

↻ | Prologue

Saint-Omer and the Growth of Urban Power

To open a fabric account from a late medieval church is to open a window onto the workings of a distant culture. These are accounts concerned not with the lofty achievements of a society but with the raw materials of its day-to-day functioning, the details of the payments and purchases through which its needs were shaped. This is clear straight away in the lists of payments for the commodities which underpinned and articulated those needs: the petrol and supermarket receipts of today yield to costings for vast quantities of torches and candles, the perishable materials of the constant round of divine services which shaped the daily life of an institution and – through the income it generated from members of church and community fearful for their souls – filled its coffers. More details of those needs emerge in the costings for the upkeep of the church and its contents: heavy emphasis, for example, on the maintenance of the clock reminds us of the vital role of timekeeping in ensuring the smooth running of what must have been an elaborate choreography of choirboys, chaplains, vicars and canons crossing and recrossing the nave to perform the plethora of Masses – for church and individuals – being celebrated at altars around the building.

Such accounts allow us also to piece together a vivid image of the sight which would have greeted the visitor to a great religious institution in the late Middle Ages. Even to approach such a church, its walls gleaming with immaculate white stone, and pass under its great tympanum with its brightly painted Last Judgement must have been awe-inspiring. But to enter the building itself, especially from a landscape that – as in fifteenth-century Artois – was frequently wracked by pestilence and warfare, must have been an experience of almost frightening intensity. To view the hive of ordered clerical activity and intricately painted and gilded figures of angels and saints via the light only of hundreds of candles and the sun streaming through stained glass windows must truly have evoked a vision of the new Jerusalem.

Compared with this heavenly picture, the image presented by the acts (or minutes) of a church's chapter often appears distinctly, and much more recognisably, prosaic. Here we see a picture of humanity which feels

immediately closer to home: human nature, warts and all, reveals itself in an all-too-familiar round of squabbles, backbiting and jockeying for position, often elevated into long and bitter legal proceedings. The objects of such disagreement – usually ecclesiastical benefices and privileges – may belong to a bygone age, but the enmities and petty jealousies they generate are universal enough. Striking about such disputes is the contrast between their vehemence and the refined legal formulas in which they are garbed, a contrast that seems to mirror the incongruity which, on the political stage, pits the extreme violence and chaos of the warfare so frequently being waged against the language of politesse and legalese used in tidying up its effects.¹ Such conflicts – which often, as we shall see, involved the church's musicians – provide invaluable insights into the infrastructures of ecclesiastical institutions: snapshots of the society in question, they are at the same time reflections of the professional and social structures which generated them.

For all too many religious houses, though, such vignettes, evocative and suggestive as they may be, are almost all that remains. Five centuries in one of the most volatile regions of Europe, to say nothing of the effects of the French Revolution, have left their mark in the destruction of innumerable documents and records. For some institutions nothing survives, and for most what is left is incomplete. For records of an important medieval religious house to have remained – over a period of some four hundred years – more or less continuous is therefore remarkable; even more so when the archive in question has, from a musical viewpoint, received little attention. Such is the case with the great collegiate church of St Omer.²

Continuity of this nature offers the signal advantage to be able to trace the developments of an institution as they unfold through history. Threading its way through that history, and enmeshed with the other aspects of its functioning, is its musical establishment. We thus have a rare chance to follow in detail such shifts as the steady growth in musical income and provisions, the turnover of its functionaries and – although, as more or less everywhere else, the music itself has been lost – its provision of notated polyphony. The archives of Saint-Omer, then, present an unusual opportunity: while perhaps not so opulent as that of such musical

¹ In the case of Saint-Omer this is most starkly revealed in the mid-sixteenth century in the delicacy of requests made to the dean and canons of Saint-Omer by Mary of Hungary on behalf of the canons of Thérouanne in the aftermath of the destruction of their cathedral, and indeed their entire city, by her brother, Charles V (letters preserved in II. G. 193).

