

## Chapter 5: Church Polyphony in the Late Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries: ca. 1475–1600

### I. Introduction

- A. The preeminent composer of his time, Josquin des Prez (ca. 1450–1521) set the standard for the new musical aesthetic, representing the *ars perfecta*, a perfect art.
- B. Giovanni Luigi da Palestrina (ca. 1525–94) and William Byrd (1543–1623) brought the *ars perfecta* to its musical height.

### II. The legendary Josquin des Prez

- A. Although a few of the composers we have studied were famous during their lifetimes (and for a while thereafter), no one achieved the “star” status of Josquin des Prez.
  - 1. His reputation was legendary during his lifetime and continues to be so today.
  - 2. Not only was his music well known, but also his personality interested his contemporaries.
  - 3. The printing of his works assisted in the spread of his popularity.
  - 4. His works not only display the technical prowess one expects of the high style ca. 1500, but also reflect humanist values in the lowering of style.
- B. A poet born, not made
  - 1. By the time Josquin died, music had moved from being considered part of the quadrivium to part of rhetoric.
    - a) Music, in response to emerging attitudes toward humanism, could express ideas, emotions, etc.
    - b) Compositions had to move the listeners.
- C. Changes in music theory
  - 1. The theorist Glareanus is responsible for the Josquin legend, as related in his *Dodecachordon* (1547).
- D. Josquin’s career
  - 1. Josquin began his career not far from where Du Fay had worked and died (Cambrai).
  - 2. Early on, he also worked in Aix-en-Provence (the opposite end of France from Cambrai) and for the Sforza family of Milan.
  - 3. In 1489 he went to Rome to work for the papal chapel choir.
  - 4. Josquin was working for the Duke of Ferrara (the d’Este family) by the time Petrucci’s volumes were printed.
    - a) Josquin composed the *Missa Hercules Dux Ferrariae* in honor of the Duke.
- E. A model masterpiece
  - 1. Josquin’s motet *Ave Maria . . . virgo serena* demonstrates many elements of his compositional style.
  - 2. Its influence was widespread, and as an example of perfected art it represents what many composers afterward sought to attain—it set the standard.

3. The text divides into three sections.
4. The music illustrates ideals espoused by humanist rhetoricians.
5. A detailed analysis of these characteristics includes the following:
  - a) The relationship between the chant and the first point of imitation
  - b) Syllabic (or not) setting of the text
  - c) The pace at which voices enter in imitation
  - d) The use of cadences
  - e) Meter
  - f) Harmonic variety
  - g) Style of counterpoint

#### F. Imitations

1. Several composers used Josquin's *Ave Maria . . . virgo serena* as a springboard for their own compositions.
  - a) Ludwig Senfl
  - b) Antoine de Fevin
2. "Imitation," or "parody," Mass is the term scholars use to designate Masses that rework polyphony from preexisting work.

#### G. Facts and myths

1. Because Josquin's *Ave Maria . . . virgo serena* encapsulates a new philosophy of composition, for many years scholars considered it a late work.
2. Recently, evidence surfaced that suggested it might date from early in the composer's career.

#### H. All is known

1. Sixteenth-century writers considered music an *ars perfecta*.
  - a) Composers had reached perfection in the art, and everything one needed to know about composition was available to be known.
  - b) Music needed rules so that those following would not have to rediscover perfection.
  - c) Gioseffo Zarlino was chief among these theorists.
    - (1) In his *Le istituzioni harmoniche* (1558) he recognizes the triad as a consonance and notes the differences in aesthetic between major and minor triads.
    - (2) Zarlino's ranking of intervals reflects those in the overtone series, although he did not know about overtones.

#### I. The "post-Josquin" generation

1. Along with consonances, Zarlino described dissonances and their treatment.
2. Several notable composers followed in Josquin's footsteps, and some were his pupils or pupils of pupils.
  - a) Adrian Willaert

- b) Nicolas Gombert
- c) Jacobus Clemens

J. Adrian Willaert

- 1. Willaert was the last in a long line of Franco-Flemish composers to work in Italy, at St. Mark's in Venice.

