

Guillaume Dufay and the World of the Bees

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Rec date: May 18, 2016; Acc date: Jul 30, 2016; Pub date: Aug 02, 2016

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Short Communication

It may surprise to find the name of Guillaume Dufay, who was a graduate in canon law, connected with the world of the bees. Yet, as will be argued below, already early in his life bees may have awakened the composer's interest. When the composer died on 27 November 1474, the report of the executor of his will consisted of no less than sixty-five pages, containing among other things a list of books which reflects that he was "a man learned in classical literature, theology, canon law, hagiography, and contemporary vernacular verse."

Among his books is listed the *Legenda aurea*, a famous collection of legends as, for example, the story of St. Ambrose and the bees. It is this legend that has helped me to discover the origin of 'faux-bourdon', a much debated compositional technique used in the fifteenth century.

In the 1420's, like so many of his compatriots, Dufay moved to Italy, where he for some time was in the service of the Malatesta in Pesaro and Rimini. In the same period, he may have studied at the University of Bologna.

The Missa Sancti Jacobi

Among his earliest settings of the Mass is the *Missa Sancti Jacobi*, composed sometime between 1426 and 1430, and probably written for the church of S. Giacomo Maggiore at Bologna. This plenary cycle, transmitted in Ms. Q 15 of the Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica at Bologna, is the earliest composition to explain the term 'faux-bourdon'. Comprising besides the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus dei also four movements setting the Proper chants for the feast of St. James the Greater, it concludes with the following Communion antiphon:

- Vos qui secuti estis me, sedebitis super sedes, iudicantes duodecim tribus Israel. [Liber Usualis (1951), p. 1570: Sancti Jacobi Apostoli] (You that have followed me shall sit upon seats, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. - after Matth. 19:28)

While all of the preceding movements of the Mass are set for four voices, this time only the Superius and Tenor voices are notated, bearing in the latter part the inscription 'faux bourdon', and underneath the Superius the Latin direction 'Si trium queras / a summo tolle figuras / Et simul incipito / dyatessaron insubeundo (If you desire a three-voice piece, take the notes from the top (voice) and begin simultaneously, a fourth lower).

In other words, the Mass ends in three-voices only, as it were with an anticlimax. However, the term 'faux bourdon' in the Tenor seems to hide the explanation for this procedure, and has led in the past to profound discussions from the part of music historians.

The Term 'Faux-Bourdon'

Differing explanations have been offered of the meaning of the term 'faux bourdon' or 'au(x) faux bourdon', as it is found in its earliest source, the Ms. Bologna Q15. The explanations vary from 'false staff' as an allusion to St James's bourdon or 'false support' (of the unwritten contratenor for the discantus) to a low voice part or the ghostly 'fictus bardunus', produced by the strong resultant tones from the consecutive fourths. Ernest Trumble rightly remarks that since the term 'faux-bourdon' is not found in Latin, its original concept probably "refers to something outside the body of classical and musical doctrine of Dufay and his circle".

As for the purely technical aspects of faux-bourdon it should be noted that it actually is "a technique of either improvised singing or shorthand notation", utilized by musicians in the fifteenth century and occurring in manuscripts from about 1425 to about 1510. Over 170 compositions are preserved with the instruction 'faux-bourdon'. They are notated as two-part pieces with the *cantus prius factus* normally in the top voice, but they are meant to be performed in three parts. In its simplest form, a faux-bourdon piece results in a series of parallel sixth chords. Its style has fittingly been described as "essentially monotonous", and the technique was primarily a simple procedure to enhance the sonority of liturgical music, without making significant demands of the singers' capacities. In other words, since faux-bourdon offered very little possibility of development, one may wonder why Dufay decided to conclude his cycle with such a small and simple piece. In order to find an explanation for this, we have to enter into the domain of entomology.

Faux-Bourdon and the Bee

More than a half century ago, the German philologist Hermann Flasdieck pointed out that from the fourteenth century onward one of the meanings of the word 'bourdon' was 'drone bass'. Before the term 'faux-bourdon' originated in the context of musical composition, it would have meant, according to Flasdieck, 'a false drone bass'. Its normal meaning, however, was 'drone' (male bee)! He also notes that the adjective *faux* in connection with *bourdon* probably refers to the redundancy of the drones after the queen has been fertilized. (For this reason drones are eliminated in the autumn by the workers.)