² Throughout this study 'St Omer' will refer to the church, 'Saint-Omer' to the city that houses it.

pinnacles of the region as Cambrai Cathedral and St Donatian in Bruges, the musical life of St Omer reflects its high status as a wealthy collegiate church which, since the thirteenth century, had answered for its authority directly to Rome. Still more importantly, in allowing such an extended, largely unbroken view, it affords valuable insights into northern European musical culture more generally.

Of course the documentary richness of the kinds of material that form the substance of this study has long been recognised. The work of local antiquarian societies – of which few are more venerable than Saint-Omer’s own Société des antiquaires de la Morinie – continues to feed the curiosity of modern citizens concerning the lives of their forebears; and the now classic studies of music at St Donatian in Bruges, Cambrai Cathedral and Notre-Dame of Paris built on traditions of musical antiquarianism extending back to Haberl and beyond.³ Each generation, each specialist body has sought answers to its own questions, ways of understanding past societies that can offer enrichment to its own; and each has sought them in the same corpus of source material. Given all that has already been written, and given the level of destruction alluded to above, it is sobering to observe the scale of documentation that remains to be mined; yet even if, in some future time, the process of initial ‘discovery’ were to come to an end, it seems hard to conceive that representatives of changing societies would not continue to seek, in historical documents, insights into a continually reimagined past.

Various kinds of musical story, from different stages in the church’s history, could unfurl from its voluminous archives, still preserved in the town library. Still, I feel that what I am offering here has a particular significance, and one not addressed in the same way elsewhere. In examining one closely circumscribed musical environment and its key players with particular scrutiny this book allows us to approach our musical forebears more closely than is typically possible. This is not a story of great men, though a few of them arguably achieved greatness; it is a story of

³ On St Donatian and Bruges see Reinhard Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges* (2nd, rev. ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). On Cambrai Cathedral see Craig Wright, ‘Performance Practices at the Cathedral of Cambrai, 1475–1550’, *Musical Quarterly* 64/3 (1978), 275–328; ‘Musiciens à la cathédrale de Cambrai, 1475–1550’, *Revue de musicologie* 62/2 (1976), 204–28. On Paris see Craig Wright, *Music and Ceremony at Notre Dame of Paris, 500–1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Franz Xaver Haberl, *Bausteine für Musikgeschichte I: Wilhelm Du Fay*; II: Katalog der Musikwerke welche sich im . . . Archiv der päpstlichen Kapelle im Vatikan zu Rom vorfinden; III: Die römische “schola cantorum” und die päpstlichen Kapellsänger bis zur Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts (Leipzig: Druck und Verlag von Breitkopf und Härtel, 1885–8; repr. Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1971).

day-to-day life, albeit lived in a society very different from anything familiar in today's world. That society was one that fostered high achievement – the source, ultimately, of its interest to modern music historians – but it did so amidst patterns of interaction that are essentially timeless and (I would argue) timelessly absorbing.

My historical focus here though is on a particular time: the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the 'golden age' of music in the Low Countries and, perhaps not coincidentally, that for which the archives offer the richest yield. St Omer during this period had the prestige to attract an impressive roster of singers and composers, many of them familiar from service in some of the great musical establishments of Europe. Although the active singers, including the master of the boys, seem at least largely to have been restricted to the rank of vicar, a number of the twenty-nine canons (resident and otherwise) were known musicians. In fact interconnections of personnel between the chapter of St Omer and the chapels of the Burgundian court, St Donatian and the Papal Chapel are such as to suggest close relationships between the musical establishments of these great institutions. As for other wealthy northern religious houses, though, the key to its musical importance, in its own region and far beyond, was its choir school, or *maîtrise*.⁴

Every student of late medieval music knows that the *maîtrise* was the crucible of contemporary sacred music. Without it the shape of music from the time as it has survived would be unimaginable. Most of the composers whose names resonate with us today began as choirboys in the choir schools of the cathedrals and collegiate churches of northern France and the Burgundian Netherlands, and the quality of their training flowered in music that held sway across the great courts and ecclesiastical establishments of western Europe for more than a century. At the same time, the development of the *maîtrise* is inextricable from that of polyphony, in which boys' voices played a signal part and whose developments came so closely to reflect shifting patterns in the ritual and social needs of institutions and individuals.

