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Choral Art in the Renaissance. Stylistic Evolution and Aesthetic Landmarks

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Abstract

The study of Renaissance choral art involves the analysis of the cultural and religious context of the era, the evolution of polyphonic techniques and the relationship between music and text, aspects that will constitute the main directions of this paper.

Keywords

Renaissance, choral art, madrigal, polyphony

I. Introduction

The Renaissance period represents one of the most fertile moments in the history of Western music, marking the consolidation of the polyphonic language and the development of a sound aesthetic based on balance, clarity and controlled expressiveness. At the center of this sound universe is choral art, which becomes the main vehicle of sacred and, to a lesser extent, secular musical creation.

Renaissance choral and instrumental music developed between approximately 1400 and 1600, a period in which European composers

created a refined polyphonic style, characterized by imitation, balance between voices, and a subtle integration of liturgical or poetic text. This era is marked by the work of such reference composers as Guillaume Dufay, Josquin des Prez, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, and Orlando di Lasso, whose creations decisively influenced the evolution of choral music.

II. The cultural and religious context of the Renaissance

The Renaissance, as a cultural and artistic movement, is characterized by the rediscovery of the values of classical antiquity and the affirmation of humanism. In the field of music, this orientation is reflected in an increased concern for expressiveness and for the intelligibility of the sung text¹. The Church remained the main patron of music, and ecclesiastical institutions - cathedrals, chapels² of princely courts and monasteries - became centers for the development of choral practice. The papal chapel in Rome, the ducal chapel in Burgundy or the musical institutions in Flanders were true laboratories of polyphonic creation³.

At the same time, the advent of printed music, with the works of Ottaviano Petrucci⁴ at the beginning of the 16th century, contributed decisively to the spread of the choral repertoire throughout Europe⁵. This rapid diffusion of creations favored the formation of an international style, dominated by the Franco-Flemish school⁶.

¹ Octavian-Lazăr COSMA, *History of Universal Music*, vol. II, Bucharest, Musical Publishing House, 1978, p. 17.

² The musical chapel was a permanent institution made up of professional singers and instrumentalists, responsible for ensuring the musical repertoire for religious and official ceremonies.

³ Octavian-Lazăr COSMA, *History of Universal Music*, vol. II. p. 22.

⁴ The musical pattern introduced by Ottaviano Petrucci allowed the multiplication of scores and contributed to their rapid circulation of the polyphonic repertoire in Europe.

⁵ Iulian COSTIN, *History of Universal Music*, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, Bucharest, 1972, p. 84.

⁶ The Franco-Flemish school was dominant in Europe between the 15th and 16th centuries, its composers occupying leading positions important in princely and ecclesiastical chapels in Italy, France or Germany.

III. Characteristics of the Renaissance choral style

Renaissance choral art is distinguished by a series of fundamental stylistic features.

Imitative polyphony – one of the most important features is the use of imitative polyphony, in which a musical theme is presented successively by several voices. This technique creates a complex but balanced sound structure, in which each voice has melodic autonomy⁷. Imitation has not only a technical role, but also contributes to the unity of musical discourse and the development of thematic material⁸.

Vocal balance – Renaissance choral music seeks a balance between the voices of the ensemble. Unlike the medieval period, in which the tenor had the central role, in the Renaissance each voice becomes an integral part of a homogeneous sound fabric⁹. This equality of voices reflects the aesthetic ideal of harmony and proportion, specific to humanist thought¹⁰.

The relationship between music and text – Renaissance composers pay particular attention to the expressiveness of the text. Through techniques such as madrigalism or sound painting, music attempts to illustrate the meaning of the words¹¹. Certain poetic images or theological ideas are suggested through intervals, rhythms, or changes in register¹².

IV. Genres of Renaissance choral art

The motet is one of the most important genres of Renaissance sacred music. Typically written for four to six voices, the motet uses Latin texts

⁷ Octavian-Lazar COSMA, *History of Universal Music*, vol. II, p. 30.

⁸ Imitation can be free or strict and represents a fundamental process of the contrapuntal technique.

⁹ Vasile HERMAN, *Musical Forms of the Renaissance*, “Gheorghe Dima” Conservatory, Cluj-Napoca, 1973, p. 41.

¹⁰ The equality of voices is one of the defining features of Renaissance polyphony, each melodic line having comparable structural importance.

¹¹ Vasile HERMAN, *Musical Forms of the Renaissance*, p. 46.

¹² Renaissance humanism promoted the study of classical languages and rhetoric, which influenced the way composers approached the relationship between music and text.

and relies on elaborate polyphonic techniques¹³. In the 16th century, the motet became a space for artistic experimentation, in which composers developed complex imitative-contrapuntal structures¹⁴.

