

Divide and Secular!

Steven E. Chambers

Music History I

November 7, 2016

## **Abstract**

Throughout the development of early music, sacred music was the focus of public practice as well as the basis of music theory up to this point. The church governed almost all music that was publicly performed or presented to the public in mass quantities. As music advanced during the Renaissance, different styles of music began forming in different parts of the civilized world. France, Italy and England each began producing their own unique style of secular music in this time. While their origins may be similar, they each have their own unique characteristics that set them apart from one another. French, Italian, and English works of the sixteenth century each had their style and began to set trends that could be defined as genres of this time. Though these countries are separate from one another and unique in their stylistic ways, they also carry similarities through their history together.

## **Background Information**

### **Styles of Italy**

Italian music began showing signs of a unique style in the late fifteenth century that was later solidified into a more recognizable and unified sound and style. Music began to be used in more public settings, rather than strictly in music school or for liturgical purposes. Celebrations and festivals brought about *canti carnascialeschi*, which was a whole new “brand” of music at the time; carnival songs.<sup>1</sup> The idea behind this music was purely in the name of fun. These carnival songs weren't exactly pleasing to listen to, the melody would often be too clustered

---

<sup>1</sup> K Marie Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, (Mc-Graw-Hill, 1998), 173.

between chaotic passages, and too difficult to determine which voice contains the melody. These pieces gave a lot of focus on the words above all else, setting them as “amusing and characteristic of popular life.”<sup>2</sup> Among these types of settings were *mascherates*, modernly known as “masquerades”, and *trifoni* (triumph songs), these were types of dance songs that were very closely related to ballets. These pieces were all typically strophic and contained a refrain, in duple meter, with clear harmonic progressions, clear musical phrases, cadences, and an apparent tonic and relative dominant.<sup>3</sup> These types of carnival works maintained their popularity for about the first quarter of the sixteenth century.

*Frottola* was another type of common secular work in Italy in the early sixteenth century. This style was a very loose term that was used to describe several different types of secular works, derived from the previously dominant *barzelle*, which is now often referred to as “frottola proper”.<sup>4</sup> This type of music comes from northern Italy, and can be traced back to the small town of Mantua.<sup>5</sup> Just as in the carnival songs, these works were mostly in duple meter with a triple on on very rare occasion. They were written mostly in four voice harmony with “usually all members of the triad present in a chord.”<sup>6</sup> Phrasing was also very clear, just as in the previously mentioned carnival songs, however the modal chord progressions were much more commonly mixed than in *canti carnascialeschi*. Phrases were shaped syllabically rather than melodically. The rhyme scheme and form of the music often follow specific patterns in relation with each other. The Music would follow an ‘ABCD’ pattern for the Ripresa section, and an ‘ababcd’ section for a stanza, while the rhyme scheme would follow with abba in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Abraham, *New Oxford Dictionary Volume IV*, (Oxford University Press, 1968) 33.

<sup>3</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 174.

<sup>4</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 174.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Mayer Brown, *Music in the Renaissance*, (Prentice-Hall INC. 1976) 99.

<sup>6</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 174.

Ripresa and ‘cdcdda’ for the stanza.<sup>7</sup> *Frottele* came in two varieties, “those in which all phrases begin and conclude all together, and those in which one voice enters one note later than the others [but they all] conclude the phrase together.”<sup>8</sup> By the 1530’s *frottola* had lost its luster and began to be replaced by *the madrigal*.<sup>9</sup>

Another type of Italian music was the *Villanella*, which was a term used to describe “a type of light music”, which was satirical in nature and intended for more upper class or educated audiences.<sup>10</sup> Looking at the music theory aspect of these pieces, *villanelle* often contained phrases with series of parallel fifths. This brings a whole different element to the satirical mood because this was a practice that was (and still is) greatly frowned on by music theorists.<sup>11</sup> These types of works were very simple in chordal structure, featuring the melody in the upper voice.

*Italian Madrigals* were very important and popular types of music in the fifteenth and even sixteenth century, becoming what was considered to be “the most significant type of secular song during the Renaissance.”<sup>12</sup> *Madrigals* were a very popular part of Italian Music, written mostly for professional vocalists. The *madrigals* of the fourteenth and fifteenth century share nothing aside from a common name.<sup>13</sup> In the early sixteenth century and even before they started out timid in nature, and grew into more involved pieces as time advanced.<sup>14</sup> The goal of madrigals in this time was to express emotion, which is determined by the various types of Italian poetry these songs were set to. “Sixteenth century madrigals comprising of a single stanza

---

<sup>7</sup> Brown, *Music in the Renaissance*, 101.