Our story begins, therefore, as it must, with the choirboys themselves. From their arrival, aged eight or younger, at the *maîtrise*, it will trace the surviving material threads of their young lives, gathering what can be gleaned of their duties and other activities, the priorities and structures that

⁴ For a useful introduction to the term and the growth of the phenomenon see Laurenz Lütteken, 'Maîtrise', in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2002), 2, *Sachteil* 5, cols. 1597–1602.

sustained them, and the rapidly augmenting status that accrued to them in the course of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Teasing out individual identities, we will follow post-pubescent careers through the ranks of ‘escotier’, vicar and chaplain, and on to the university training sponsored for so many by their host institution.⁵ Even before their physical change, though, the best young singers, their voices prized by even the greatest of magnates, could become embroiled in priorities of much larger dimensions, their gifts conducting them as far as the chapels of the ruling dynasties.

If political forces could guide musical careers from their outset, they became all-embracing as, talent and connections permitting, former boys progressed up the ladder of ecclesiastical preferment. Local institutional patronage could lead only so far; major careers depended on the structures of the larger European stage: the ducal House of Burgundy, the chapels of the Habsburgs, even Medici Florence, and – ultimately for the very best – the papal curia. Such power structures could build careers of truly international currency. But the soundscape to which they contributed was generated not only by voices: enveloping, augmenting and announcing the messages articulated by human tones to the greater church building and beyond were the grander voices of organs and bells, the subjects, respectively, of Chapters 4 and 5.

Only a few former choirboys achieved elevation to the major church benefices of canon, cantor, dean or provost; such a post – which brought with it a ‘prebend’ (comprising property and revenue), a vicar assigned to perform the canon’s ostensible ritual duties, a house and considerable status – tended to be the province of wealthy families and even (at the upper stratum) of the nobility. Talent and industry, even of the highest levels, were seldom sufficient on their own to make the leap to the security of tenure that such posts would bring. But connections forged by talent, as for major figures such as Du Fay and Josquin, could lead, via patronage at the highest level, to eventual attainment of high ecclesiastical office on home *terroir*. Chapter 6 will enter the St Omer chapter to trace the careers of three senior figures who, via success in the chapels of the Burgundian and papal courts, established themselves as major players on the St Omer stage. Looming largest at the turn of the fifteenth century is the figure of Nicolas Rembert, canon and, from 1494 until his death in 1504, dean of the

⁵ ‘Escotier’, a term seemingly particular to St Omer, refers to a category of poor clerics, aged eighteen or over, verbally and musically literate, who were fed and maintained, in their own ‘escoterie’ situated in the cloister, at the expense of the chapter. For more detail see below, pp. 48, 67.

collegiate church (henceforth the *collégiale*). Sewing together an international tissue of professional musical traffic by means of connections and diplomacy, Rembert's career provides a vivid demonstration that musical influence in the late Middle Ages need not necessarily involve the direct practice of musical skill. Exercising – typically at considerable expense to its beneficiaries – his influence and political adroitness in Rome in the offices of papal preferment, Rembert offers a striking case of a musical 'fixer' of a kind without whose aid most international musical careers at this time would have been scarcely feasible.⁶

Besides its intrinsic interest, then, the story of late medieval music at the church of St Omer has a far broader reach: it affords insights into the musical (and hence broader political) life at great religious institutions more generally, and across the musical melting pot of the north and beyond. With this observation we can begin to see how the main series of documents with which this discussion began, evocative as they are on a local level, also beckon us out again into the larger world, into the social, economic and political landscape which enabled and sustained the opulent, if sometimes myopic, society of church and cloister. Before entering more fully into institutional musical machinations, then, it will be valuable to offer a brief sketch of the origins of the larger civic polity which enveloped and (to at least some degree) sustained them.