The Missa is the musical cycle intended for the liturgical text of the Catholic Mass. Renaissance composers created numerous masses based on cantus firmus, paraphrase, or parody¹⁵. These works demonstrate a great stylistic unity and a remarkable capacity for integrating thematic material into extended structures.

The Madrigal in the field of secular music, the madrigal occupies a central place. Originating in Italy, the madrigal is a choral composition on poetic texts, characterized by intense expressiveness and the frequent use of sound painting¹⁶. Madrigal's composers¹⁷ explored the relationship between music and poetry in an innovative way, anticipating Baroque sensibility.

IV. Great composers of Renaissance choral art

Guillaume Dufay¹⁸ (1400–1474) is one of the central figures of the early musical Renaissance. His work reflects the transition between medieval and Renaissance styles, combining cantus-firmus with more flexible polyphonic techniques¹⁹. He had a remarkable musical career, enjoying the appreciation of his contemporaries.

His creation:

- secular works rondos, ballads, polyphonic chansons;
- religious works occasional or religious motets;

¹³ Iulian COSTIN, *History of Universal Music*, p. 87.

¹⁴ The Renaissance motet differs from the medieval one in the unity of the text and the use of imitative contrapuntal polyphony.

¹⁵ Octavian-Lazăr COSMA, *History of Universal Music*, vol. II, p. 32.

¹⁶ Vasile HERMAN, *Musical Forms of the Renaissance*, p. 71.

¹⁷ Sound painting was used especially in the Italian madrigal, but it also appears in some sacred works.

¹⁸ Ecaterina BANCIU, *History of Music*, course for Distance Learning, "Gheorghe Dima" Music Academy, Cluj-Napoca, p. 44.

¹⁹ Iulian COSTIN, *History of Universal Music*, p. 91.

- he draws inspiration from folk songs (used as *cantus firmus*) which he processes in masses (e.g. the melody of the French *chanson* *L'homme armé*);
- takes the idea of unity from Machault's mass and develops it: the initial melody is repeated in each part of the work, and the repetition of the melody (partially or in full) in the lower voice, the extreme parts will have similar characteristics (*Kirie* and *Agnus Dei*) the contrast between the parts was achieved with differentiations of rhythm or tempo, respectively the alternation of parts with two voices with those with four;
- at Dufay, the upper voice, leading the tenor, was called the *cantus firmus*, regardless of whether it was secular or religious.

Josquin des Prez²⁰ (1440-1521) is considered one of the greatest masters of polyphony. His music is notable for its clarity of structure and expressive sensitivity. In his motets, imitation becomes a fundamental organizing principle²¹. He is believed to have been from St. Quentin, where he began his studies.

He became a disciple of Ockeghem in Paris, a singer at the Duomo in Milan, at the Sforza family chapel (Milan 1473-1479), and at the papal chapel in Rome (1486-1494). He passed through Ferrara and Paris, at the court of Louis XII (1501-1503), in the Netherlands (1507), again in Italy, in Florence (1516). He will find his end in France at Condé (1521), composing until the last moment. He composes only when inspired, he refuses to compose on command.

His creation:

- secular creation - *chansons* (70), for four voices, simple or complex, polyphonic (*chanson* conceived in triple canon - for 6 voices), joyful or sad;
- religious creation: large works, motets (90), *magnificats* (2), masses (32).

His style combines the clarity of Italian-inspired melody with an architectonics based on contrast: he unites the voices for a *cantus firmus*, or reduces the number of voices to two.

²⁰ Ecaterina BANCUI, *History of Music*, p. 46.

²¹ Octavian-Lazăr COSMA, *History of Universal Music*, vol. II, p. 38.

Specifics of his music:

- the descending drawing of the melodic line and the minor third symbolize sadness or even funeral - the ascending march and the major third joy and light. The chanson *L'homme armé* also inspired him in the composition of the second mass;
- He composed the masses: *Ave Maria stella*, *Mater patris*, and the motets *Stabat Mater*, *Salve Regina*. An excellent teacher, he composed motets for two voices for didactic purposes. He demanded of the performers respect for the text and forbade excessive ornamentation. He was among the few composers who saw his creations published (Venice 1498).

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina²² (1525-1594) is often associated with the ideal of Renaissance polyphonic style. His music is characterized by balance, clarity, and a careful relationship between text and melodic line²³. The musicological tradition has long considered him the representative of the “pure” style of sacred polyphony. Palestrina’s counterpoint²⁴ remains one of the great landmarks of the development of choral music in the Renaissance for the following musical eras.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina would save church music by creating a mass in which the liturgical text was perfectly intelligible, without sacrificing the musical message. He was born near Rome in the city of Palestrina. It is recorded about Giovanni Pierluigi that at the age of 11 he was orphaned by his mother and sang at the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. He lived his entire life in Rome, except for the years (1544-1551) spent in his hometown as an organist and choir conductor.

