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Excerpt
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PART I

The status of the early polyphonic Mass

1 | Enlightenment and beyond

It takes a very bold and independent mind to conceive the idea that the invariable parts of the Mass should be composed not as separate items, but as a set of five musically coherent compositions. In the latter case the means of unification are provided by the composer, not the liturgy. This idea, which is the historical premise of the cyclic Ordinary, betrays the weakening of purely liturgical consideration and the strengthening of essentially aesthetic concepts. The “absolute” work of art begins to encroach on liturgical function. We discover here the typical Renaissance attitude – and it is indeed the Renaissance philosophy of art that furnishes the spiritual background to the cyclic Mass. The beginnings of the Mass cycle coincide with the beginnings of the musical Renaissance.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the decisive turn in the development of the cyclic Mass occurred only in the early fifteenth century. At this time the first attempts are made to unify the movements of the Ordinary by means of the same musical material.¹

Now more than half a century old, Bukofzer’s statement remains the classic evaluation of the “cyclic” polyphonic Mass as masterwork. Located in one of the most influential articles in the history of the discipline, it has gained still broader currency in refractions through the standard textbooks which have shaped the image of the Mass for generations of students.

Its authority notwithstanding, aspects of this position have been challenged almost since it was articulated. Early challenges mostly grew out of attempts to situate the polyphonic Mass in its liturgical context. This began when, in the 1950s, scholars noticed the ordering of sections of the Ordinary into sets, a phenomenon hitherto thought to have originated in the context of polyphony, in fourteenth-century chant Kyriales.² This trend culminated in 1972 in Geoffrey Chew’s observation that such groupings can be dated back at least as far as the publication of the Franciscan Gradual of 1251. Quoting the above passage directly, Chew noted that we need no longer necessarily seek, as Bukofzer had done, to explain the phenomenon of sets of Ordinary sections by appeal to artistic or aesthetic considerations: they had arisen in chant books about a century before the earliest

surviving polyphonic grouping.³ More recent years have witnessed a proliferation of studies in which authors, rather than focusing on the “internal” characteristics of the Mass *per se*, have sought instead to locate individual Masses and other fifteenth-century works in the particular sets of “external” circumstances that gave rise to their composition, structure and usage.⁴

Implicitly challenged on various fronts, however, the central message of the Bukofzer quotation has never been subjected to a detailed critique. Part of the reason for this is surely its very familiarity, particularly in the less ideologically charged language through which its message has been filtered into textbooks. But that familiarity and acceptability are rooted in an epistemological precondition that made Bukofzer’s statement possible in the first place: a conviction in the historical importance of the “cyclic” Mass as an epoch-making development in Western music. To call into question Bukofzer’s position, the expression of an intellectual struggle that is integrally bound up with the historiography of modern musicology itself, might implicitly have been seen to question the historical status of the cyclic Mass, and, implicitly, the scholarship that has taken that status as its premise.

My concern here is not with any perceived merits or otherwise of the view summed up in the Bukofzer quotation. It is rather to enquire after its origins and to consider how modern evaluations of the Mass might relate, or not relate, to those of the period of its currency. Why, for example, has the Mass based on a cantus firmus been singled out as historically and artistically superior not just to songs and motets, but to Masses not based on recurring musical material? Why have we traditionally given it a higher status than, say, freely composed Masses, Masses (including many Marian Masses) based on series of chant antecedents, scribal Mass “compilations,” plenary Masses, Proper cycles, and so on? On what basis do we view the polyphonic Mass as a development of crucial historical importance? What is the origin of our view of it as a watershed in the emergence of “unified” or “cyclic” form? What alternatives might there be to this received view of its historical status? And how, finally, might considerations thrown up by these questions affect the way we construct the history of music in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries?