Saint-Omer in the Late Middle Ages

However one might characterise the political landscape of fifteenth-century Saint-Omer, it was not, at least in a political sense, French.⁷ Rooted historically in the larger region of Flanders, and subsequently on the eastern edge of the County of Artois, it became in 1384 part of the northern territories of the dukes of Burgundy when the first Valois Duke, Philip the Bold, married Margaret, daughter of Louis de Male, Count of Flanders.⁸

⁶ A rare and important earlier discussion of this function (focusing on the career of Johannes Puylois (or Pullois)), can be found in Pamela Starr, 'Music and Music Patronage at the Papal Court, 1447–1464', unpublished PhD dissertation, Yale University (1987), 38–62.

⁷ For a survey of the history of the city see Alain Derville (ed.), *Histoire de Saint-Omer* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1981), especially chs. 1–3, 11–105 (all by Alain Derville). For a more detailed account up to c.1300 see his *Saint-Omer: Des origines au début du 14^e siècle* (Lille: Presses universitaires de Lille, 1995).

⁸ On the emerging political, economic and cultural identity of Artois see Carola Small, 'Artois in the Thirteenth Century: A Region Discovering Its Identity?', *Historical Reflections* 19 (1993), 189–207.

Via this brilliant nuptial strategy Philip acquired (among other territories) the counties of Flanders and Artois, the latter already inherited by Count Louis on the death, two years earlier, of his mother. Artois, from the tenth century a southern part of the territory of Flanders, had in 1180 been cleaved away as part of the dowry of Isabella of Hainault in her marriage to King Philip Augustus of France. While Saint-Omer, Aire and Guines were briefly regained for Flanders in 1198 they were soon firmly back under royal control, where they remained for almost two centuries.⁹ Embroiled in the penury and destruction of the Hundred Years War, the city's identity in the fourteenth century became strongly wedded – especially through its role as a frontier town with Flanders – to the French crown, and a sense of loyalty to the king lingered long after its joining of the territory of his (at least technical) vassal the duke of Burgundy. But from 1384 Saint-Omer, nudging the eastern border of Artois defined by the river Aa, returned to political union with the Flanders that, economically and culturally, it had never completely left. In terms of its growth and rising prosperity it was closely bound up, as I shall outline below, with the (particularly waterborne) commerce of the nearby trading centres of Ypres, Bruges and Ghent.

With its inheritance of the regions of Flanders and Artois the Duchy of Burgundy assumed control of the most populous and urbanised region in Europe north of the Alps,¹⁰ and also, at least periodically, one of its richest. For the city of Saint-Omer, though, the best was yet to come: the Burgundian takeover ushered in a period of prosperity rooted in a peace that reigned for almost a century; and if parallels between wealth and cultural efflorescence can perhaps too easily be drawn,¹¹ there is no doubt that conditions in the city were exceptionally propitious for urban and ecclesiastical display. Not least of these was the example of the dukes themselves:

⁹ David Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), 73, 75. Nicholas offers a synoptic view of the history of the region, including Saint-Omer, until the division of Flanders and Artois in the twelfth century. See also Derville, *Histoire*, 48.

¹⁰ For detailed (and vivid) analysis of the remarkable relative population density from Artois to Liège, see Norman J. G. Pounds and Charles C. Roome, 'Population Density in Fifteenth Century France and the Low Countries', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 61/1 (1971), 116–30, and Norman J. G. Pounds, 'Population and Settlement in the Low Countries and Northern France in the Later Middle Ages', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 49/2 (1971), 369–402.

¹¹ See John H. Monro, 'Economic Depression and the Arts in the Fifteenth-Century Low Countries', *Renaissance and Reformation* 7/4 (1983), 235–50, which points out the frequent disjunction between artistic flowering in the Burgundian Netherlands and economic depressions associated with fluctuations in (especially cloth) trade and population depletion.



Map P.1 Artois, Flanders and environs, late Middle Ages

Philip's *joyeuse entrée* into Saint-Omer on 22 November 1389 was the first of an effusion of grandiose entries, festivals, aristocratic weddings and tournaments that included two meetings (in 1440 and 1461) of the Order of the Golden Fleece and the 1449 tournament of the Belle Pèlerine to name but a few. There can be little doubt that the Burgundian taste for pomp and ceremony rubbed off on the elite individuals and institutions of the city, including the collegiate church of St Omer, whose personnel – singers included – were enmeshed in deep and continuous patterns of Burgundian clientelism.

