of oil paint which was far more stable than egg tempera, and the development of perspective, that were the principal contribution from the Flemish school to the course of ‘Renaisance’ painting. By the same token, it was the Netherlanders’ application of rigorous contrapuntal techniques together with the deployment of sensuous harmony into sacred as well as courtly song, that characterised their style. The overall effect was to enrich and enhance musical texture and harmonic rhythm that came to significantly widened the gamut of emotional intensity in music everywhere.

Cultural history never moves from one ‘school’ or ‘movement’ or ‘ism’ to ‘the next’ ‘En bloc:’ during the fourteenth century the English had developed the use of these sensuous musical sounds, and the import of English musicians into the court of the Duke of Bedford as ‘governor-general in Rouen after Agincourt created a fashion for what the poet martin Lefranc termed ‘La Contenance Angloise.’ The German lands, the Italian city states and Spain all had well established musical traditions that could withstand and assimilate new ideas and techniques from elsewhere, but until the spread of printing their dissemination, particularly in wartime, could be seriously restricted, whereas grand get-togethers such as church councils diplomatic summits, peace treaties dynastic weddings and even christenings brought grandees out with their entourages often to compete in the use of display and soft power.

With the spread of printing, of course, publishers vied for the best of the best, with occasional stuff misattributed to famous composers for the extra profit which has left modern scholars with the head-ache of trying to unscramble such deception by examining aspects of style and making inspired guesses as to who could have composed what; and the relative unimportance of composer attribution around this time brought about the many infuriating ‘anon’ tags we find on recordings and and in concert notes.

Musicians never change; onwards and upwards taking chances and putting ourselves forward for a job; listening to other colleagues and, like chefs, not being too ashamed to emulate the best we can find in whatever we can learn from them. In the period covered by this course, the best paid and most prestigious jobs were usually to be had at royal and ducal courts; well-endowed religious foundations and secondarily at B-list establishments be they religious or other; these could sometimes include work for rich merchants or even bankers who could afford to make religious endowments or hold private parties and put on civic shows.

A third stratum would be contracts to municipalities, often as instrumentalists, but with perhaps a few singers. The instrumentalists, however, would probably have their jobs from their fathers, after a long and arduous apprenticeship often resembling slave labour. At the very bottom were ‘minstrels’ who scraped a living as best they might; perhaps joining bands and getting occasional plush gigs where payment could be nothing more than getting fed. It’s worth bearing in mind that payment for many services besides music was not always delivered in money alone: board & lodging, uniforms & clothing, besides everyday essentials such as flour, salt, wine or beer were factored into even some of the top jobs.

Whilst town minstrels could leap-frog out of their caste by means of getting noticed and funded for university to study for the priesthood, the lucky ones, or, as ever, those with the sharpest elbows, could bring themselves to the attention of a really rich patron and live in clover for as long as their luck lasted. Loyset Compere worked for the Sforza family in Milan, but in 1476 the ‘don’, Galeazzo Maria Sforza was murdered; his rich musical establishment broken up, and ‘Savue qui peut!!!’ Similarly, Jakob Obrecht, probably second only to Josquin for talent and sheer beauty of composition, was the son of a contract trumpeter in ghent where he was probably born; showed huge talent and was head-hunted for Utrecht university where it has been suggested that he might even have taught Erasmus. Early in his adult career he was invited for a six-month stay at the D’Este family seat in Ferrara, the best paid position in Europe at the time. Returning to the Netherlands, he seems to have had difficulty settling down –shades of Mozart – getting fired from St Donatian in Bruges,moving onto Our Lady, the principal church in Antwerp, and finally obtaining the plum job at Ferrara again in 1504; but the following year Duke Ercole died of the plague; the music set-up was dissolved and Obrecht died of the plague himself before he could find another gig. Both these top-ranking musicians were doubly unlucky because at the end of most of the best jobs they could apply for a nice fat absentee benefice on home turf from which to support their retirement.

What constituted a top job, then, was a safe one, and during the fiftennth and sixteenth centuries how many of those might you guess there were?