Enlightenment invention

The perspective encapsulated in the quotation from Bukofzer represents the culmination of a long line of development.⁵ This began not in the fifteenth century, however, but in the late eighteenth, in the cultural context

of the European Enlightenment, the environment in which – along with the notions of the aesthetic and the intrinsically valuable “work of art” – modern interest in early Western musical repertoires was born. It culminated only in the early twentieth century, when, in what remains the only book-length study concerned solely with the history of the polyphonic Mass, Peter Wagner first applied to the Mass the notion of “cyclicity.”⁶

The Enlightenment conviction in the value of collective cultural memory, seen as essential to civilization, gave historical enquiry in the late eighteenth century an unprecedented impetus. Driven as it was by a striving for self-discovery, though, that history was shaped directly in the Enlightenment’s own image: thus the self-realization of the individual, from an Enlightenment perspective humanity’s greatest goal, became the chief model for enquiries into the past. Based on an unshakable faith in the eternal durability of the human spirit, such enquiries as those of Burney and Forkel⁷ focused on identifying great artists from the past as precursors of the geniuses identified in the present, in Bukofzer’s words “bold and independent minds” capable of emancipating art from reliance on anything other than the unfettered imagination of the individual creator.⁸ Since the mark of such genius had come to be seen to be the ability to produce works of art fashioned purely for the contemplation of beauty, the quest was on for similarly immutable objects to stand as embodiments of the achievements of the geniuses of the past. Thus the landmarks of the past became functions of those of the present, stages on the path of unending progress via which, in its turn, the present would also be superseded. As this model took shape in music history in the form of the achievements of a succession of generations each represented by an outstanding great man, so the rediscovery of increasingly early vestiges of the Western tradition gave the self-image of the post-Enlightenment West ever greater historical depth.

The early limits of the progress of rediscovery were defined by availability: of actual music, of the means to decipher it, and of information concerning it. As earlier repertoires were recovered, so the aesthetic canonization of music was pushed back into ever earlier “phases” of music history. For our purposes the crucial point in this process was reached, as we will see, in the mid nineteenth century, with the incorporation into the canon of the generation of Du Fay, the first generation of composers to concern itself with the Mass based on a *cantus firmus*.

For Burney and Forkel, reliant as they were on Petrucci prints and available sixteenth-century theorists such as Glarean,⁹ the earliest composer whose music was known in any depth was Josquin.¹⁰ A representative, like his modern counterparts, of the eternal durability of human genius,

Josquin possessed, for the earliest music historians, a power of vision that allowed him to some extent to transcend the limitations perceived in the prevailing style of his times. Yet for all that, his music engendered little sympathy: unfamiliar and alien to late eighteenth-century ears, it was the target of more specific prejudice for its use of abstractly constructed compositional techniques, procedures antipathetic to the spirit of free expression so prized in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Denigrated for the same reasons was the presence in cantus firmus Masses of externally borrowed tenors, the use of which – for these authors and still to some extent even, in the 1860s, for Ambros – was evidence of a “poverty of invention.”¹¹ This was the original basis for the long-standing tendency, beginning with Burney and extending well into the twentieth century, to place higher value on Josquin’s motets – composed as they frequently are without recourse to borrowed material – than his Masses, constructed on preexistent compositions. The new emphasis on pieces of music as self-contained, integrated “works” brought with it also the beginning of the tendency – first expressed by Forkel in 1801 and still familiar today – to criticize medieval theory for saying nothing about principles of large-scale musical construction.¹²

The next pioneer in the recovery of early repertoires, Giuseppe Baini, was no more sympathetic to them than Burney and Forkel had been. Indeed, motivated as he was by the desire to demonstrate that Palestrina’s achievement had been a huge advance over that of his forebears, Baini’s judgment – in his celebrated *Memorie storico-critiche della vita e delle opere di Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina*¹³ – of the precursors of his idol was even harsher than that of his predecessors. Giving vent to the same prejudice against overtly “constructivist” musical practices, Baini similarly inveighs against borrowed tenors, casting the cantus firmi of Masses by Du Fay and his generation as “boring tenors in the longest note values.” He considers the Masses by Du Fay that he has seen – *Ecce ancilla domini*, *L’homme armé* and *Se la face ay pale* – to be fair achievements for their time, and superior to contemporary Masses, yet finds them sorely wanting by the standards of his own day. Misled by an erroneous interpretation of papal records that led him to conclude that Du Fay had been active in the late fourteenth century, Baini similarly misdated the Masses by Du Fay and others that he found in what are now the early Cappella Sistina manuscripts, thus bequeathing to music history a confusion that was to remain unresolved for more than fifty years.¹⁴ Yet as the first modern commentary on Masses by Du Fay, Ockeghem and others, Baini’s study stands as a watershed in the recovery of early cyclic Masses, and one that had considerable impact on his – particularly German-speaking – immediate successors. In perhaps his most signal