Pope Marcellus II appointed him *magister puerorum* (master of the children’s choir) and *maestro di cappella* at St. Peter’s Cathedral (1551), and after the publication of his first volume of masses (1554) he appointed him to the college of singers at the Sistine Chapel. He was appreciated by the ten popes in whose service he worked, but he left the pontifical chapels following the decision of Paul IV to admit only (unmarried) ecclesiastics

²² Ecaterina BANCIU, *History of Music*, p. 46

²³ Vasile HERMAN, *Musical Forms of the Renaissance*, p. 82

²⁴ Vasile HERMAN, *Musical Forms of the Renaissance*, p. 83.

to service. During these years he conducted the choir of the church of St. Giovanni di Literano (1555-1561) and Santa Maria Maggiore (1561-1571). Between 1564-1568 he led the musical events of the family of Cardinal d'Este, a patron of the arts, and composed a lot, enjoying fame. The last decades of his life would be marked by both tragic events (the death of his wife, two brothers, and two of his three sons in the plague epidemic), but also the recognition of contemporaneity.

He was appointed by the new pope, Pius V, as maestro compositore of the Vatican and in 1592 16 psalms from his works by contemporary Italian composers were published, with a laudatory preface.

The tomb of the great musician of the 16th century, as Paul Dukas called him in 1892, is located at St. Peter's Cathedral.

His creation:

- over a hundred masses (105), over 600 motets, hymns, offertories, magnificences, psalms;
- 1554 - first volume of Misses;
- 1555 - first volume of secular madrigals;
- 1563 - first volume of Motets,
- 1567 - Pope Marcellus' Mass;
- 1569 - second volume of Misse;
- 1570 - third volume of Misses, Missa Brevis;
- 1584 - Canticum conticorum (Song of Songs) on the verses of Solomon. I have written more animated music than is generally customary in liturgical music, because the subject itself demands it, Palestrina writes in the preface;
- 1586 - second volume of secular madrigals, after a 30-year break, on the verses of his favorite poet, Petrarch;
- Two volumes of Spiritual Madrigals - published in the last years of his life.

Among Palestrina's disciples we mention: Giovanni Maria Nanino, the brothers Anerio, Felice and Giovanni Francesco, Marc'Antonio Ingegneri, Monteverdi's teacher, Gregorio Allegri and Lodovico Grossi da Viadana. And among the foreigners, we mention the Spaniard Tomaz Luiz de Victoria (Tomas Ludovico da Vittoria).

Orlando di Lasso²⁵ (1532-1594) was one of the most prolific composers of his time, creating both sacred and secular music. His style is notable for its diversity and ability to integrate different regional influences²⁶.

At the age of 12 he entered the service of the House of Mantua, began composing in Naples, and in 1553 became Maestro di Cappella in Rome, at the church of St. John Lateran²⁷. In 1555 he came to Antwerp, where he printed his first compositions. In 1556 he entered the service of the Bavarian Duke, with the position of singer in the chapel, and from 1563 he led the chapel for 30 years, until his death.

His creation:

- Madrigals;
- chansons;
- leads;
- religious music (motets, masses, Magnificats, offertory);
- 1250 motets;
- 50 masses.

Luca Marenzio²⁸ (Coccaglia, near Brescia 1553- Rome 1599)

He studied organ and became the maestro of two princely courts in Rome. He was in the service of the King of Poland from approximately 1588 to 1590 and employed at the Papal Chapel from 1595.

He wrote church music, but became especially renowned for his madrigals, of which he left 16 volumes.

His creation:

- spiritual madrigals;
- motets;
- sacred concerts;
- vilanelle.

Thomas Morley²⁹ (London 1557-London 1602)

He was a chorister at St. Paul's Cathedral and a disciple of W. Byrd. He was choirmaster at Norwich Cathedral from 1583 to 1587. He graduated

²⁵ Ecaterina BANCIU, *History of the Music*, p. 47.

²⁶ Octavian-Lazăr COSMA, *History of Universal Music*, vol. II, p. 45.

²⁷ Octavian-Lazăr COSMA, *History of Universal Music*, vol. II, p. 53.

²⁸ Ecaterina BANCIU, *History of Music*, p. 48.

²⁹ Ecaterina BANCIU, *History of Music*, p. 48.

from Oxford in 1588 and became organist from 1589 at St. Paul's Cathedral. He was appointed a "Gentleman of the Royal Court" by Queen Elizabeth. Between 1596-1661 he lived in the same neighborhood as Shakespeare, but it is not known whether they met.

His vocal creation:

- songs (for 3 voices);
- madrigals (for 4 voices).

His instrumental creation:

- works for violin, virginal and viola.