<sup>8</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 174.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham, *New Oxford Dictionary*, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 175.

<sup>11</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 175.

<sup>12</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 175.

<sup>13</sup> Abraham, *New Oxford Dictionary*, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham, *New Oxford Dictionary*, 39.

with varying number of 7- or 11- syllable lines in free rhyme scheme... Through composed setting of a one stanza poem or from a multistanza poem treated phrase by phrase.”<sup>15</sup>

Counterpoint, a newly determined practice in this time was integrated in *madrigals*, as well as “familiar style”, resembling much of the style of motets and *frottola*.<sup>16</sup> *Madrigals* were written for three to twelve parts (one person independent to a part). Text painting was the focus of madrigals of this time, used to emphasize emotion in the poetry.

The famed Italian *opera* debuted in the late sixteenth century. While looking at early operas, it’s important not to have any preconceived expectations about what opera should be in comparison to today.<sup>17</sup> Early operas were more focused on the music rather than the drama, and have advanced in every aspect since then. The reason for this genre’s success is due to the way it expresses various forms of art at the same time.<sup>18</sup> It brought music to life on the stage with integrated drama elements as well as still life art with scenic elements their productions. This gave a new purpose and more defined meaning to this type of music.

## Styles of France

The ever popular french *chanson* was another style of music that is a keystone in the development of music in the sixteenth century<sup>19</sup>. *Chansons* came about with the rise of the printing press, as music began to be printed and circulated into the general public in a much more expendable way. In French-speaking countries the word “chanson” was used “to describe any

---

<sup>15</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 175.

<sup>16</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 175.

<sup>17</sup> Abraham, *New Oxford Dictionary*, 821.

<sup>18</sup> Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth Century Venice, The Creation of a Genre*, (University of California Press, 1991), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 183.

kind of monodic or polyphonic song composed on a vernacular text.”<sup>20</sup> They were strictly written in French and almost exclusively by composers who lived in or near Paris. In the first fifty years after the *chanson*'s birth, close to 2,000 of these songs were published.<sup>21</sup> Following the commonly practiced *formes fixes* of courtly poetry at first, these works were polyphonic and had clear cadential schemes, but would eventually abandon *formes fixes* stressing more of equal importance on in the polyphonic lines. These works are mostly in duple meter and follow strong rhythmic and featured a light texture.<sup>22</sup> *Chansons* were set syllabically for four voices. The melody is mostly found in the highest voice, however, in some instances *chansons* exhibit short instances of imitation. Comparatively to the *motets* of the time, these pieces were always livelier and kept a much more up-beat tempo.<sup>23</sup> Nearly all of the composers who produced chansons in this time also composed masses and motets. By the late sixteenth century, due to the widespread popularity of this style, “expressive madrigalian devices infiltrated chanson” by way of modern versatile composers of that time. French *chansons* “did not submit to any arbitrary form”, which allowed strict details to focus more on circumstantial occurrences.<sup>24</sup> The influence of the *chanson* would eventually spread to Italy and make way for the *symphony da chiesa*.<sup>25</sup>

Other known types of French music of the time includes the *voix de ville*, *air de cour* and *musique mesurée*. In the mid-sixteenth century the *voix de ville* (city voice) arose as a new type of poetry which featured “short stanzas that are set strophically to music in a homophonic chordal style with the melody in the top voice.”<sup>26</sup> These pieces were written in regular notation

---

<sup>20</sup> Abraham, *New Oxford Dictionary*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 183.

<sup>22</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 184.

<sup>23</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 184.

<sup>24</sup> Abraham, *New Oxford Dictionary*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Abraham, *New Oxford Dictionary*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 185.

for a single vocal part and an accompaniment, often played on the lute (which gave way to the french tradition of *lute song*) which would read tablature.<sup>27</sup> *Air de cour*, commonly known as just “air”, were simple pieces written for four or five voices unaccompanied or a solo voice with a instrumental accompaniment to fill in the chordal structure. In the late fifteenth century, a group of poets attempted to transcribe a Greek and Latin verse into the french language, these were known as *versev mesurée*. *Musique mesurée* were the setting where *verse mesurée* was applied to written and performed music, they were typically homophonic and predominantly homorhythmic in order to focus on the clarity of the words.<sup>28</sup> This style of music prohibited true expression by setting to constricting guidelines with the written music, and thus, was short lived.

