

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization, Spring 2019

Prof. Smey

Session 4, Thurs Feb 7

Part I – One last Medieval piece

Guillaume de Machaut's Kyrie from the Messe de Nostre Dame

Machaut (c. 1300 – 1377) is undoubtedly the most accomplished and influential Late Medieval composer. He inherited the polyphonic technique of Léonin and Pérotin and the tradition of courtly poetry from the trouvères, and brought all of these genres to new heights.

We already looked at an example of his contribution to secular music. His main contribution to *sacred* music was creating the first complete polyphonic setting of the Mass.

Mass is a somewhat long and complicated service that was conducted mid-morning (around 9:00 am). It has some ritualistic parts in which the text is always the same, plus sections that are different each day. Machaut was perhaps thinking practically about how his music could be re-used – he stripped out all of the changeable parts of the Mass and composed music for all of the fixed parts. This leaves a five-movement structure which would serve as a template for composers in the Renaissance and beyond.

I. Kyrie II. Gloria III. Credo IV. Sanctus V. Agnus Dei

We listened to a minute or so of the Kyrie and noted how polyphony has evolved since Léonin and Pérotin.

- There is a wider spread in the vocal parts. It is similar to the modern Soprano-Alto-Tenor-Bass format and creates a “big” sound.*
- Machaut uses the *cantus firmus* technique like Pérotin, taking a pre-existing melody and embedding it in his composition, but here the *cantus firmus* is in a middle voice, and it runs at the same speed as the other parts. It doesn't “stick out” like in the Pérotin.
- So, in a lot of ways Machaut is writing the “music of the future,” using the same basic technique that Renaissance composers would use. Everyone that follows uses a similar five-movement template, big vocal sound, and sophisticated *cantus firmus* technique. The one detail that marks him as a Medieval composer is that he frequently makes “cold” or “empty” combinations of notes, what are known as *fifths*. Renaissance composers would work hard to have a pretty sound at all times – what sounded good to Machaut sounded a little crude and unsophisticated to a Renaissance musician. We'll look at this in more detail in the next segment.

*A lot of people assume that the SATB format means that there are women in the choir now. But in the Medieval and Renaissance periods, the church choirs were still mostly male. They just used male singers

who could sing very high or choir boys or (believe it or not) men who had been surgically altered to sing high. Our recording of the Machaut is actually all men! Listen carefully and see if you can tell.

In modern times it is considered acceptable to use women to sing the high parts in polyphonic music. Some groups do it, some don't. Our next recording on the quiz list (Josquin Despres' "Ave Maria") will be performed by a mixed-gender group, and it sounds a little nicer.

INTRO TO THE RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance (1450-1600)

There are some **revolutionary developments** that mark this period as a departure from the Middle Ages.

Perhaps the most important is the Gutenberg's invention of the printing press around 1439. (In music, Ottaviano Petrucci is the first to print polyphonic music in 1501 – he is "our" Gutenberg.)

This is also the "Age of Discovery," in which European nations begin to explore (and exploit) the rest of the globe. Portugal begins to explore the coast of Africa in 1419, and Columbus sets sail for America in 1492.

Finally, this era sees the break-up of Christianity into multiple strands. Lutheranism is founded when Martin Luther publishes his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517. The Church of England also cuts ties with the Catholics in 1538 due to a dispute between Henry VIII and Pope Clement. The emergence of competing concepts of Christianity is known as the Protestant Reformation.

However, there are also **continuities**, ways in which European society remains largely the same.

There is still a pretty clear division between aristocrats, priests, and peasants (i.e. the feudal system.) Despite the existence of large kingdoms, Europe is really still fragmented into small city-states. And, in a trend that began in the late Middle Ages, cities continue to grow, supporting the existence of a fourth class of individuals, the independent tradesmen, merchants, and bankers. In particular, the Medici family of Florence, Italy amass fantastic wealth (through banking) and manage to buy their way into the aristocracy.

Humanism

Advanced education for elite men begins to center around the classic works of ancient Greece and Rome, as people study Cicero, Aristotle, and Plato (among others) as a rite of passage into adulthood.

This is a philosophical shift from the God-centered world of the Middle Ages. The valuing of ancient, non-Christian thinkers and the belief that contemporary man could achieve similar things is called **humanism**, and this sort of education eventually became known as “the humanities.”

(This does not mean that European society was completely abandoning religion, however. Humanists studied these pre-Christian works alongside religious documents, and they sometimes made texts that mixed religion and ancient philosophy together.)