Drones, male bees, are characterised in two ways. In the first place, they are larger than the workers (the undeveloped females), and they produce, when flying, a strong, buzzing noise. In the past, this noise must have led to the musical term 'drone' (Fr. *bourdon*), which was given to a sustained droning sound. "Instrumentally produced drones generally accompany melodies played on the same instrument ... and are usually tuned to the keynote of the melodies and often to its 5th also". The drone occurs in primitive music, but its origins are uncertain. The second remarkable feature is that in early summer the drones fly out of the hive together with the new young queen, when

she makes her bride's flight. This flight is really an endurance test for the drones, who try to follow their queen as well as they can. Also in this respect, the term 'faux-bourdon' fits the musical technique perfectly, and may well us bring closer to the answer on the question why Dufay introduced the term and the technique at the end of his Mass cycle.

The Allegory of the Idea of 'Follow Me'

As we have seen above, the text of the Communion is borrowed from chapter 19 in the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus teaches about matrimony and divorce, and about perfect living in general. To the rich young man he said: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come follow me" (Matth. 19:21). It is important to remember that Christ gives the admonition to the young man in the presence of his disciples. One of them is the apostle James the Greater, to whom the Mass is dedicated. In Matthew 20:20-21, the mother of James and John comes to make a request to Christ: "Say that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left, in thy kingdom." As the first apostle to die for the Christian faith -- he is the only one whose martyrdom is recorded in the New Testament (Acts 12:2) -- James followed Jesus unconditionally.

In this connection it seems to me of the utmost interest, that in the Middle Ages the apostles were compared with bees. In Ms. 151, fol. 107v, of the Stiftsbibliothek in Lilienfeld, which dates from the mid-fourteenth century, there is a representation of Christ sending out Apostles, under which bees are depicted, surrounding the queen bee. Christ has in his right hand a scroll with an inscription from Matthew 28:18 -- "Data est mihi omnis potestas in celo et terra." (All power is given to me in heaven and in earth.) These words precede Christ's instruction: "Going therefore, teach ye all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." The text occurs in the Gospel of Easter Friday. Although representations of this bee allegory are scarce, medieval Christian writings provide more examples. Christian bee symbolism goes back to ancient times, when it was customary to connect poets with bees, as they did, for instance, with Sophocles, Homer, Horace, and Vergil.

St Ambrose and the Culture of the Bees

The patron of bee culture is St Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (374-397), to whom tradition has assigned "a musical significance exceeding that of any other early Christian leader." He was particularly noted for having introduced into the Latin church antiphonal singing and hymns, two elements in music which are markedly represented in Dufay's faux-bourdon repertoire. No less than eight hymns set by Dufay have been attributed to Ambrose. Ambrose's patronage of bee culture has its origin in the legend that a swarm of bees had alighted on his mouth as he lay in the cradle. The miraculous event, which is connected with Ambrose's eloquence as an early-Christian preacher, is related in the *Legenda aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine (ca. 1229-1298) [1]. The *Golden Legend* is a collection of saints' lives and accounts of events in the lives of Christ and Mary that became immensely popular and was translated into all Western European languages. Also Dufay owned a copy of it! Undoubtedly, the composer was interested in hagiography, and may have known that in his *Hexaemeron* ("On the Six Days of Creation"), St Ambrose devoted a chapter to the bee.

Drawing on the fourth book of Vergil's *Georgics*, Ambrose defended by erudite philosophical allegory the spiritual meaning of the praise of the bee by referring to Proverbs in the Old Testament: "merito quasi bonam operariam Scriptura apem praedicat dicens: Vade ad apem, et vide quomodo operaria est. Operationem quoque quam venerabilem mercatur, cujus laborem reges et mediocres ad salutem sumunt. Appetibilis enim est omnibus et clara [cf. Prov. 6:6-8]. Audis quid dicit propheta? Mittit utique te ut apiculae illius sequaris exemplum, imiteris operationem." (Scripture rightly commends the bee as a good worker: 'Behold the bee, see how busy she is, how admirable in her industry, the results of whose labors are serviceable to kings and commoners and are sought after by all men.' Do you hear what the Prophet says? He enjoins on you to follow the example of that tiny bee and to imitate her work). The quotation makes clear that Ambrose, while imitating the analogy of the ant in Proverbs, recommends the community of the bees to the attention of his readers as an example that should be followed, and reveals at the same time the analogy between the society of the bees and the Church.

Animal allegory played a central role in medieval bestiaries, a literary genre based on the description of certain qualities of animals, which were often used as a metaphor to depict virtues or vices. The tradition to use allegories of animals in Christian religious and moral instruction partly finds its basis in Aristotle's concept of animal sagacity, but the numerous manuscripts of medieval bestiaries are ultimately derived from the *Physiologus* ("Naturalist"), a Greek work from the second century AD. In the Middle Ages, the *Physiologus* was widely disseminated throughout the Christian world. Bestiaries were especially popular in France and the Low Countries. Vincent of Beauvais, Thomas of Cantimpré and Bartholomew the Englishman belong to the most famous compilers. As one of the characteristic features of the bee it is mentioned that the commoners follow the 'king' with marvellous obedience. In Christian thought, the 'king' was seen as Christ.