For the first three quarters of the fifteenth century, it was undoubtedly duke Phillip ‘the Good’ and his far less competent son, Charles ‘The bold’ who bossed Europe: Phillip who reigned until 1467, and despite his political standing and achievements, was still only a duke and needed to compete with royalty, so that his court became a by-word for excessive luxury and display. He employed as his Musical Director the foremost composer of his day, gilles binchois who died in his service: in addition, he kept Dufay on hand to provide occasional music, particularly for his foundation, ‘The golden fleece’; while patronising the cream of the Flemish painters, Van Eyck, Rogier van der Widen and Memling. His son Charles,who had been duke of Charolais before inheriting, also loved music and had Antoine Busnois in his entourage, another great and influential composer if also something of a hell-raiser like his boss.

When Phillip changed sides in the 100-year war and helped tip the English out of France, the French royal court took on Johannes Ockeghem, the top composer of our second generation who didn’t die until 1492: his already adequate salary was bulked out with an appointment as treasurer to the richest religious foundation in France; the Abbey of St Martin, but he must have possessed other skills and accomplishments because he was occasionally sent on diplomatic missions. Anne of Britanny held court at Nantes and employed jean Richafort for a time: she married Louis Xi ‘The Spider’, - he of the notorious ‘pig piano!!!’ but who was otherwise, himself, an open-handed patron of music!

The French revival peaked in 1517 with Francis the 1st who famously competed with henry Viii at the ‘Field of the Cloth of Gold’ a ‘cardboard city’ equivalent to a modern film set, where both chapels met and shared the musical entertainment and liturgical duties together.

Charles ‘The Gold’ got himself rashly killed after ten years, leaving one daughter Mary ‘The Rich’ who might have been better named’ the Jackpot’ bringing with her dowry the whole of Burgundy and the territories her ancestors had won in Switzerland, Alsace Lorraine and the entire Netherlands. Before their assimilation into Burgundy, these had consisted of 17 entirely separate and different polities, city states, considerable provinces like Flanders and Hainault, not forgetting the Prince/Bishopric of Liege, annexed through family connections. Each of these had different laws and traditions and even different currencies, and language, then as now, was a constant source of friction among a host of others. Thus, the ruler of the Netherlands became Prince of ‘this’; duke of ‘that’ and Count of ’the other;’ was expected to speak three languages and to settle the many quarrels that arose among them all.

Mary had two suitors with any chance of success: Charles, the French Dauphin’ heir to the throne, who behaved with such arrogance that she wouldn’t consider him, so it was the Holy Roman Emperor’s son, Maximillian who scooped the lot. Max didn’t achieve much on the battle field but he and Mary had six children before she fell off her horse and died, - all of which they managed to shoehorn into advantageous dynastic marriages. Not the least of these was son Phillip ‘the Handsome’ who deserted his Spanish queen Joanna ‘the Mad – largely down to Phillip’s infidelity, but their son Charles, - future Emperor Charles V, who would have scooped the Renaissance equivalent of the Lottery had he not almost bankrupted himself getting elected Emperor. .

The Holy Roman Empire was a very strange animal; an elective post to rule virtually nothing directly though nominally his responsibilities included all the German lands, parts of Switzerland, Bohemia and Austria with a smidgeon of northern Italy and of part of the Balkans. The electors included the bishops of Mainz Trier and Cologne; the Elector Palatine, of Brandenberg and the Duke of Bavaria,and the King of bohemia. Each of these ran musical establishments that aimed to keep up with Vienna. In 1558 , when Charles retired to a monastery in Spain and died, his brother Ferdinand took up the eastern part of his territory based in Vienna: Son Phillip ii of Spain was left with the Netherlands, whichturned out a disastrous mistake for all concerned.

Nominally under the aegis of the Empire was another commercial network, the Hanseatic league, rooted in a few towns around north Germany; principally Hamburg and Lubeck and Danzig, but with outposts in Scandinavia, England and even the Netherlands. The Hanseatic league is not easily definable in terms of government: representatives met formally to discuss business, but it seemes to have functioned like a rather informal state within another rather informal empire. Its movers and shakers were, like those in the Netherlands, rich and well- established merchants and bankers who governed powerful trade guilds and were wealthy enough to live in very impressive town houses. The Fugger banking house in Augsburg stood out as one of the richest in Europe.

