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978-0-521-11412-7 - The Cultural Life of the Early Polyphonic Mass: Medieval Context to Modern Revival

Andrew Kirkman

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The Cultural Life of the Early Polyphonic Mass

The “cyclic” polyphonic Mass has long been seen as the preeminent musical genre of the late Middle Ages, spawning some of the most impressive and engrossing musical edifices of the period. Modern study of these compositions has greatly enhanced our appreciation of their construction and aesthetic appeal. Yet close consideration of their meaning – cultural, social, spiritual, personal – for their composers and original users has begun only much more recently. This book considers the genre both as an expression of the needs of the society in which it arose and as a fulfillment of aesthetic priorities that arose in the wake of the Enlightenment. From this dual perspective, it aims to enhance both our appreciation of the genre for today’s world, and our awareness of what it is that makes any cultural artefact endure: its susceptibility to fulfill the different evaluative criteria, and social needs, of different times.

ANDREW KIRKMAN is Associate Professor of Music at Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University, New Jersey, where he teaches on a broad range of historical topics. His research centers on sacred music of the fifteenth century, and he has published and lectured widely on English and Continental music of the period, including the music of Du Fay, Ockeghem, Walter Frye, and John Bedyngham. He is also very active as a violinist and conductor of vocal and instrumental ensembles, including the award-winning Binchois Consort, with which he has recorded eight CDs on the Hyperion label.

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for Philip

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Preface

The musical form of the Mass is the noblest fruit of the bond, rich with blessings, that, for nigh on two thousand years, has bound together liturgy and art. Musical interests and strivings alone could never have brought this about; outside the frame of the liturgy it would have occurred to no artist to link together texts like those of the Mass. The liturgy created this, but artists built, from the loosely juxtaposed pieces, an inwardly linked, cyclic form, the vessel for their most brilliant inspirations.¹

Now approaching its centenary, Peter Wagner's *Geschichte der Messe* (billed as "Part 1") remains the only book to address the early history of the musical Mass in its entirety. The reason for this seems clear enough from the development of Mass scholarship since: as interest in the music, stimulated by scholars such as Wagner, has grown, the field has become too large, too ramified to be brought within the frame of any single monograph. That scholarship has grown out of a conviction, forged by musicology's pioneers, in the integral musical Mass setting as the forum for inspired inventions by original creative minds – "the vessel for their most brilliant inspirations."

Conviction in the message embodied in that phrase of the quotation above, from the foreword to Wagner's book, has borne spectacular fruit. Yet the implications of the larger context of his remark have begun to be addressed only much more recently. The past few years have seen the appearance of a range of studies associating pieces with individuals or occasions, or relating them to local liturgical practices on the basis of choice and application of chant.² Still others have offered more culturally grounded explanations of the forms of particular works on the basis of hidden symbolic or arcane programs, in terms of analogies with other cultural manifestations of the societies in question, as reflections of the specific career patterns of composers, and so on.³ Yet for most of the modern history of interest in the polyphonic Mass, wonderment at the sheer fecundity of its musical invention has given the field such impetus and momentum that scholarship has seldom felt the need to enquire after the cultural circumstances that fostered the particular forms it took. It was enough, simply, that the music existed, that it could still, after half a millennium, provide

aesthetic pleasure and the motivation, as a consequence, to investigate the material source of that pleasure.

The remarkable state of affairs, so particularly characteristic of Western civilization, whereby products of a distant culture can offer such aesthetic and intellectual fulfillment to modern perceptions (the motivation, in the end, behind this study) provides the focus of Part 1 of this book. Here I compare the evaluative criteria, beginning in the late eighteenth century, of modern scholarship (the subject of Chapter 1) with contemporary views of the polyphonic Mass – gleaned from the evidence of theory, music manuscripts and other written records (Chapter 2). My first question, then, is what drove people to revive this music for modern ears and eyes? What was it about it with which they identified, and what was the nature of their appreciation? What criteria, as a consequence, gave rise to the intellectual tools that allow us today to appreciate the repertory in the ways we do? By contrast, how, as far as we can determine, were fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Mass compositions appreciated by their original users? Which among their features were particularly prized? Were certain kinds of constructions valued over others? As I will outline, the answers to these questions arise, as they must, from the particular needs and proclivities of the very different societies in which interest in the polyphonic Mass has been cultivated.

