

What is meant by the expression ars nova in the 14th century



During the early fourteenth century there occurred an imperative stylistic change in music, now commonly known as the “Ars nova” period. The term “Ars nova” means quite literally “new art” when translated from the Latin and refers to the new way of thinking of composers at his time. The term itself was initially used by one of the leading French composers of the time, Philippe de Vitry. The resulting music reflected the ingenuity of the composers working at the time giving them increased ability to express mood and emotion in their works. De Vitry not only coined the new phrase but was the forbearer in a new system of notation which included time signatures, giving rhythmic autonomy where there had previously been little. The composers of the Ars nova distinguished themselves from the composers of the fin de siecle, whose techniques they universally named Ars Antigua, innovated techniques which are present even now in modern day notation.

The main developments in technique were within the fields of rhythm and metre, although maturity in harmonic structure is also evident. In the case of metre, the most commonly used note values had been diminishing in duration during the preceding centuries, for example, longs had given way to breves, which had in turn been divided up in to semibreves, to minims and so forth. The dissection of the semibreve was of imperative importance to the composers of the Ars nova, and this division could occur in a number of ways, for example; 1. Taking the imperfect time of two semibreves and dividing them into four or six minims, or 2. In triple or trochai time where the relationship between minims and semibreves was thus that the prolation could result in six or nine minims. This example of trochai time subjugated

the motet during the Ars nova, while duple prolation using trochaic time (where the division results in six minims) was used for ballades, rondeaux and Virelais, the other popular musical forms of the time.

These musical forms, which used a mixture of music and poetry, are set apart by the use of repetition of both text and melody, whereas before, music had been more or less completely through composed. The ballades, rondeaux and Virelais most frequently followed the forms below: 1. Ballade – aaB: two lines of text are used, with one repeated line of melody then there follows a new line of text to a new melodic line 2. Rondeaux – AbaAabAB: much more intricate 3. Virelai – AbbaA These fixed forms had their predecessors in the chansons of the trouvoures became progressively more multifaceted throughout the fourteenth century until such time as they were replaced with the simpler Italian song forms at the beginning of the fifteenth century.

One composer who was highly acclaimed as a master of all of the above forms was Guillaume de Machaut. A poet and musician, he was born in Champagne around 1300, akin to Vitry, and died at Rheims in April of 1377. There is a tenacious argument that he, and indeed other composers of the Ars nova, only wrote for the elite, and statements were made, such as that by Reaney that “ compositions like the motet, were intended primarily audiences of intellectuals and the elite of the various princely courts.” Even individuals who have done much to make Machaut’s music accessible to contemporary audiences have their preconceptions of who the music was meant for, for example David Munrow who took an elitist view of the interpretation of the 14th century theorist Johannes de Grocheio which also <https://assignbuster.com/what-is-meant-by-the-expression-ars-nova-in-the-14th-century/>

concerned the performance of motets: " This sort of song should not be performed before ordinary people because they do not notice its fine points nor enjoy listening to it, but before learned people and those on the lookout for subtleties in the arts." In his book " Discarding Images" Christopher Page adversely disputes this viewpoint and argues that the " ordinary" people that Grocheio refers to are in fact the laity and that the " learned people" are the clergy. Although it is still unclear exactly who the music of Machaut and his fellow composers of the Ars nova was for, and indeed the capabilities of such individuals, it is clear that, in the case of Machaut, the main audience could be found among the courts of the important families of France.

The central theme running through many of his compositions and narrative poems was love, or to be more accurate, courtly love. One of his particular talents was his ability to create a beautiful bond between music and poetry, as can be seen in his poem " Remede de Fortune" in which texts and their melodies are interpolated into the poem itself. He wrote both the poems and the music for his works giving the completed piece a much more intense feeling of completeness and finality unique to no one else but him, giving him the ability to completely express feelings and emotions through his music. Another important master of the time was Francesco Landini, who worked in Italy.

He composed many works in ballata form that was similar in structure to the French Virelais. However, he is not accredited to the same successes as Machaut whose name is synonymous with the term Ars nova. To be perfectly accurate, Landini cannot really be named a composer of the Ars nova as this term was reserved only for France, and the term Italian Ars nova meant <https://assignbuster.com/what-is-meant-by-the-expression-ars-nova-in-the-14th-century/>

something else entirely. As well as creating the phrase “Ars nova”, Philippe de Vitry also engineered the Biorhythmic Motet.

This was a new form of the motet in which the tenor part was organised in terms of rhythmic pattern and interval. This tool of isorhythm was used to organise longer pieces and was occasionally used in parts other than the tenor, although the tenor was the norm. This is a clever method of organisation, as at first glance, the piece would appear to have no set form, but on further analysis there is an abstractly concealed method of formal organisation. This is very typical of the music of the time. Machaut also used this method of tenors in isorhythm, while he often borrowed his tenor lines from Gregorian chants.

On analysis of Sacred Ars nova music, one finds that the typical ranges commonly used until this period have been expanded, as have the lengths of phrases. A surprising feature of sacred music of this time is that no attempt to express the meaning of the texts is made. This is strange as in secular music, which was typically love songs, the mood of the text was effectively captured in the melody, and the meaning was fully expressed to the audience. Another important aspect of the Ars nova was the increased use of instruments.

These took the place of the cantus firmus, and those most widely used were the fiddle, portative organ, shawm and a small harp. This gave composers increased flexibility in part writing, as no part had to act as an accompaniment, giving rise to increasingly intricate polyphonic textures. This freedom of composition also aided the incorporation of higher

complexity in rhythm, development of notation and the introduction of syncopation. The period of Ars nova was a time of increasingly intricate musical patterns and ideas, making compositions more interesting for the listener.

This however caused some debate as to who the compositions were ideally intended for. Bringing this new art forward meant leaving behind old ideals, which perhaps also meant the leaving behind of audiences was imminent. However, this was a period of increased intensity in creativity. In conclusion, it appears that the term Ars nova in the fourteenth century means a new beginning for a new type of composition, the birth of new structures and forms and the opportunity for new growth.