

MUSIC OF THE RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION PERIODS

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The renaissance period has been called the age of humanism and it engendered new architecture and the rise of polyphony in music. The period of musical renaissance covers the early fifteenth century to the early seventeenth century, but during that time there occurred the Reformation and therefore part of the music of the Reformation runs concurrently with the latter part of the renaissance period.

Yet the onslaught of humanism, which is a philosophy based on liberal human values and non-religious concepts and is certainly not Christian, did not prevent the composition of religious works. But the invention of the printing press which enabled people both to read the Bible and have access to a Bible rather than see it locked up in Catholic churches and this enabled people to read it and see how Catholic teaching differed substantially from the Bible. This gave rise to Protestantism and, for those who believed that the Catholic church had misled them and indeed lied to them, turned their back on religion and adopted their own beliefs and values, hence humanism.

I suppose the most famous composers of the renaissance include Dunstable, Dufay, Ockeghern, Des Pres, Jannequin, Arcadet, Sermisy, Willaert, Tallis, Lassus, Palestrina, Holborne, Victoria, Byrd, Cabezon, Campion, Dowland, Bull, Gibbons, Sweelinck, Praetorius, Weelkes, Banchieri and Frescobaldi. It is impossible to deal with them all.

This age of humanism was also known as the age of joy, and yet the music of these composers seldom lend itself to joyous music. Michael Praetorius and Adriaan Willaert wrote some lively and spectacular music but they were exceptions to the general rule. In fact, the majority of people find renaissance music rather dull and tedious and, to quote one wit, like a Jane Austen novel where nothing happens and is further likened to a fly trying to move in bottle of glue. Whether that is a fair comment is a matter of opinion, but what the renaissance composers excelled at was polyphony. The word means 'many sounds' and refers to two or more independent parts moving contrapuntally. I suppose the opposite is monophonic music where there is only one melodic line and the other lines are accompaniment.

Thomas Tallis stands out from this list in many respects and is an example of both renaissance and Reformation music. He was born around 1505 and was organist at Waltham Abbey to 1540 and a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal serving Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth I, sometimes working jointly with William Byrd. It is the contrapuntal genius of Tallis that is so amazing coupled with a striking originality for its day as displayed in his forty part motet, Spem in alium. His other striking originality was in his clever modulations. Even in his comparatively straight forward motets such as If ye love me there is a wonderful clarity of texture and a simplicity that one finds in greatness. Some of the trouble today is that his works are performed so slowly that its musicality is lost.

A pupil of Tallis was William Byrd who was originally the organist at Lincoln cathedral. He suffered from religious bigotry being a devout Roman Catholic in a country moving towards Protestantism but, nonetheless, he was always in trouble with innumerable lawsuits against him. His work does not have the originality of Tallis and can be slow-moving and somewhat remote or anaemic. It is some of his keyboard pieces with fanciful titles that are probably of more interest and appeal.

Contrapuntal music was predictable, as were other devices such as the fugue, and so attracted the label of academic or cerebral music which is quite true. Sometimes the music is skilful and often very clever but it has been said it is usually from the brain rather than the heart and clinical rather than inspired. This is true but musical fashion was the necessary slave master of those days. What is grossly unfair is that some modern musicologists object to serial music of the twentieth century as merely a system or device and put this view forward as a snide and hostile remark. Yet the fugue and canon were examples of

devices just as the twelve note system was which later system in the hands of great composers such as Webern, Schoenberg, Berg and Humphrey Searle can be spontaneous and inspiring.

The music of the Flemish composer Adriaan Willaert is worth exploring. He was born in 1490 and became choirmaster at St Marks, Venice, in 1527 which boasted two organs, and therefore some of his religious music calls for double choir and two organs. But it is in his secular music that we sometimes find rumbustious and very exciting music which stands out as incredibly original and vital.

Percy Scholes claims that Orlando Lassus (1532-1594) was the greatest representative of the Flemish school stating that his music has pure musical beauty and the expression of man's emotions... yet others will state that such early music lacked emotion and was written in accordance with the strict matter of fact style imposed by the Catholic church. Lassus travelled widely and, like Elgar, was a toady demanding and collecting awards and recognition from royalty, nobility and institutions to manufacture their self-importance.

Much renaissance music was scored for voice and lute and other small forces which did not always give the music sufficient colour and contrast. John Dowland is an obvious example of this and he composed many effective songs. Michael Praetorius (1571-1621), like Willaert, departed from the acceptable style of non-spectacular music, or controlled music as someone said, and wrote music of great verve as a good performance of the Dances from Terpsichore will reveal.

But so many so-called early music experts render a great disservice to this type of music thinking that slow tempi and clinical control being the order of the day... and therefore this music and the slow style remain in present time performances in this infuriating nonsense in search of authenticity. The dreariness of some recordings of Palestrina Masses and those by other composers of the period is lamentable so much so that Rossini and other enlightened composers put some enthusiasm into sections of the Mass which sections merited it. The Credo and Gloria are mainly movements of confidence and assurance and the music should reveal that. Gounod, Saint Saens and Poulenc also thought the same and, of course, they were right.

There were two important Spanish renaissance composers namely Tomas Luis de Victoria (1548-1611) and Antonio de Cabezon (1510-1566). Victoria went to Rome to study to become a priest and, in fact, was ordained, but took up music. He worked with Neri who is said to be the founder of the oratorio which remark is ridiculous because it cannot be proved. Victoria returned to Spain and his music, including a substantial amount of sacred music, does contain some drama and tension in contrast to composers like Palestrina and Byrd. In fact it is the strictness of the counterpoint in Palestrina and Byrd that is the main complaint about their music, whether or not that complaint is justified.