Like the German lands, northern and central Italy was made up of many small city states ruled by dynasties: the D’Ests in Ferrara, the Medici in Florence; the Bentivoglio in Bologna; and the Gonzagas in Mantua. The Sforzas, great patrons of music, were thrown out of Milan which was subsequently fought over during the terrible Italian wars. Once re-established as the papal seat, Rome recovered, and under the two ‘monsters’ as John Julius calls alexander the Borgia and Julius ii the ‘warrior’ Rome’s prestige increased markedly with top musical achievers installed in the Sistine chapel.

The one city state we most associate with this period of history is Florence with its regiment of painters, sculptors, architects, philosophers and writers. Veery little attention seems to be paid by music lovers at present to the wonderful productions of the Italian ‘Trecento’ with composers whose names end with ‘de Firenze’ and the star of them all, a blind composer-poet, Francesco Landini, whose tomb can be seen in San Lorenzo in Florence, although the good citizens appear to have forgotten him too. During the last quarter of the 15th century the Medici hired several first-rate Franco-Flemish musicians including the great Henryk Isaac, a distinguished contemporary of Josquin. When the firebrand preacher Savonarola whipped up the populace into making the famous ‘bonfire of the vanities,’ the Medici had to flee for their lives with or without their ‘chapel:’ : nowhere during this period of history was ever safe for very long. .

Venice was in decline by this time, having lost most of her empire to the Turks, but her traditions and special relationship with the sea still set her apart from the rest. The earliest musician documented as MD in mid-14th century is Antonius Romanus, and the famous Florentine composer/poet Francesco Landini composed a motet in honour of the Doge also around that time but both Johannes Ciconia and Hugo de Lantins were early 15th-century Flemish masters. writing grand motets in a style nothing like the great Adrian Willaert who laid the foundations for the splendid polychoral style made famous by the Gabrielis and Monteverdi. Such was the importance placed on the splendour of music at St Mark’s for sheer display and prestige, that a priest could be fined for interrupting the music!

Only English sacred music can be said to have been relatively unaffected by their neighbours across the channel; surprising in view of the amount of commerce that went on among them. The Old Hall manuscript contains items the like of which would have inspired the ‘Contenance Angloise; in the Netherlands, but, as with architecture, England went its own glorious way in the late 15th century in its self-preoccupation with civil wars. The Eton Choir-book comprises some truly splendid music based on plainchant cantus firmus and with soaring treble parts which might still exercise singers like Deboarah Roberts and Caroline Samson to the full: little or no sign of Netherlandish influence although Henry vii maintained two Jewish dynasties from there and Anne Boleyn’s songbook contains a good proportion of sacred compositions by Franco-Flemish contemporaries.

My best guess is that with composers such as Bobert Fayrfax, William Cornysh and THE REAL John Taverner around, and plenty more, perhaps there wasn’t much space for improvement! The single experiment with parody masses came probably at first with Taverner’s ‘Western Wynde’ mass, based on a countertenor to a fairly raunchy song: probably later, composers John sheppard of Christopher Tye took up the challenge and wrote a Mass setting each based on the same tune but with different arrangements. With the dissolution of the monasteries many superb composers disappear in mid-flow, pensioned off if they were lucky; and the death of queen Mary in 1558 marks the official end of sacred music on Latin texts.

At the end of the 16th century William Byrd was writing his masses for private consumption and probably amateur singers; the simple lines and limited ranges of the parts in the mass for 3 voices best illustrates this, besides which he was writing in a consciously archaic style that he didn’t use elsewhere, perhaps as protest, of which he was well capable, or as nostalgia for everything he viewed as having been lost.

Finally, it seems that ‘Das Lande ohne die Musik’ managed once more to help move things on in Europe when two great composers, the keyboard player John bull and Peter Phillips fled into self-exile in the Netherlands.

These illustrious Franco-Flemish composers continued pouring in and out of Italy and the German lands roughly until around 1550, but the reformation on the one hand, and the Council of Trent on the other, between them rather put the lid on any further career prospects for major figures, although in Spain the kings were recruiting from the Netherlands into the early 17th century, by which time this wonderfully rich seem of the finest music ever composed was being consigned to the archives, much of it still awaiting discovery by scholars today.