Part 2 of the book shifts the enquiry to the nature of the polyphonic music used in the Mass. In particular it addresses the function of the *cantus firmus*, a melody typically borrowed from outside the traditional chants of the Mass (and often from outside the whole repertory of liturgical chant) and laid out in the tenor – and increasingly in other voices as well – within each section of the new work. On both specific and general levels, construction on a *cantus firmus* offered, in the time of its most intense cultivation, signal advantages with regard to the function of the ritual of Mass: first, through the emblem of an individually chosen melody, it particularized the supplication to the Real Presence brought forth in the ritual within which it was embedded; and by imbuing, through its layout in each of the five sections of the Mass Ordinary, almost the entire course of the rite, it also afforded a uniquely specified expression of what had increasingly come to be seen as the unified message of Mass. But what gave rise to the specific choices of melody, and why, in particular, were secular pieces co-opted for use, in this manner, in the most sacred of settings? Chapter 3 introduces the issue, combining previous scholarship with new observations to enquire after the choices of particular songs as Mass *cantus firmi*: why did those who supported the composition and performance of polyphonic Masses, who were anxious for their posthumous welfare, foster works based on

these particular melodies, and how were the new compositions shaped to give point to the supplications of earthly souls? Chapters 4 and 5 develop the resulting observations in two case studies in which, on account of the importance and sheer quantity of the works concerned, they emerge with particular prominence: the Masses on *Caput* and *L’homme armé*. Chapter 6 returns to a broader field of vision to consider the possible meanings, and surprising range, of incursions into the Mass by secular songs, not just as *cantus firmi*, but also in their naked, original forms.

The template of the *cantus firmus* Mass afforded a structure, combining local detail with unprecedented breadth, which gave rise to some of the most sophisticated musical edifices of its day. But however individual the composers of polyphonic Masses may have been, however gifted and celebrated in their own time, they could only have expressed that individuality within the confines of the worldview and practices in which they were steeped, and which were all they knew.⁴ The polyphonic Mass had a function, and a powerful one, in the central and defining ritual of the church, and, by extension, of society generally.⁵ Meaning arises from the circumstances in which a phenomenon is used and which give it life for its users, whether those users are from its own time and culture or another one.⁶ But beyond even that, such meaning is always and essentially situated much more broadly within the larger profiles of society, its political and social realities and range of values, its intellectual and existential sense of itself.

The final part of the book places the polyphonic Mass in the context without which, as expressed by Wagner in the above quotation, it could never have assumed the form it did: that of the greater entity of Mass which it served and whose needs it articulated and enhanced. Chapter 7 outlines how, through a liturgical streamlining effected in the thirteenth century, to a large degree through the efforts of the Franciscans, the unchanging, “Ordinary” movements of the Mass ritual were thrown into the particular relief that allowed the polyphonic cyclic Mass to come into being. Broadening the lens, Chapter 8 examines the role of polyphonic music in the larger counterpoint, visual as well as sonic, of Mass. The most important component in that counterpoint, to which all others related and from which they derived their deepest meaning, was the transubstantiation of the host into the actual body of Christ, as revealed to the people in the elevation. This key moment of grace bestowed great spiritual power, and the potential for accelerated advancement, after death, to heaven. The particular structure and use of the polyphonic Mass were driven, I propose, by desire to particularize, and maximize, that advantage.

Of course contextual awareness too needs its sense of proportion: it is, after all, the particularity of a material phenomenon, its very physical morphology, that allows us to perceive in it a sense of intrinsic – and therefore inalienable – worth. To allow it to blend too much into the circumstances that permitted it to come into being might be to run the risk of losing sight of our reasons for caring about it, for wanting to appreciate it more deeply, in the first place. But to care about such a phenomenon is also, for us, to care about its creators, their reality, their hopes and fears, the world they inhabited and whose needs that phenomenon addressed. Appreciation of the cultural remnants of ages past was nurtured, after all, by conviction in the creative originality of those who fashioned them, seen as “ideal” representatives, and indeed embodiments, of their times. Thus connections – real or assumed – between composition, composer and composer’s world were built into our modern models of appreciation from the start.