Other representatives of the Renaissance period:

William Byrd³⁰ (1543–1623) was organist at the Chapel Royal. He composed religious works, both Catholic and Anglican:

- miss;
- motets;
- lamentations/complaints;
- psalms;
- hymns;
- instrumental music - 130 pieces for virginal.

John Dowland³¹ (1562-1626) was a violin virtuoso and singer, a student of Luca Marenzio. He became lutenist to the King of Denmark (Christian IV) and from 1612 to the King of England-Jacob I. He was praised by Shakespeare in a sonnet "The Divine Musician".

Vocal creation:

- Madrigal`s (Come again, Sweet love);

Instrumental creation:

- pavans for viola

Carlo Gesualdo da Venosa³² (Naples 1560-Naples 1613) was a nobleman, but he had a life marked by tragedies, which greatly influenced

³⁰ Ecaterina BANCIU, *History of Music*, p. 48.

³¹ Ecaterina BANCIU, *History of Music*, p. 48.

³² Ecaterina BANCIU, *History of Music*, p. 49.

his psyche. He played the violin, and his first creations are 40 madrigals inspired by Tasso's poems. A contemporary named Fontanelli characterized his art as strange and infinite. In the second part of his life he fell into religious mysticism.

His compositional style was pathetic-dramatic, his thinking harmonic-chromatic, with tensions, continuous variation and contrasts, and freedom in dealing with dissonances.

His creation:

- "Sacra Cantiones" for 5 and 6 voices, two volumes;
- Canzonette for 3 soprano voices;
- instrumental works 10 Gagliarde a 4 per suonare le viole;

Igor Stravinsky considered him "one of the most personal and original composers ever born", and in 1960 he composed *Monumentum per Gesualdo da Venosa*.

Claudio Monteverdi³³ (Cremona 1567-Venice 1643) without having any family tradition (his father was a doctor), he and his brother would become musicians. He studied with the chapel master of Cremona and at the age of 15 published religious works. Before turning 20, he became a well-known composer. He was hired as a violist at the court of the Duke of Mantua, where he would publish a volume of madrigals considered innovative. He undertook tours in Hungary and Flanders. In 1602 he would become maestro di cappella, a job with many obligations and very poorly paid by the Duke. The death of his wife in 1607 would leave a deep mark on him. After the Duke's death in 1610, he would be invited to Venice, as maestro di cappella at the church of San Marco.

His creation:

- canzonette for 3 voices in 1584 at the age of 17
- volumes of madrigals: vol. I-1587, vol. II - 1590, vol. III - 1592, vol. IV - 1603, vol. V -1605, vol. VI-1614, vol. VII-1619, vol. VIII-1638 (Madrigali guerrieri e amorosi), vol. IX-1651 posthumously (madrigals and canzonettes for 2 and 3 voices), vol. I-VI for 5 voices, vol. VII for 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 voices, vol. VIII for choir and instrumental accompaniment, vol. IX for 2 and 3 voices.

³³ Ecaterina BANCIU, *History of Music*, p. 49.

- “Scherzi Musicali in stilo recitativo”: vol. 1 - 1607 (3 voices), vol. II-1632 or 1638 (1-2 voices with continuous bass)

His creation:

- 1607 - The Tale of Orpheus
- 1608 - The Ball of the Ungrateful
- 1608 - L'Arianna (Lamento d'Arianna, Lasciatemi morire, vol. VI of madrigals)
- 1617 - La Maddalena
- 1627 - Armida
- 1628 - Mercury and Mars
- 1641 - Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria
- 1642 - L'incoronazione di Poppea
- ballet: 1615 - Tirsi e Clori

Compositional innovations:

- *tremolo* - (first used by Biaggio Marini in 1617)
- *pizzicato* used in the crossing of swords in the opera Tancred and Clorinda (Armida)
- *style concitato* (for the drama of the speech)
- style recitativo (sung speech)
- accompanied monody

V. The legacy of Renaissance choral art

Renaissance choral art had a lasting influence on the development of Western music. The contrapuntal techniques developed during this period became the foundation of musical pedagogy in the following centuries³⁴. In the 18th century, composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach studied and integrated the principles of Renaissance polyphony into their own works³⁵. Renaissance choral repertoire also continues to be widely performed in contemporary vocal ensembles, being appreciated for its purity and complexity.

³⁴ Iulian COSTIN, *History of Universal Music*, p. 95.

³⁵ Vasile HERMAN, *Musical Forms of the Renaissance*, p. 94.

VI. Conclusions

Renaissance choral art represents one of the most important chapters in the history of Western music. The development of imitative polyphony, the balance between the voices of the ensemble, and the profound relationship between music and text contributed to the creation of an artistic style of great refinement.

The work of Franco-Flemish, Italian and German composers consolidated a universal musical language, which influenced the evolution of European music for centuries. Through its formal perfection and subtle expressiveness, Renaissance choral music remains a model of aesthetic balance and spiritual depth.