In a region studded with proud and prosperous cities, then, Saint-Omer was one of the jewels in the Burgundian crown; this in spite of the fact that, to quote David Nicholas, it 'developed in the least promising physical location of any Flemish city'.¹² Hence it is worth considering the source of the prosperity that enabled such wealth and high status and as a consequence that, in turn, of its collegiate church.

The origins of the city's status rest in its great antiquity as a place of learning and devotion. Its story begins in the seventh century with the arrival of its founding, and eponymous, saint and his disciple Bertin in the proselytising wake of the Frankish King Dagobert. In this marshy, unworkable and scarcely habitable terrain they founded what was to become the great Benedictine abbey of St Bertin, situated in what was then known as Sithiu in the lower part of today's town. By the ninth century, when the region was ravaged by Norse invaders, the abbey and its dependencies stood alone. But around 820, the Abbot Frigudise dispatched thirty observants up to the butte, the one point of elevation and the centre of the present town, where they were to serve God, albeit under the rule of the single abbot, not as monks but as canons according to the rule of the 817 Council of Aix.¹³ With this cleavage the foundations were laid of the division, often uneasy, between abbey and collegiate church which were to persist until the dissolution and despoiling of St Bertin at the Revolution.

The surrounding marshland and dense forest being unsuitable for agriculture, the future Saint-Omer owed its development to trade, marketing produce from the rich soils of Artois to its west to the heavily populated cities of the Flemish marshes to its east. Even with increased drainage and cultivation this was a role that was to expand hugely over the centuries, with a relatively low, agriculturally based population and fertile soil to the

¹² Nicholas, *Flanders*, 36. ¹³ Derville, *Histoire*, 17.

west supplying a relatively high urban population to the east.¹⁴ Its catalyst was probably the sale of tithed grain that was surplus to the sustenance of the abbey, which already by the mid-ninth century held sway over some fifty villages and fifty thousand hectares. Around the year 1000 the first walls were built around the butte, the location, from 874,¹⁵ of the grain market and the site of the collegiate church of St Omer.

With the ascendancy, in the late ninth century, of the counts of Flanders, their co-opting of the estates of the abbey, and the establishment – the first in the region – of the market came a shift in the power structure and an economic tilt away from ecclesiastical service to trade; the development, in other words, of a town, as opposed to a large composite monastic institution. This is not to imply that the prior history of Sithiu was one only of disinterested service to the *opus dei*: foreshadowing the similar power structures of the future collegiate church, the abbots had already long been scions of great temporal dynasties including, in the ninth century, a bastard son of Charlemagne and the uncle of the king of France. In the later part of that century, however, the abbey was given over by the king to the counts who for the following century functioned – either directly or via an intermediary – as abbots.¹⁶

From this point on, control of the surrounding populace, its housing and its produce came directly under comital aegis, as did the upper church, now for the first time under the separate leadership of a provost. Even at this early stage, relations between the temporal powers and the canons of the upper town were symbiotic, with the provost typically an appointment of the count, while the canons, being literate, managed the comital accounts. Thus the first citizenry of Saint-Omer came together within the ramparts of the upper town, generated by the market and the needs of the adjacent comital château, in the environs of the early collegiate church. Urbanisation, once started, accelerated rapidly: from a population of a few hundred around 900, Derville estimates a rise to c.35,000 by 1300, with a similar shift over the same period in relative numbers between town and locality from c.6 per cent to c.60 per cent.¹⁷

If grain was always fuel to the city's economic engine, its wealth in the high Middle Ages was built on the Flemish cloth trade. Like neighbouring

¹⁴ See Pounds and Roome, 'Population Density', 127 and *passim*, and Pounds, 'Population and Settlement', 392–3.

¹⁵ Derville, *Histoire*, 18–19, 21. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29; Derville, 'Le nombre d'habitants des villes de l'Artois et de la Flandre Wallonne (1300–1450)', *Revue du Nord* 65/257 (1983), 277–99.