contribution to the history of the music of this era, Baini was also the first modern music historian to construct the history of music before Palestrina in terms of a succession of progressively advancing “epochs” each headed by a representative “genius.” But his future impact in this arena was channeled chiefly through his enormous influence on the *Geschichte*, published only six years later, of Raphael Georg Kiesewetter.¹⁵

Taking his cue from the rediscovery by Baini of the music – chiefly the Masses – of Du Fay, Ockeghem and their contemporaries, and following the same succession of musical “epochs” led by Du Fay, Ockeghem and Josquin, Kiesewetter is nonetheless considerably more positive than his predecessor in his musical judgments. In his hands, the boundaries of the Western musical canon are permitted to extend back beyond even the music of Josquin to embrace also that of Ockeghem. Even Du Fay, in a revolutionary judgment for its time, is cast as the architect of “a perfectly finished or cultivated art.” Kiesewetter, like Baini, bases his conclusions on examples drawn from Masses in what are now the Cappella Sistina manuscripts, apparently the only music by Du Fay then known. Excerpts from his transcriptions of the Masses on *Ecce ancilla domini*, *L’homme armé* and *Se la face ay pale* – the first music by Du Fay to appear in print – occur, along with other pieces by Adam de la Halle, Machaut, Landini, Eloy d’Amerval, Ockeghem and Josquin, as an appendix to his history. Newly elevated as works that could be heard “without giving offence, but even communicating pleasure,”¹⁶ Du Fay’s Masses were, however, yet to be fully admitted into the canon. Notwithstanding his newly positive appraisal of Du Fay, it is to Ockeghem (distinguished by “great superiority over his celebrated predecessor”) that Kiesewetter ascribes “the real foundation of that fame which the composers of the Netherlands enjoyed throughout the whole civilized world in the epochs that immediately follow.” While Du Fay and his contemporaries were “illustrious as predecessors,” it was Ockeghem who “must be regarded as the founder of all schools, from his own to the present age.”¹⁷

Hegelian transformation

The exegetic force of the Enlightenment model of progress was revolutionized through assimilation, in the mid nineteenth century, into the totalizing system of Hegelian metaphysics. In a refinement of Enlightenment models, artworks became for Hegel – in common with all other manifestations of society – expressions of the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. At the same time they were also, like all other aspects of the particular *Zeitgeist* in which they

were embedded, bound up in the ongoing process of historical dialectic whereby each age must logically constitute an advance over its predecessor. Individual styles and composers thus became part of the expression of the “spirit of the age,” though that spirit was seen to achieve its optimal distillation in the work of particularly gifted individuals, figures who were able, through the advanced state of their art, to be at the same time perfect embodiments of their own time and, through their innovations, instrumental in the progress to the next stage. Thus the works of these individuals were caught up in the dialectical process which, for Hegel, bound both logic and history in all their manifestations. Such works were at one and the same time “thesis,” through their optimal instantiation of the prevailing *Geist*, and “antithesis,” through the creative irritancy of genius. They were therefore both perfect embodiments of the present and harbingers of things to come, pointing the way ultimately to a future synthesis to be crystalized by the representative figure of the next generation. The Hegelian historical model finds its most direct musical instantiation in the *Geschichte der Musik* of 1851 by Franz Brendel, the most widely promulgated and perhaps most influential music history of the mid nineteenth century.¹⁸

