

Dufays nuper rosarum flores analysis

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Guillaum Dufay [Dufay] is described in Guillaume Dufay and the early Renaissance-Howard Mayer Brown as the greatest of the early 15th-century Burgundian composers and one of the great figures in the history of western European music. He is credited as being mainly responsible for initiating the Renaissance [meaning rebirth] in music. Nuper rosarum flores is among the most spectacular musical creations of the period.

Giannozzo Manetti, who was a politician, described the first performance of Du Fay’s Nuper rosarum flores as follows-

..”. it seemed as though the symphonies and songs of the angels and of divine paradise had been sent forth from Heaven to whisper in our ears an unbelievable celestial sweetness...” [The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom. by Eugene F. Rice, Jr.]

In this essay I will discuss the musical background, function and characteristics of Dufay’s Nuper rosarum flores.

Background

In order to understand the musical background of Nuper rosarum flores it is necessary to examine the composer and his music. Dufay was born in 1397 and raised by his mother. It is not certain whether he actually ever knew his father but it would seem that his father was not involved in his life. Dufay spent his early life in Cambrai living with a relative who was a canon of the Cambrai Cathedral, which is situated in Northern France. He became a choir boy at aged 12 and his musical talents quickly impressed. By 1418 he was already a priest and a sub-deacon. In 1428 he joined a papal choir, which was considered a great honour and was one of the highest positions for a musician during the fifteenth century. It is right to recognise that most 15th Century composers were trained as choir boys and many Cathedrals and chapels taught not only singing but also music theory, grammar, mathematics and other subjects. This was only the privilege of men as women did not have such an opportunity. Whilst some Nuns and Novices in convents did receive some musical instruction only a very few were ever regarded as distinguished composers. [“ Music in the Renaissance -The History of Modern Music]

Dufay quickly became a well-known and much respected composer. He travelled frequently across Europe spending a great deal of time in Italy introducing him to perhaps the most advanced musical thinking of his time which influenced much of his writing. He was Chapel master between 1433-35 and again 1437-39 at the Court of Amadeus VIII, King Duke of Savoy. In 1439 a Church council deposed the then Pope and elected Amadeus as Pope. Dufay escaped from the conflict this created and returned to his principal

home in Cambrai where he was ultimately appointed Canon of the Cathedral.

[England and Burgundy in the 15th Century, a History of western Music-]

Peter Burnholder, Donald Jay Grout & Claude Palisca]

Dufay's musical background enabled him to write a lot of relatively short sacred pieces, in Latin, the function of which was to accompany the liturgical service of the Mass as well as a number of longer and more detailed motets especially dedicated to the Virgin Mary resembling "chant".

Many musicians and historians suggest that his most impressive and most complex compositions were his isorhythmic motets which were written for a particular historical occasion or a grand occasion like the wedding of a prince; the signing of a peace treaty; or as was the case with *Nuper rosarum flores* ["The Rose Blossoms"] the dedication of a Church.

Nuper rosarum flores is seen by many musicologists and historians as a truly brilliant isorhythmic motet. Simply explained the definition of an Isorhythm [Greek for "the same rhythm"] is a musical technique that arranges a fixed pattern of pitches with a repeating rhythmic pattern and a "Motet" is an unaccompanied choral work. The isorhythmic motet was intended to be sung as part of the church service.

According to McComb, Todd M.- "Guillaume Dufay (1397-1474) – A discography."

"During his lifetime Dufay completed seven masses, 28 individual Mass movements, 27 hymns, 22 motets (13 isorhythmic), in addition to a variety

of additional pieces from plainchant to secular pieces, all of which were spectacular.

Before he died Dufay wrote a Requiem mass [now said to be lost] to be sung at his funeral and asked for the best singers from the cathedral sing his motet “ Ave regina caelorum” [Hail, Queen of Heaven] to him on his deathbed. By the time of his death in 1474 Dufay was an extremely wealthy man. He was buried in the chapel of St. Etienne in the cathedral of Cambrai. His portrait was carved onto his tombstone which is now in a museum in Lille.

His music survives because nearly 100 manuscripts were copied in Europe between 15th and 16 the Century to preserve them. Had that not have happened his works would have been lost as existing only in his mind. Thankfully in the late 19th and early 20th Century Dufay’s music was revived and many of the works were edited and transcribed into modern notation and published again for future generations to enjoy. [Guillaume Dufay and the early Renaissance-Howard Mayer Brown]

Function

The particular function for which Nuper rosarum flores was commissioned was the consecration of the Cathedral della Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence. The piece was written by Dufay especially for this grand occasion and it was probably the first piece of music that greeted Pope Eugene IV as he entered the Cathedral as the piece forms part of the Introit (Latin for “ entrance”) for the commencement of the Mass and used as the clergy process into the church and up to the High altar. In fact, the two tenor voices support the

whole structure of the piece which is based on a ‘ Gregorian cantus firmus’ melody which was historically used for the consecration of most Christian churches.