## Styles of England

While madrigals were a prominent part of Italian music, english composers also began to create their own style of *english madrigals* in the last two decades of the sixteenth century. *Italian madrigals* were circulated in England around this time, some even in english translation.<sup>29</sup> Much of the influence came from an early publication of *Musica transalpina*, a collection of 57 *Italian madrigals* with translated english texts. Many English composers began mirroring the madrigal style as seen in those pieces.<sup>30</sup> Most of the english counterparts were intended to be performed as unaccompanied works, and weren't much less zealous than those in Italy.

*Consort songs* were a type of music that purely originated in England, the popularity of this style lasted from the late sixteenth century up to the middle of the seventeenth. These were

---

<sup>27</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 185.

<sup>28</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 186.

<sup>29</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 186.

<sup>30</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 186.

vocal works featuring “one or more solo voices with [an] instrumental accompaniment.”<sup>31</sup>

*Consort songs* drew no influence from any other type of music and stole the attention of major english composers away from the madrigal. Rather than lute and vocal, viol and vocals were often scored for these pieces, with the occasional chorus.<sup>32</sup> Many english composers and their audiences began focussing on these new and unique styles of music. Through use of Renaissance techniques of imitation, antiphonal and homophonic, writings styles of the english eventually led to more florid melodies and solid foundations of cantus firmus.<sup>33</sup>

## Sixteenth Century Style Comparison

Almost all secular polyphony of this time, regardless of nationality, is related in content matter. The church controlled almost all public works up to this point in history, the sixteenth century being the first time in history mass amount of music have been shared on large-scale levels that were connected. This sudden freedom rang in the ears of people worldwide and gave them a voice they hadn't had before (by way of printing press), and a new insight to life. Just like the satirical *villanelles* of Italian music, and some french *chansons*, these were both new types of works that gave a different kind of view on news areas of societies. Secular music of this time was all about connecting the the humanistic side of life, rather than the spiritual side. The Italian, French and English all focused on completely new materials with their polyphonic secular works. Straying as far away from the church as they could get. “*Chanson*” in a sense of the word literally means “new music”, the Italian “city voice” that was previously discussed aims

---

<sup>31</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 187.

<sup>32</sup> Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 187.

<sup>33</sup> Hughes and Abraham, *New Oxford Dictionary, Volume III*, (Oxford University Press, 1960) 304.

at an earthly setting for music, and the english consorts were brand new and raw to the composers. These are all similar in the way they approached new musical art forms. New music ranged from courtly love songs, to old non liturgical Greek texts that were translated to english. While subject matter isn't exactly parallel, across the board we notice different types of music that quickly branch out and flourish away from the church. That quality of diversity is in common among each nationality and is similar because they each expand on some occurrence of life events and experiences rather than prayers to God.

Looking at strictly the theoretical side of the music, there are many elements that composers hundreds of miles away were doing in common and possibly had no idea or didn't exactly intend for. All three featured some form of strophic texts, as well as instances of homorhythmic melodies in various voices at once. *Madrigals*, and *chansons* are examples of this. The Lute was a common instrument of choice typically in both scored in pieces in France and England. In instances for accompanying vocal music often times a solo or small group of four or less voices or less, the Lute was used by French and English Composers. As the term "polyphonic" would suggest, many of these pieces consisted of many vocal parts and still spotlight the vocal parts as the main focal point of the music, all styles are still very vocal dominated.

## **Conclusion**

The sixteenth century was a huge turning point in civilizations across the civilized world. With breakthroughs in printing, and music theory advancements new music flowed from composers of the time. So much going on surely provided ample material for new music.

Polyphonic music brought with it many new practices for composers of the time such as cantus firmus, more elaborate and effective text painting as well as more intricate instrumental integration into common music. While each style of music has a large quantity of similarities they each follow their own record of uniqueness.

## References:

Gerald Abraham, *New Oxford Dictionary Vol. IV*, (Oxford University Press, 1968).

Howard Mayer Brown, *Music in the Renaissance*, (Prentice-Hall Inc. 1976).

Hughes and Abraham, *New Oxford Dictionary, Vol. III*, (Oxford University Press, 1960).

Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth Century Venice, The Creation of a Genre*, (University of California Press, 1991).