

Impact of secular music on church during the middle ages



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Secular Music and its impact on the Church during the Middle Ages

From the years 500-1400 A. D, western music reflected some of the social and religious developments that occurred during that time period. One of the most famous composers of the middle ages was known as Guillaume de Machaut.[1] During this time period, the church would try to suppress pieces that were considered “ secular” in the hopes that people would not worship or praise songs that “ go against the church.”[2] However, history began to take a new course when Guillaume de Machaut wrote *La Messa de Notre Dame* . This piece became one of the first polyphonic styled works to be played in the Mass Ordinary, and what began to change the history of the church’s strictly sacred style music to incorporate secular music as well.[3]

The Church was the most influential institution when it came to keeping all things sacred. Elizabeth Kramer wrote, “ during the middle ages, sacred and secular worlds were both separated and integrated” .[4] With the Catholic Church being the major influence of the type of music that was heard, sacred music seemed like it was the only music there could be. The church often offered musical training to those who sought it as well, promoting the idea that music was to be sung and performed in a sacred way only. Chant was the style of music most often sung in worship in the Catholic church, due to the belief that instruments were too related or associated with secular music, which the church would have none of.[5] Another common belief about keeping the music for the church sacred was that secular music was too distracting for the whole purpose of the mass. Espie Estrella wrote, “ most of the music was vocal and unaccompanied. The church wanted to keep music pure and solemn because it was less distracting. Later on, bells and organs

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were allowed in church, but only for important days in the liturgical calendar”. [6] This is evidence of the church being strictly sacred and why its decision to evolve to secular music style was a more elongated one.

The fourteenth centuries new writing style the Ars Nova, created by the French, came into play when Machaut wrote *La Messa De Nostre Dame*. [7] The Ars Nova style was composed of two innovations, one being duplet division of note values with traditional triple value, and the other allowing for division of the semibreve into minims. [8] Although most composers found this new notation to be unambiguous for both pitch and rhythm, some railed against it. An example from the Norton Anthology “A History of Western Music” textbook states that a famous composer of his time known as Jacques de Liege said:

In a certain company in which some able singers and judicious laymen were assembled, and where new motets in the modern manner and some old ones were sung, I observed that even the laymen were better pleased with the ancient motets and the ancient manner than with the new. And even if the new manner pleased when it was a novelty, it does so no longer, but begins to displease many... Let the rational art flourish once more... Wherein does this lasciviousness in singing so greatly please, this excessive refinement, by which, as some think, the words are lost, the harmony of consonances is diminished, the value of the notes is changed, perfection is brought low, imperfection is exalted, and measure is confused? [9]

The main points from this section of the textbook is where it states that Jaques de Liege complained that in the new music “perfection is brought

low, and imperfection is exalted".[10]He was also objecting that the "imperfect double division was now equally as valid as the perfect three-fold division, which carried associations with the trinity".[11]The Ars Nova also created the popularly used isorhythm (equal rhythm) device in the fourteenth century.[12]It was not until the major musical works, such as *La Messe de Notre Dame* written by Guillaume de Machaut did the Ars Nova begin to fully flourish into what it became in the late fourteenth century.

Machaut was one of the most influential composers from his time in that he influenced other composers of his time and the ones to come later to typify the Ars Nova.[13] *La Messe de Notre Dame* was one of the first pieces to be used in the Mass Ordinary that contained polyphony, which made Machaut unique to all the other composers who knew of his work since the church did not approve of polyphony in the mass setting.[14]The textbook says,

The piece was celebrated each Saturday in a chapel of the Cathedral at Reims, where Machaut was a canon. The mass is in four voices throughout. The tenor and contratenor together provide a foundation for the more quickly moving upper voices, the motetus (duplum) and triplum. The contratenor is in the same range as the tenor, moving above or below it as needed to create the desired harmonic intervals.[15]

It is in this piece, particularly the Kyrie that begins to exemplify the Ars Nova style of writing in Machaut's work. As mentioned before, using isorhythms was one of the earliest ways to illustrate the Ars Nova beginning in the works of Philippe de Vitry. Guillaume de Machaut also incorporated this device into the Kyrie. The textbook states:

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In the first Kyrie, the twenty eight notes of the chant divided into seven statements of a four-note talea in the tenor in measures 1-4. The contratenor is mostly isorythmic with a talea of twelve measures (compare measures 1-12 with 13-24), corresponding to three taleae in the tenor, and the upper voices are partially isorythmic over the same span (especially measures 9-12 and 21-24).[16]

While examining these measures, there is evidence of the isorythms mostly in the contratenor part at mm. 1-4, and specifically in mm. 5-7 in the upper voices.[17]

As Observed, and the Norton Anthology textbook states, “ the second Kyrie (mm. 50-66) and in the Christe (mm. 1-27) both tenor and contratenor are exactly isorythmic with talea of seven measures in the Christ and eight measures in the second Kyrie”[18]. In mm. 30-32, the upper voices are slightly isorythmic as they both have eighth notes together emphasizing the melody and traded off syncopated rhythms.[19]This Kyrie shares commonalities with the rest of Machauts music because of the syncopations at the level of the quarter note which is the semibreve, in the original notation and also eighth note (minim) in mm 30-31 and 34 of the Christe. [20]This proves that Machaut wrote music that exercised the Ars Nova, and since *la Messe de Nostre Dame* was not exempt from the church, it means that Machaut is arguably one of the first and perhaps most important people who began the evolution of the church music into a more secular setting. Peter Phillips wrote “ Composers of Polyphony were more preoccupied with perceptions of moral chaos, of the workings of the devil, and of sharp definitions of good and evil. Beauty for its own sake was highly problematic, <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-secular-music-on-church-during-the-middle-ages/>

especially for religious extremists on both sides of the divide.”[21]However, Machaut defies this and becomes “ probably the first composer to write a polyphonic mass individually and conceived as a unit.”[22]as