The piece, Nuper rosarum flores is a plea to St. Mary of Flowers [as the Virgin Mary was known by the population of Florence], by offering the church to her and asking for her perpetual intercession for her Florentine people. It is widely thought that the dimensions and musical structure of the motet was composed by Dufay with direct reference to the precise measurements and proportions of the cathedral dome, which was designed by Filippo Brunelleschi, one of the most famous architects and engineers of the Italian Renaissance. These proportions have been described in this named web based reference as “ sacred geometry”. (AmaranthPublishing. com/dufay)

In order to ensure that the piece would meet the high expectation for the function for which it was commissioned, Dufay had to carry out a lot of historical research so that it would work in a modern setting. It would appear that he did this by joining the musical ideas of the Middle Ages with those of the Renaissance and ancient Greece to produce a totally unique piece of music, rather like Brunelleschi had achieved with his dome design, namely to design the dome in a traditional but modern way for that time period.

Characteristics

The characteristics of Nuper rosarum floreis that of an isorhythmic motet. As stated above an isorhythm composition is one in which a musical technique has a musical arrangement that has a fixed pattern of pitches with a repeating rhythmic pattern.

In *Nuper rosarum flores* the repeats are in different meters. As Dufay had decided to mix the traditions of the Middle Ages with the ideas of the Renaissance and Ancient Greece this style produced a piece that is seen as more progressive rather than structured. The voices become more and more independent as the piece progresses, unlike in earlier periods where the pieces were heavily structured and had to keep to a certain time signature. It was deliberately notated so that the music increased in volume and therefore did not rely on the structure for this increase. As there are no dynamics on the score the singers had to put in the dynamics themselves. The two tenor parts both still use the original notation of the Gregorian Neumes whilst the Triplum and Motetus use the new notation of crotchets and minims. It is easy to see why there is continued reference to the architecture of the dome when one examines the characteristics of *Nuper rosarum flores* because Dufay's way of writing refers back to the "old" and incorporates the "new" just like the design for the building the dome on the Cathedral.

Nuper rosarum flores is a mensuration canon which means that the main melody is accompanied by one or more imitations of that melody in other voices at different speeds. Accompanying voices may enter simultaneously or successively, as in *Le Ray Au Soley* by Johannes Ciconia, circa late 14c [Harvard anthology of music-Harvard University press 1949]. A very good example can be found in Josquin's *Agnus Dei* [fig 1] each voice sings the same music but at different speeds. This is achieved as follows; the slowest voice is that found in the middle, the lowest voice sings the same music but at twice the speed of the slowest and the highest voice sings the same music

at three times the speed of the slowest. This allows the upper voices to move more freely and in a way that can easily be heard.

[fig 1 Josquin's Agnus Dei]

The name for the rhythmic patterns found in Nuper rosarum flores is “taleas”. A taleas is a freely invented rhythmic pattern which repeats each time in a different meter. The meter is probably better known as the time signature. The rhythm repeats four times and is twenty eight primary measures long. While many might say that the isorhythm was common in the fifteenth century, especially for large occasional pieces, it is also correct to say that music styles were changing rapidly in the 15th century.

Another characteristic of this piece is that there are two tenor lines. Each has different rhythmic patterns which retain their own rhythms each time they are repeated. Tenor 1 has 14. 5 measures of rest while Tenor 2 has 14 measures of rest. The tenors do not sing at the same time as the upper voices. Here Dufay is displaying the use of contrasting textures. The upper voices are fast moving while the tenors are slow moving. There is an exact balance of the two sections. The duets last 14 primary measures as do the full voices. These contrasting textures became an essential development of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. These full voiced sections were described as “tutti” [Howard M Brown – “Music in the Renaissance” (1986)] reflecting the progressive quality of the music of the seventeenth century and later.

Another characteristic is that the piece involves the technique referred to as isomelic. Isomelic is “a general term identifying reappearances of the same
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or similar melodic material in the upper voices at corresponding locations with respect to the divisions of the tenor.” [Samuel E Brown, Jr “ New Evidence of Isomelic Design in Dufay’s Isorythmic Motets” (Journal of the American Musicological Society © 1957)]

Dufay’s musical style was without doubt unique and the composition of Nuper rosarum flores was complex and it is here where it was believed that the proportions in which the repeats were written represented the structure of the cathedral. This is where once again music and architecture meet.

Having said that not all historians share the view of the association between Nuper rosarum flores with the cathedral dome. The musical piece acquired renewed interest as recently as 1973 as the result of the discovery by Charles Warren of a strong connection between its musical structure and the dimensions and proportions of the new Cathedral arguing that the unique set of ratios of the piece corresponded to the large-scale architectural dimensions of the Cathedral i. e the nave, crossing, apse, and dome. However, this view was not widely accepted and in an article in 1993 by Craig Wright he suggests that the piece more accurately reflects the mystical numbers of Solomon’s Temple whose overall length, length of nave and sanctuary, and height were 60: 40: 20: 30 cubits [the durational ratio is 6: 4: 2: 3 in the piece] Another article written in an attempt to restore Warren’s theory was written by M. Trachtenberg and found in, “ Architecture and Music Reunited: A New Reading of Dufay’s “ Nuper Rosarum Flores” and the Cathedral of Florence, Renaissance Quarterly 54 (2001), 740-775”. Thus the mystery continues.

Conclusion

Dufay's music defined the central style of the music of the 15th century. He changed the overall sound by the use of four voice textures, a defining moment being the performance of Nuper rosarum flores at the consecration of Florence Cathedral. He lived in a period of great musical change in Europe. " Dufay, in many respects, paved the way for future composers to use greater imagination and ingenuity in musical composition." (Ogan, 2001)

Charlotte Lynch 26th October 2010.