Yet such connections seem newly relevant today, as the experience of ever more cultures, ever more diverse musics, seems implicitly to call into question what once seemed to be the eternal cultural touchstones of the Western musical canon and its embodiments in the modern formal concert experience and its recorded progeny. The change of yesterday’s eternal verities into today’s cultural contingencies seems to invite us to seek new ways of experiencing musics not just from other cultures, but also from earlier phases of our own. To allow modern strategies of appreciation to become joined and modified by others is ultimately, then, greatly to enrich our wonderment at the polyphonic Mass. At the same time, it can sharpen our awareness of what it is that makes any cultural artifact endure: its susceptibility to fulfill the different evaluative criteria, and social needs, of different times.

This study has accrued numerous debts during its long gestation. I have benefited greatly from the opportunity to present parts of my research at conferences and at university colloquia in the United States and Great Britain, and from the comments those occasions engendered. I would like to acknowledge with gratitude those friends and colleagues who organized the latter. Parts of Chapters 3 and 6 were presented at the Eastman School of Music, the Ohio State University at Columbus, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Southampton University, King’s College, London, Bangor University, All Souls College, Oxford and York University. I would like to thank Patrick Macey, Graeme Boone, James Haar and John Nadas, Mark Everist and Jeanice Brooks, Michael Fend and Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, Christian Leitmeir, Margaret Bent, and John Potter and

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It is hard to imagine this work without the generous assistance and advice I have received on its various chapters. First, thanks are due to the American Musicological Society for permission to reuse, in chapters 1 and 2, material from my article “The Invention of the Cyclic Mass” (*Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54/1 (Spring, 2001); many colleagues, named in that article, contributed to the growth and development of the ideas presented there. I would like to thank Graeme Boone for valuable comments on earlier versions of chapters 3 and 8, Christopher Reynolds for advice and suggestions regarding Chapter 3, and John Harper and Magnus Williamson for their readings of Chapter 4. For comments on various versions of Chapter 5 I am grateful to John Harper, Barbara Haggh Huglo, Patrick Macey, David Marsh and Joshua Rifkin. Chapters 7 and 8 benefited greatly from the expertise of John Caldwell, Barbara Haggh Huglo and Michel Huglo, and particularly John Harper, whose extraordinary generosity – at various stages – in close readings and suggestion (and provision) of materials has transformed earlier drafts beyond recognition. My friend Rob Wegman has been a source of valuable information used in Chapter 6 and of much-appreciated intellectual, and psychological, support. I am grateful to David Marsh for assistance with the translations in Appendix 3 and to Mary Lewis for the kind loan of her microfilm of RISM 1552. My wife Amy Brosius was a huge help in the task of compiling the index. Pat Harper proved a good-humored and unfailingly helpful copy-editor. I wish to proffer my grateful thanks to Rebecca Jones, Rosina Di Marzo and particularly Victoria Cooper of Cambridge University Press, who have been models of kindness, support, advice and collegiality, and to their anonymous readers, whose feedback generated substantial and valuable reworkings. But my greatest debt is to my friend and colleague Philip Weller: it is impossible for me to imagine what this book could have looked like without Philip’s detailed comments on chapters (in numerous redactions), and without his endless fund of ideas and far-ranging discussion over many years. I dedicate the finished work to him in gratitude and friendship.

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Bologna Q16	Bologna, Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale, MS Q16
Cambrai 1328	Cambrai, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS B. 1328 (1176)
Cappella Sistina 14 etc.	Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MSS 14, 22, 51, 63
Chigi Codex	Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS, Chigi VIII.234
Ivrea Codex	Ivrea, Biblioteca Capitolare, MS 115
Lucca Codex	Lucca, Archivio di Stato, MS 238
Naples Manuscript	Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS VI. E. 40
Occo Codex	Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS IV. 922
Old Hall	London, British Library, Add. MS 57950
San Pietro B80	Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS San Pietro B80
Strahov Manuscript	Prague, Museum of Czech Literature, Strahov Library, D.G. IV. 47
Trémouille Manuscript	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, nouvelle acquisition française, MS 23190
Trent 88 etc.	Trento, Castello del Buon Consiglio, MSS 88, 89, 90, 92
Trent 93	Trento, Biblioteca Capitolaria/Museo Diocesano, MS BL
Verona 756 etc.	Verona, Biblioteca Capitolare, MSS 756, 761
Vienna 1783	Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS 1783