Bishop Ambrose's allegory of the society of the bees and the Church was further elaborated by Thomas de Cantimpré (1201-1263). Before he settled as a Dominican friar in Louvain, Thomas lived fifteen years in the Augustine abbey of Cantimpré, near Cambrai. In his *Bonum universale de apibus*, a manual that instructs the ecclesiastical leader how to reach the state of perfection, Thomas compares the life of the bees with the community of the Church, the hive being the Church. The leader's main task is the *imitatio Christi*. While referring to passages in the Holy Scriptures like Matthew 19, from which Dufay's Communion text derives, Thomas names the apostles Peter and Paul as models. The *Bonum universale* is considered to be one of the most influential books of allegorical examples of the late Middle Ages. King Charles V (1337/1364-1380), who founded a magnificent library, had a French translation made of it. Soon afterward, Dutch and German translations also appeared. In view of the fact that the abbey of Cantimpré was so near to Cambrai, where Guillaume Dufay served as a choirboy at the cathedral from 1409 until 1414, it seems plausible that the young chorister visited the famous place, and became acquainted with the life of Thomas and with the contents of his most popular treatise.

It may indeed surprise people in our days to see that the allegory of the bee seems to emerge again in liturgical music in the fifteenth century. However, in the early and later Middle Ages animals were currently used by man in art and literature to symbolize not only his social and political, but also his religious life. An example of bee allegory can be found in Roman liturgy of that time. Once a year, on

Holy Saturday, the Exsultet was sung during the solemn Easter Vigil. This text, which has its origin in the sixth century, "treats the essential themes [of Easter] in lyrical vein" and, while celebrating the purity of the candle's wax, mentions the work of the bees. This passage too draws on the Georgics of Vergil and "recalls the literary habits of St Ambrose". Like the artists who decorated the Exultet Rolls with bees gathering honey, musicians who had been ordained as priests, as was the case with Dufay, must have been familiar with this attitude.

The last question to be answered is, why the literal meaning of the French word faux bourdon never before has been connected with the musical term. I think there are two reasons for this. In the first place, no fifteenth-century theorist dealing with faux-bourdon as a musical phenomenon gives an explanation of the term. Only Adam von Fulda, in his *De musica* from 1490, connects its "awkward" sound with the invention of the term 'faulx bordon'. But can we expect a German theorist to have known the literal meaning of the word faux bourdon? Secondly, the insight that the musical term has probably been derived from the entomological meaning of the word faux bourdon can only be reached after one has become conscious that the musical style does conceal an extra-musical meaning. Until now, however, no musicologist has ever acknowledged the fact that faux-bourdon in Dufay's Communion antiphon *Vos qui secuti estis me* can only be understood as a climax in his Mass if it indeed means more than a series of sixth chords. Finally, the sole musicologist discussing faux-bourdon who may have been aware of the normal meaning of the word faux bourdon is Suzanne Clercx. She concentrated, however, on the question in which country Dufay's first faux-bourdon composition

originated and came to the conclusion that Dufay invented both term and technique in Italy.

In medieval etymology, it was generally accepted that terms in particular branches of knowledge were derived from words used in the realm of natural history. The writings by Isidore of Seville -- they comprise, among other things, the *Etymologiae*, *De natura rerum*, and the *Allegoriae* -- which "influenced a broad range of writers and thinkers throughout the Middle Ages", testify to this habit. The musical term 'bourdon', indicating a drone or pedal point, a musical instrument or part of an instrument, is certainly an example of it. As a designation of low organ pipes 'bourdon' occurs as early as 1382 in Rouen. And that this term indeed was inspired by the insect of the same name is proven by the equivalents *hommel* in Dutch and *Hummel* in German. Therefore I believe, that, *mutatis mutandis*, the onomatopoeical character of the sound of faux-bourdon and the analogy described above are two mutually reinforcing arguments in favour of my thesis.

*For an extensive version of the present article, with musical examples and a discussion of several other works by Dufay in which the technique of faux-bourdon has been applied, see my *Symbolic Scores, Studies in the Music of the Renaissance* (Leiden – New York – Köln 1994), pp. 17-43.

References

1. De Voragine J (1850) *Jacobi a Voragine Legenda aurea vulgo Historia lombardica dicta*. Open Library pp: 957.