Brendel, like Baini before him, sees the “period of the Netherlanders” chiefly as a preparation for better things to come, a *Vorgeschichte* for the main historical eras that, as for Hegel, culminate in the “great movements” of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. While for Hegel the fifteenth century had been “the dawn, the harbinger of a new fine day after the long, fateful and terrible night of the Middle Ages,”¹⁹ for Brendel likewise it witnessed “the dawn of art music: daybreak is anticipated; it is perceptible in isolated appearances, but one has not yet emerged out of the dawn” (*Geschichte*, 29). Thus although his historical narrative borrows directly – sometimes almost word for word – from Kiesewetter, Brendel is considerably less charitable in his judgments of the music of the fifteenth century, motivated as he is to cast it as inferior to that of the “sublime” (“erhaben”) and “beautiful” (“schön”) phases that were to succeed it.

Yet in his characterization, again profoundly Hegelian, of music’s interaction with the church, Brendel was an important harbinger of future perspectives on the cyclic Mass, as embodied, for instance, in the quotations from Bukofzer at the beginning of this chapter. From Brendel’s perspective, the role of the church for music – as for art generally for Hegel – was in raising it from a bare and unsophisticated “natural” state to the more elevated realm of “the Spirit.” Thus elevated by its interaction with the divine (Brendel’s “sublime” phase), music was able to carry that divinity within it when it went out again into the secular world (his “beautiful” phase).²⁰ In

a typically dramatic formulation, Brendel further describes how “scarcely matured, scarcely evolved to a higher, self-sufficient existence, [art] forsook the halls of the temple and rushed out into the world.”²¹ This departure from the church helps to explain why, in the end, music’s “beautiful” phase is ranked above its “sublime” phase: the integrity of the ideal work of art, for Brendel, can only be weakened by a need to fulfill external functions, even those of the church.²² Thus although raised to its proper status through its interaction with religion, art was ultimately destined to stand on its own, combining its divine and material elements in a self-contained and self-substantiating “organic” union. Here we can see the beginnings of the rationale through which such a development as the Mass based on an externally borrowed cantus firmus came to be seen as an expression of the composer as an individualist striking out from the confines of the church into the realm of free “artistic” expression.

Built on a model of forward dynamism, the notion of dialectical advancement gave a particular urgency to the rediscovery and reevaluation of earlier “phases” in musical history. Conviction that the achievements of each age were built incrementally on those which preceded them pushed the frame of aesthetic evaluation further and further back as historians strove to identify in the work of previous generations the qualities which had enabled the achievements they perceived in those already familiar. As increasingly early vestiges of Western musical history were rediscovered, so the phases already known acquired ever loftier status as advances on those being unearthed. At the same time, music’s *Vorgeschichte* – that murky, unfamiliar period when, it was assumed, music was in its most rudimentary state – was pushed back further in time with the discoveries of each new generation of historians. For the perception of the cyclic Mass – and, more particularly, the cantus firmus Mass – this process reached a crucial point in the 1860s, with the publication of what is surely the greatest landmark in the rediscovery of late medieval music: the *Geschichte der Musik* of August Wilhelm Ambros.²³

Ambros and the nineteenth-century invention of the cyclic Mass

Given the time and cultural milieu of its writing, the profoundly Hegelian stance of Ambros’s history is probably its least surprising aspect.²⁴ Of special interest here, though, is the fact that its Hegelianism is filtered in a number of important respects through Jacob Burckhardt. The Hegelian frame of Burckhardt’s *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* – appearing, in 1860,

just a few years before Ambros's *Geschichte* – has been well known at least since Gombrich's exposition of 1969.²⁵ In its central notion of a cultural and artistic Renaissance, Burckhardt's study was to have a powerful, if confusing, effect on Ambros's history, and, in turn, on the future perception of the cyclic Mass. While, as we shall see, Ambros himself never proposed that the "New Era" he saw as beginning in music in the fifteenth century constituted a "Renaissance," he was certainly construed to have done so by later writers. With the crystalization, in later historical writing, of the notion of a musical Renaissance beginning in the fifteenth century, the most characteristic expression of that era came to be seen to be the cyclic Mass, and, in particular, the Mass based on a cantus firmus, a perspective summed up in the quotation from Bukofzer cited above.