Cabezon was blind from birth but, nonetheless, became the organist to the kings of Spain. He used popular songs of the time which he incorporated into some of his work.

The renaissance lutenists and singers were a progression from the troubadours and often sang their own songs to their own accompaniment and therefore their music was more widely known among those unable to attend courts and theatres. By their very nature their songs were predominantly secular and were often narratives telling stories as did the songs of the Victorian Music Halls which, perhaps, are unfairly maligned today.

Two fine innovators of this period were also friends. John Bull (1562-1628) was the organist at Hereford cathedral before he went to Belgium in 1613. He wrote some amazing keyboard music with fanciful titles much of which has sunk into oblivion. He was a friend of the Dutch composer Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621). It seems unbelievable to realise that the majority of the musical public who, because they know little if anything of Sweelinck, cannot accept that he was the first composer to compose fugues fully written out with independent parts for the pedals. And it

was J S Bach who took this form up. In this context Sweelinck was the master and Bach the mere disciple and yet the pupil is revered more than the master. Sweelinck's music mainly belonged to the Reformation period more than the renaissance and in his sacred words the crippling severity of previous fashion and Catholic control gave way to a human voice. Given good performances his work has a freshness and it also has heart.

It is often erroneously thought that composers and musicians of our own time only like composers who are contemporary with themselves. Elisabeth Lutvens was fascinated by the Italian composer Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643). He was a virtuoso organist, probably the first master of the organ. He had posts in Antwerp before coming to St Peter's in Rome. His organ works influenced his student Froberger and, of course, the Bachs.

The strictures of Roman Catholicism on music was receding, although those who were of the Catholic persuasion or who were employed by the Catholic church still had to comply with sacred music being restricted in expression. Some composers like the great J C Bach became a Catholic to get a job and pay his way, and his earliest sacred music more or less complied with tradition but later developed in a semi-operatic style. Music may stand still for a few generations but not for ever and there will always be composers who will compose in an anachronistic style.

Secular music became influential. The church was deemed to be the place to be serious and the court, inns and other establishments realised the need of entertainment. There were crude and vulgar songs such as those said to be sung at rugby matches today, and for their time, some renaissance songs were as suggestive and sexually provocative as can be heard in pop music today. Following renaissance and Reformation music came baroque music and one aspect that delighted both the vain and perverted was the playing of the harp which was usually an accomplishment for young ladies and, as they had to contend with pedals, they would show their ankles and, as they had to stretch to play the width of the strings they had to bare their arms. And if there was a tight bodice being worn as well, this made the harp of tremendous appeal but not for the right reasons. There was a Bohemian composer who drowned himself because of his wife's infidelity which commenced when she was playing the harp before a male admirer, who became her paramour.

It is visual imagery that often leads to illicit affairs and crimes against women but it also has to be said that many young women in the baroque period took up the harp not for musical reasons but for the inherent sexual implications, as the wife of another composer, Dussek, was also to discover. Human nature does not change.

There was also acceptable secular music which could be employed in mixed company without giving offence. France had produced the chanson, a simple verse- chorus repetitive song usually of a gentle lyrical nature which could be sung to ones sweetheart or in the company of friends. But this simplicity of song gave way to a type of song employing several voices with instrumental accompaniment. Its original concept was the development of the songs of the troubadours and often these were simply called airs. Josquin Des Pres was a leading exponent in this and Jannequin did likewise, but he later changed the nature of the chanson introducing dramatic content such as accounts of battles.

The Reformation which started in Northern Europe in the early sixteenth century spread largely because of the facility of the printing press and that people could read for themselves. They found that Roman Catholic doctrine did not match with the teachings of the Bible and people began to realise that salvation was not in the Church or in the sacraments, but in Christ alone and the doctrine of grace. People say that the Catholic church was powerful and astray from the Bible and that their reigns of terror, including the infamous inquisitions, were man made exploits for the purposes of domination and subjugation. The hypocrisy of the Catholic Church was being exposed piece by piece. Religion and Christianity are not the same thing and centuries of Catholicism with its accompanying terrors was the greatest deterrent to Christianity. Of course it was then and still is today but on a vastly

reduced scale, and it has to be reported that there are very many Catholics who are honourable people and who denounce evil even within their own church.

It follows that the music of the Reformation eased away from the demands of Catholicism in music and music took on a different language. Music should never be subjected to authorities or political demands such as befall the Soviet Union in Stalin's time for example. While I would strongly advocate the distinction between music and entertainment and firmly believe that all quality music should be accurately written down and accurately realised in all subsequent performances. What is not put into such permanent form is often mere entertainment but I do not decry that. Many of the Victorian Music Hall songs were never written out but it does not stop a lot of them being great entertainment. I have been in a jazz band and none of our performances were ever written down as we played them. Such entertainment has its place and I would not give up my King Oliver collection for the world. But I expect serious and quality music to be available in printed form as the composer wants it performed.

Sitting in a garage does not make me a car. Being 'unable' to read music does not make someone a musician even if he can play a few chords on a guitar and thinks he can sing and renders repetitive four minute pop songs. It gives pleasure and entertains, but it is not real music and, again, that is not a statement of snobbery, but highlights the obvious gulf between a thorough composed magnificent Bach Mass faithfully and permanently recorded by and with the printing press and able to be purchased for study and performance, and a pop song not so accurately preserved which songs, for example, repeats I loves yer baby 48 times in four minutes with only tonic and dominant chords. There is no comparison with great music and yet we call it music! And, often, the people who call these pop songs music will rubbish a Bach Mass or a Bruckner Symphony or one of the superlative Piano Concertos by Liszt!

I remember going into a music shop to buy some music by Dohnanyi and the gum chewing sales girl said. "Is that rock or heavy metal?"

The next age of music was the baroque period which is probably the first really exciting era of music!

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