History Of Western Music Essay, Research Paper

Most of the early music that we have today

still in print is primarily sacred music. This music, for the most

part, is in the form of sections of the Mass, such as the Gloria, Kyrie

and Agnus Dei. Most people of the Middle Ages were poor peasants

who worked all day for meager wages and had no idle time lounging the way

the upper classes did. Therefore, there are few extant secular compositions

of music from this era. The rise of a new middle class, however,

gave financial freedom for some people to spend time and money on entertainment

in the form of music and dance. Thus, the rise of the middle classes

also gave way to the rise in composition and performance of secular music,

which became the music of choice for composers of that day.

Many of the songs we have today of the

Middle Ages were in Latin, and are by anonymous composers. Many were

written by wandering people, many of them men and churchmen without permanent

residences of their own. Men who could not obtain a position in the

Church and had to drop out were called goliards. These goliards wandered

around the land, composing and performing for people. Their music

was mostly comprised of the “?eat, drink, and be merry? type, appropriate

to the wanton kind of life the goliards lived” (Stolba, 99). Carl

Orff, the composer of the Carmina Burana, used the poems found in the largest

surviving records of Latin secular music that we have today. The

Codex latinus 4660 was held in the Benedictine monastery at Benediktbeurn.

Many of the songs speak of love, many of them lascivious. Others

speak of drinking, satires of the religious life and even liturgical plays.

A few of them are even written in the vernacular of the region in that

time (Stolba, 99).

Following the history of the era in literature,

many authors were fascinated by the courtly tradition, chivalry and a higher

love. Therefore, we have today musical compositions that speak of

many of the same ideas. French composers wrote songs in the vernacular

called chansons de geste . These songs spoke of the heroic acts performed

by knights for their ladies in the name of love. The French have

a national epic called the Chanson de Roland which related the life

and death of Charlemagne?s nephew and his endeavor to rid France of the

Basques. Many of these chansons were performed by other wondering

entertainers called jongleurs and ménestrals , or minstrels.

On one hand society named them outcasts, not worthy to live a productive

life in service of the community, yet on the other hand, they were accepted

as the perfomers of the day. They did not compose the music, but

were one of the main reasons why we still have records of the secular music.

By keeping the oral tradition, they kept secular music alive in the hearts

and minds of the people (Stolba, 100).

In France there were also other wondering

musicians and entertainers known as troubadours and trouvères.

Many of these musicians were of the upper aristocratic classes (Annenburg).

These musicians, unlike most of the minstrels, often composed their own

music and performed it as well, writing and singing in the vernacular which

became the modern day French language. The troubadours and trouvères

also wrote their own poetry, which later became used in written and oral

songs (Daum). Although many of the French songbooks contain some

compositions, there are more records of the poetry. Most of the songs

in the book are in one of three musical forms: ballades, rondeaus and virelais.

Many of these songs were strophic and had refrains or choruses, (Stolba,

102).

The musical instruments in use by

the performers consisted mainly of stringed and woodwind instruments, augmented

by the use of the early trumpet and several types of drums and cymbals.

Medieval art is perhaps the best example

of illustrating the uses and types of instruments. The cittern and

citole consisted of four or five metal strings and were the primary stringed

instruments. They are described as “an instrument fit for rustics,

such as cobblers and tailors” (Annenburg). The recorder and shawm

were the primary woodwind instruments. The recorder, still in use

today, didn?t differ much in the production or sound that we know now.

The shawm was the predecessor of the modern day oboe, yet unlike the oboe,

had the reputation of “a piercing sound that was said to have terrified

the crusaders” (Annenburg).

By the fourteenth century, production

of secular music far outweighed that of sacred. The time period became

known as the Ars Nova or New Art, in response to a treatise written by

the famous composer of the time, Philippe de Vitry. For much of his

lifetime, de Vitry worked in service to the French court. Later in

1351 he became Bishop of Meaux which he maintained until he died.

In his writings, de Vitry codified the new rhythms and notation which were

being developed. He also used red notes to determine pitch notes

and alterations known as colorations. Together with new rhythms and

these colorations, composers began to write music which had never been

seen before. Composers before this had followed strict rules.

De Vitry now utilized the old rules and combined them with new ideas to

create genuine Ars Nova (Stolba, 116).

Another great contributor to secular music

of this time was Guillaume de Machaut. Machaut was also employed

most of his life by the court. At this time, the primary form of

music was the motet, often in multiple parts. The upper voices were

named motetus and triplum. These were written over the lower voices

of the contatenor and contratenor bassus, which later became the bass.

Machaut used the notational practices codified by de Vitry and wrote mostly

in Latin. An interesting rhythmic pattern was also created, called

the rhythmic palindrome. This pattern created a new sound and driving

force to the music. Machaut?s most famous contribution, however,

is La Messe de Nostre Dame . This work is the oldest complete setting of

the Mass Ordinary by a single composer (Daum). The pope renounced the use

of hocket, a form of dividing up a melody and giving it to different voices.

Machaut wrote many rests and syncopations to attain the feel of hocket,

though (Stolba, 120).

As new ideas were constantly being developed,

codified and widely used, many of the old forms of music were being changed

and started to evolve into the forms we now recognize in the Renaissance

style. More freedom was granted in writing and performing music.

The church could no longer contain composers in what they wrote, because

of its dwindling power and influence. The church had no hope of containing

a growing love and appreciation for new music. Music is a definition

of emotion and certainly these times were full of great deeds, as well

as great suffering. The Black Death decimated the population of most

of Europe, but if one single item from this time period could be called

beneficial, it would be the song we all know and grew up with as children:

Ring around the rosies,

Pocket full of posies,

Ashes, ashes

We all fall down.

Works Cited

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