The high profile which accrued to the Mass from this time on was due to a particularly felicitous convergence of circumstances. The first of these concerned the point that had been reached in the process of the "discovery" of earlier phases in Western musical history. For Ambros the phase which separated music's "pre-history" from its "true" expression was that of the generation of Du Fay – significantly the earliest generation of Continental composers to concern itself with the cantus firmus Mass. It is easy to perceive how the Mass subsequently came to be seen as a particularly potent emblem of the "Renaissance" in music: first, its timing was impeccable, once, in the wake of Ambros's history, the beginning of the musical "Renaissance" had been fixed in the early–mid fifteenth century; second, its basis in a pre-existent composition, chosen apparently by the composer rather than out of considerations of liturgical appropriateness, was cited repeatedly, beginning with Brendel, as early evidence of the "emancipation" of the artist from the "constraints" of his working environment; and, third, as the earliest large-scale multipartite form in Western musical history it was seen as the creative forum for the most sophisticated and ambitious structures and hence the greatest "works of art" of its era, an assessment which drew support, as we shall see in the next chapter, from Tinctoris's definition of the Mass as *cantus magnus*. Perhaps most important, though, is the way in which this form, subsequently to be cast as one of the chief expressions of the "Renaissance," was made to embrace another Hegelian notion which was applied to music for the first time by Ambros: that of organic unity.

Relentless in its linkage of general and particular, the unity which informed the various expressions of the prevailing historical *Geist* was seen, particularly at the hands of such Hegelian epigones as Brendel, to reveal itself at the level of microcosm in the organic unity of its individual instances.²⁶ While the progression of history was a manifestation of dialectic played out

in time, artworks revealed its workings on a logical plane. From a Hegelian perspective, then, a “beautiful” work of art must not only be expressive of the spirit of its time; it must also be organically unified.²⁷ With its use of common borrowed material running through the parts of a multipiece composition that, when strung together, can last more than half an hour in performance, it is clear how the cyclic Mass came to be seen as a particularly sophisticated embodiment of this principle, in Bukofzer’s words “a set of five musically coherent” and “unified” compositions. Here for Bukofzer was further evidence, moreover, of “bold and independent minds” providing the musical “means of unification” without recourse to the liturgy.

The same perceived tendency towards a self-conscious, “composerly” attitude to construction was further seen as distancing the cyclic Mass from its “medieval” musical antecedents. Knowledge which might have ascribed similarly elevated attributes to, say, the isorhythmic motet had simply not yet been acquired. Thus while the construction of the cantus firmus Mass accommodated it to the role of Renaissance masterwork with particular ease, the endowment upon it of the lofty historical importance summed up by Bukofzer was due more than anything to historical coincidence.²⁸ The convergence of the circumstances that enabled that coincidence was, as for so many received views on late medieval music, to a large extent the legacy of Ambros.

Following the advances of Kiesewetter, whose increased knowledge of early repertories had led to his enhanced appreciation of Du Fay and Ockeghem, Ambros’s vastly expanded knowledge brought with it further retrograde progress of historical valuation, “recovering” the reputations and enhancing the status of early composers.²⁹ The most obvious beneficiary was Josquin, who at last acquired a canonic status equal, and in some respects even superior, to that of Palestrina. While his “genius” had never been in doubt, this was really the first time he had been allowed to rub shoulders on the aesthetic pedestal with Palestrina, to whose Apollonian status he was contrasted as a sort of Dionysian counterpart.³⁰

Just as the allegedly free choice of Mass cantus firmus came to be seen as evidence of composers emancipating themselves from constraints imposed by the Church,³¹ so for Ambros the Holy Rite (*kirchliche Ritus*) within which Josquin’s times obliged him to work is seen as an obstacle which his heroism had to surmount in order to free himself, in true Romantic fashion, from reliance on anything other than his own uninhibited genius. In this Ambros echoes the Hegelian views of Brendel and Burckhardt, according to which the new Renaissance spirit of individualism transcended and thus conflicted with the expectations of the Church.³²