Upon the death of Machaut, Roberg and McComb wrote “ Guillaume de Machaut died in 1377, and was remembered as being one of the undisputed pinnacle geniuses of Western music, and the most famous composer of the middle ages.”[23]Unfortunately, according to the Norton Anthology textbook;

The interplay between structure and pleasure so typical of fourteenth century music has also had a continuing resonance. Specific structural devices of the time, such as isorythm and the forms fixes, lasted only until the fifteenth century, but ideals of the musical structure continued and diversified. French structure, Italian smoothness of melody and clarity of declamation, and the growing use in both traditions in prominent harmonic thirds and sixths all contributed to the international style of the fifteenth century. The metres and rhythmic combinations made possible by the Ars Nova notation, from common time to syncopation, are still part of music today.[24]

With the death of Machaut, the Ars Nova was becoming a less used writing style due to the emergence of the new “ International Style.” Elements from English, French, and Italian traditions were included in this new style. It is believed that the international style is what people use to differentiate between the fourteenth and fifteenth century style music.[25]Guillaume Du Fays *se la face ay pale* is an example of the international style because of its French elements, (vaguely follows ballade form, rhythmic energy, angular

contratenor part) English elements, (Pervasive consonance, prevalence of third and sixths, triadic figures) and Italian plus English elements (stepwise tenor and contratenor, syllabic mainly). Anne Walters Robertson has suggested “ the text, probably by Du Fay himself, can be read with either secular or sacred meanings.”[26]She describes the secular portion as “ a lovers complaint, similar to the older poems in the troubadour and trouvère traditions.”[27]She also says it can be interpreted as sacred because of “ The vision of a man with a pale face who experiences grief and bitterness for love of another was also used in the writings of Christs sacrifice on the cross, during which he suffered and died.”[28]The international style is curious because within it there are composers who write their musical works similar to the style of Guillaume de Machaut. Guillaume writes sacred and secular pieces separately whereas a piece such as Du Fay’s *Se la face ay pale* is one composition that can be interpreted as sacred or secular. Perhaps Machauts skill of writing in both fields have inspired the future composers like Du Fay to compose pieces with their foot in each door.

Interestingly enough, *La Missa se la face ay pale* was composed by Du Fay based on a secular melody. Anne Robertson suggests that it was the mass to honour the holy shroud. She thinks this because the holy shroud has an image of a pale faced man who had been nailed to a cross and died on it. She said, “ The man was bearded, giving off the impression that it was the shroud used to wrap the body of Jesus after his crucifixion.”[29]Although Du Fay’s ballade *Se la face ay pale* is a secular piece, its words match perfectly to the shroud. Therefore there was no other perfect melody that could be used for a mass version of the piece.[30]This is yet another composer “

sneaking” In secular styled music into the church, which certainly does not end here. If it weren't a composer like Du Fay for instance, how would other future composers have known to continue using secular devices derived from the Ars Nova in their musical works?

When the sixteenth century began, Christians from Poland to Spain and Italy to Scotland shared allegiance. But by the mid-century, every practice and belief from the middle ages was extinguished. Europeans were entering the religious war known as the reformation. The entity that was mostly affected by this war was sacred music. It was a belief of the leaders in the reformation that worship should be more direct, through congregational singing and service presented in the vernacular rather than in Latin.[31]In the generation of 1520-1550, famous composers of the time such as Adrian Willaert, Nicolas Gombert and Jacobus Clemens write pieces that defined the mode of polyphony through frequent cadences and melodic profiles in the superius and tenor voices that fit the range of the mode.[32]Being in the era of the sixteenth century and still having polyphony present in the pieces means that composers of the future have actually kept the Ars Nova alive. Most of the works by these composers were in the duple metre which was created in the middle ages when triple metre was simply perfect for church. How could composers execute this idea so frequently? Well, most likely from the earlier Guillaume de Machaut's style of writing derived from the Ars Nova.

Giovanni Pierluigi Da Palestrina is yet another composer that incorporates the early devices of the Ars Nova within his musical works. According to the Norton Anthology textbook, He was known as the “'prince of music' and his <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-secular-music-on-church-during-the-middle-ages/>

works the ‘ absolute perfection’ of church style.”[33]Interestingly enough his “ Absolute perfection” style for church was mainly written in “ a polyphony of utter purity.”[34]Palestrina is known for “ saving polyphony” and seen as a model by the church and seventeenth century theorists. The church felt there was a strong need for new compositions, and Palestrina was advantageously placed to provide them.[35]He did this by composing *Pope Marcellus Mass*. Even seventeenth century composers looked up to him as the ideal of the old style.[36]The church felt there was a strong need for new compositions, and Palestrina was advantageously placed to provide them.

With a few centuries passing by, it has been shown that the Ars Nova is the root of what assisted in evolving the standards of music in the church. It began as a strictly sacred service, with few voices and simple metre, to the expansion of the Ars Nova in the middle ages credited to Guillaume de Machaut, the most important composer of his time. His work *La Messa de Nostre Dame* being the first to include the most devices from the new art style of the fourteenth century, and inspiring the works of later composers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with their ability to write music that could be interpreted as sacred or secular, and music that was considered sacred but used secular devices within them such as Palestrina’s *Pope Marcellus Mass: Agnus Dei I*. The church finally opened up its arms to secular devices within sacred music and essentially has come to what it is today all thanks to the initial works of Guillaume de Machaut.

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