K. The new instrumental music

- 1. Willaert's reputation as a perfecter of method enabled him to have many students.
- 2. One of his supposed pupils, Cipriano de Rore, succeeded him at St. Mark's.
- 3. Italian students of Willaert continued his tradition of excellence in Venice, which became a major center of music study.
- 4. Jacques Buus also studied with Willaert.
  - a) Buus was an organist at St. Mark's.
  - b) He contributed the "ricercare"—keyboard pieces that followed the same compositional aesthetics as Willaert's motets.
- 5. The architecture of St. Mark's included two organ lofts, and the cathedral choir could be split between the two, resulting in a style of antiphonal performance known as *cori spezzati* (split choirs).

III. Italy

A. Palestrina and the ecumenical tradition

- 1. Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina and William Byrd continued in the *ars perfecta* tradition.
- 2. Palestrina was essentially the musical spokesperson of the Catholic Church during the tumultuous years following the Protestant Reformation.
  - a) He was the composer for eleven popes, from 1550 until his death.
  - b) Palestrina composed many Masses (at least 104).
- 3. Palestrina sought to provide an ideal medium for the text.
- 4. His pursuit of perfection in so many Masses resulted in a certain facility.

B. Continuing the tradition

- 1. Most of Palestrina's Mass settings are based on preexisting material.
  - a) Among his choices was the *L'Homme arme*.
  - b) More than thirty Masses are paraphrase Masses.

C. Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* and the bishops

- 1. During the mid-sixteenth century, some Catholic Church leaders noted difficulty in understanding the text in polyphonic music.
  - a) In response, Palestrina composed the *Missa Papae Marcelli*.

D. Freedom and constraint

- 1. The *Missa Papae Marcelli* represents an enforced style.

- a) There is no cantus firmus.
  - b) The careful treatment of melodic line (especially control of leaps and dissonances) created a style of composition associated with Palestrina.
  - c) Several parts of the Mass are homorhythmic, which allows for a clear expression of the text.
- E. “Stairway to Parnassus”
- 1. Over time, Palestrina’s compositional style came to be seen as the prototype for “correct” writing.
    - a) Palestrina’s style came to be known as *stile antico*, or “old style” in the early seventeenth century.
  - 2. In the eighteenth century, Johann Joseph Fux wrote a treatise in which he devised rules for counterpoint based on Palestrina’s music.

#### IV. England

- A. Alternatives to perfection
- 1. English aesthetics dictated a style that differed from that on the continent.
    - a) The music of John Taverner continues in this tradition of very dense textures of melismas.
    - b) English music reflects a belief that music expresses something words cannot.
    - c) The music seeks to lift up the listener by overwhelming the senses.
- B. The recusant William Byrd
- 1. Byrd’s music is more personal than that of his English predecessors.
  - 2. He wrote well in every genre.
  - 3. England alternated between Catholic and Protestant during his lifetime, but Byrd remained Catholic.
- C. The first English cosmopolite
- 1. Continental music flooded into England during the sixteenth century.
  - 2. The move to Protestantism meant no more Masses as compositional vehicles.
    - a) Because Byrd was in essence a Catholic composer, this dealt a severe blow to his career.
- D. The music of defiance
- 1. As Byrd withdrew from established music, he began to compose works that demonstrate defiance. They are considered a form of protest and personal statement.
  - 2. He published two books of Latin motets in 1589 and 1591.
    - a) They constitute the first Masses published in England (1593–95).
    - b) They are for three, four, and five voices.

- c) These works could only be performed in secret because it was illegal to be Catholic.
  - d) Byrd published two volumes of settings of the Propers: *Gradualia*.
- 3. Byrd's Masses are without precedent in England because decades passed without performances of the Mass Ordinary in England.
  - a) He would not have known contemporary Mass settings from the continent.
  - b) He based his Mass compositions on the style he had perfected in his motets.
  - c) The Agnus Dei from the Masses for four and five voices illustrate Byrd's approach.
  - d) These settings demonstrate Byrd's very personal statement—ones made in a period in which it was dangerous to do so.
- E. The peak (and limit) of stylistic refinement
  - 1. Byrd represents an end of the *ars perfecta* as a living style: in the next period it is called *stile antico*.
  - 2. Historical conditions outside music are part of the reason for this change.
  - 3. Furthermore, how composers saw the relationship between music and text changes drastically around 1600.