



## Dufay in Italy

Sunday 11 September 5:30 pm

### Notes on "Dufay in Italy"

by Björn Schmelzer

These are thoughts that emerge while preparing and rehearsing a selection of pieces by the Franco-Flemish composer Guillaume Dufay. With *graindelavoix*, we had never profoundly worked before on his oeuvre. Even if you think you know a repertoire, it's a different feeling and approach when diving into concrete music: it's a work of negotiation, of touching, of tactility, of finding ways to ask the music what it exactly wants from you as a performer. And in an indirect way, it's asking the composer himself these questions...

Once the French art historian Daniel Arasse called artworks: works that think in their own right, that have a thinking logic. This reminds me of what Mary Carruthers called once the *machina memorialis*: works of art, but also musical pieces are little machines with an inner, intrinsic logic, that should be expressed, articulated by performers. Medieval theologians called this the work of *exegesis*. It's a creative job: it's half of the work. The musical notation is like a magical diagram. The performer should bring this diagram into action, into movement. Just reading the score and executing in a literal, digital way, is doing the composer no justice, on the contrary. It's like a disgrace. Performing this music is also showing that you understood it and how you understood it: it's articulating not just mere organized sounds, but the ideas, the thinking that is constructed with the sounds. It's articulating sounds as if they were movements and gestures: some of them we need to sharpen by adding a contour, others we need to blur together into a colorist *sfumato*. Ornamenting a phrase is the opposite of embellishment. On the contrary, it is completely functional and is crucial to shape a musical structure, to give it a form, to bring it into the right pulse, to be able to stretch the phrases in such a way that they become graspable, almost visible. This element of visibility triggers me for a long time in the works of Dufay. No composer seems to be more close to the visual and artistic developments and inventions of his time. It's sure that Dufay knew very well Brunelleschi and Leon Alberti, the writer of the *De Pictura* treatise: both are responsible for the introduction of the linear perspective in western culture. Dufay and Alberti were both engaged in the same social status by the Papal Court in exile in Florence in the 30's of the 15th century. Unfortunately we don't know anything concrete about their relationship. We have no correspondence and no anecdotes...It's hard to talk about 'real' influence in this way, we will never be able to prove it...we only could shape a sort '*espace de résonance*' as André Chastel called it.

Let's think of some ingredients for these potential '*espaces de résonance*'.

Exactly in the same time as Dufay working in Florence for the papal court but also for the city authorities, Donatello and Della Robbia were active there. The cathedral was in full construction. Everybody knows the story of the consecration of Florence cathedral, constructed by Brunelleschi, on the 25th March 1436 for which occasion Dufay wrote one of his most known motets *Nuper rosarum flores*. This is an example that musicologists like because it confirms their idea of medieval music as architecture, and architecture as music in stone. Medieval music is a question of mathematics, geometry, proportions, abstraction. Ok, that's fine. But let us try to make other connections, which are of the more molecular level. The level of warm bodies, of energy flows that continue in time and are called 'survivals'. The level on which it is still possible and a necessity "to talk with the dead" as Stephen Greenblatt would say. Let's go back to Donatello and Della Robbia, and leave the perfect, stratified spaces of Alberti and Brunelleschi for a moment on the side. I have been long time fascinated by the *cantorie* both sculptors made for both sides of the choir of the Florence Duomo, exactly around the same time of the cathedral inauguration, the

time Dufay worked in Florence too. A *cantoria* is a balcony on which the singers stand while they do their job, namely singing the service in an Italian church. These balconies were mostly on the north or south side of the choir where the service was kept. In the 18th century the music chapel became so big, with instruments etc, that new *cantorie* had to be installed. They didn't destroy the old ones, but put them in the cathedral museum where you can still see them. It was on these balconies that Dufay and his colleagues were standing while singing their motets. The people attending the services, liturgical, para-liturgical or even public and political events, could see the singers performing on these balconies: or better, they heard them singing and at the same time watched these incredible *cantorie*, highly decorated with specifically chosen sculptors and bas-reliefs. Although we don't know much about the singers, we have a list of their names. Listing them is almost seeing them standing next to each other on a large polyphonic choirbook: Guillaume Dufay, Gilles Flannel called L'Enfant, Jehan de la Croix called Monami, Jacques Ragot, Guillaume Le Métayer called Malbecque, Richard Herbare, Jehan Marsille, Alfonso Garcia de Zamora, Enrico Silvestri da Fondi and André Francmont: most Franco-Flemish guys, a Spanish and finally an Italian singer. The upper part of their singing bodies, their torso's dressed in liturgical garments, would have been visible, but downwards the visual was dominated by the scenes that embellished the *cantoria*. Della Robbia sculpted the famous young singers, who would probably have been of inspiration for the singing angels of Van Eyck. They are beautiful and seductive. Most of the sculpture however, and certainly the one on Donatello's *cantoria*, represents dancing little kids, putti, holding each others hands while singing and dancing a chorea. Donatello represents them in wild, whirling movements, holding hands high in the air or throwing girdles made of leaves. These are the visual elements that accompanied the performed motets of Dufay. Was it the music that blowed animation, wind, movement in the marble bas reliefs and sculptures? Or is the representation of dancing angels and children a visualization of the sonorous sensation these new compositions of Dufay made upon the Florentine public? Or do they share both the '*enargeia*' so necessary to bring these works of art and devotion into resonance?