The Arts

In the arts we see a new concept of the artist as an individual genius, rather than an anonymous craftsman. Figures such as Leonardo da Vinci become well known for their creativity and intellect.

In class we looked at some technical advances in visual arts. I showed Raphael’s *School of Athens* [1510], with its use of 3D perspective and portraits of ancient Greek philosophers, and Hans Holbein the Younger’s *The Ambassadors* [1533], which featured that strange distorted skull at the bottom.

Sacred Music in the Renaissance

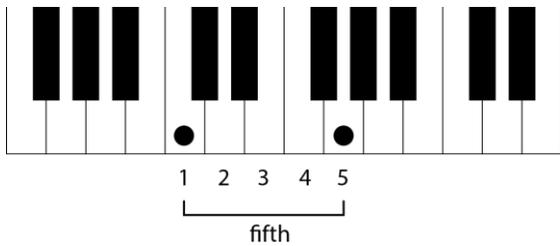
We started this part by going back to Guillaume de Machaut’s *Messe de Notre Dame*, from around 1360. I often say that Machaut is writing the “music of the future” in the 1300s – there are a lot of ways in which the Renaissance composers simply copied what he did.

Fifths vs. thirds

However, one way that later composers disagree with Machaut is in their idea of the best way to combine notes into *harmonies*. As usual, in order to understand this we need to back up a bit and talk about some technical aspects of music.

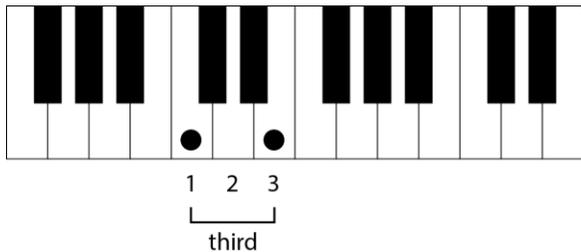
Combinations of notes that sound pleasant and stable are called *consonant*, whereas more “difficult” combinations of notes that seem to clash with each other are *dissonant*. Most music involves some alternation between consonances and dissonances.

Here’s the interesting part: Medieval composers and Renaissance composers seem to have disagreed on what the best consonance is. Medieval composers loved *fifths* – the interval you can make if you go to the piano and count off five white notes:



To us today, a fifth by itself can sound a little “empty,” “cold,” or even “spooky.” Medieval composers, however, gravitate to this sound over and over again.

Renaissance composers, on the other hand, discovered that they prefer thirds.



Thirds generally sound “fuller” and “prettier” than fifths. So, in general, Renaissance music also tends to sound fuller and prettier as well.

In class we spent some time listening to tracks and guessing which ones were Medieval and which were Renaissance.

Josquin des Pres, *Ave Maria*

Another new development in Renaissance sacred music is the popularity of the **motet**.

We’ve already learned about the musical **Mass**. We saw how Machaut is famous for standardizing the polyphonic Mass, taking the parts that were used every day at Church and giving them very elaborate music.

A **motet** is not part of an official Church ceremony. Instead, it takes a new sacred text in Latin (usually a carefully chosen passage from the Bible) and creates a piece out of that. It is usually one, single movement, not a set of five like Machaut’s Mass. So, you wouldn’t use a motet as part of church services – instead, they were often presented on a special occasion, like the consecration of a new cathedral or a wedding.

I spoke a little about how Josquin des Pres (c. 1450 - 1521) was like many composers of his day, traveling from court to court in Italy, making fancy church music and secular entertainments for wealthy aristocrats. He managed to build a reputation of simply being the best at what he did, and he commanded a relatively high fee.

The *Ave Maria* is a motet that sets text from a few different prayers praising the Virgin Mary. It is notable for its **imitation** technique, in which short melodic ideas are passed from voice to voice. This creates structure – if a composer is using imitation it gives a sense of “purpose” to the notes.

We watched a youtube animation of the piece in which the notes were rendered as colored blocks, which made the imitation easy to see (and hear.)

I also tried to show how the music seems to have some parts where Josquin is trying to match the meaning of the words in the music. This “musical symbolism” is all “extra” information that is not on the quiz! Craig Wright also writes a little about it in the text.

Palestrina and the Counter-Reformation

There is one last sacred composer on our list – Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c. 1525-1594) is the most influential figure in the Late Renaissance. This material has been spun-off into an [online unit](#), and [exercise #3](#) asks you questions about it.