The Dufay we are trying to revive is not the one of the big mathematical spaces, the overall structure and synthetic composition, but the one of inner motion and articulated emotion. It's the Dufay that performs with his feet on an amazing balcony which is completely part of the total experience of this kind of repertoire. Even if we don't see these *cantorie* in Royaumont we should make them audible. We should make Dufay visible again too. We should again articulate all the dancing in his music, and it's really everywhere, in all his music. Let's listen to the *amen* in the Sebastian-motet: it's a traditional (*p*)*neuma*, also known as *jubilatio*, a melismatic finalization found also in a lot plainsong antiphons and responses; but at the same time it's a dance, a *chorea*, reviving the old pagan dances of antiquity. Dufay uses a lot the proportion sign for *tempus perfectum diminutum*, the so called cut circle  $\circ$ , to make clear this idea of musical *chorea*-style. There is a lot of discussion in musicology what the exact meaning is of this sign. Is it just a sign of doing the part double as fast? Or should we think of another pulsation, a dancing tactus? Also other proportion changes in the motets, where the pulse feels suddenly divided in two or three parts, starts from a basic principle of groove: this is applied, affective mathematics in its most pure expression, finding it's ultimate articulation in the antique dynamics of the physical body.

How near Dufay is to the Italian painters of his time shows his approach to the christian *mystery of Incarnation* described in many texts of the motets he composed. The case of Fra Angelico is celebrous: to paint the story of the *Annunciation* for example, the painter could easily paint a Virgin in a gallery and the angel Gabriel to the other side, but how to paint the crucial aspect of their meeting, the act of miraculous conception, known as the *conceptio per aurem*, that was the real subject of the painting: how to make the invisible visible, how to visualize what can not be seen, so that at least it could be grasped in a devotional practice. Both French art historians Arasse and Didi-Huberman point at the use of marble painting: the *Figura* that figures the unrepresentable is a disfiguration; secondly the invention of perspective made it possible to represent the invisible as that what falls out of the perspective. The daily order, the civil and the sacred found in perspective drawing the exegetical point of convergence *par excellence*.

Should we understand one of the most beautiful and at the same time most mysterious and enigmatic motets of Dufay in this way?

All musicologists agree: although *Gaude Virgo mater Christi* is in both sources delivered with four voices, the contratenor part must be a fraud, an addition, something not original, a disturbance to the original three parts Dufay must have composed himself. But the strange thing is: when you perform this motet with three voices, the strange *sfumato*-passages are not away, dissonances are plenty, the climate is maybe even more ethereal....

So what if a four-voice *Gaude Virgo* is Dufay's answer to the problem of making perceptible that what cannot be perceived? His solution to this problem reminds strongly of Fra Angelico.

Paintings are thinking machines and so are musical pieces. They are conceptual but at the same time they are not asking for much brains to be perceived. Their conceptual shape is put into a musical diagram: it's the performer and the performance which make its concept affectively perceptible. The motets of Dufay are only theological in this way: they make mysteries which can not only be explained as dogma's by scholastic theologians, completely immanent, palpable, tactile, sensitive. The act of singing and performing this motets is making the impossible, the paradox and the mystery for a moment as direct and pre-conscious as a sensation can be. How more relevant can music be today?

Bjorn Schmelzer

Aucun compositeur ne semble plus proche des arts visuels, des développements artistiques et des inventions de son temps que Guillaume Dufay. Ce dernier connaissait Brunelleschi et Leon Alberti qui ont introduit la perspective en peinture. Au sein de la cour papale en exil à Florence dans les années 1430, Dufay et Alberti étaient engagés sous le même statut. En l'état, l'histoire ne permet pas d'en dire plus sur leur relation. Nous ne pouvons que nous figurer un « *espace de résonance* » dont parle André Chastel.

Essayons de réfléchir plutôt aux ingrédients de ce possible « *espace de résonance* ».

Exactement au même moment, alors que Dufay était embauché par la ville et par la chapelle papale, les sculpteurs Donatello et Luca Della Robbia travaillaient également à Florence. L'épisode célèbre de la consécration de la cathédrale nouvellement édifée et inaugurée le 25 mars 1436 pour laquelle Dufay composa le motet *Nuper rosarum flores* montre à quel point la musicologie considère la musique médiévale comme architecture et l'architecture comme de la musique « en pierres ». Certes, la musique médiévale touche aux mathématiques, à la géométrie, aux proportions et à l'abstraction. Mais essayons de trouver aujourd'hui d'autres connexions qui agiraient à un niveau plus moléculaire : le niveau des corps chauds, celui des flux d'énergie qui transcendent les époques et qui sont appelés des « survivances ». Mais aussi, le niveau par lequel il est possible et nécessaire de « dialoguer avec le mort », comme le souligne Stephen Greenblatt.

En ce qui concerne Donatello et Della Robbia, j'ai longtemps été fasciné par leurs sculptures qui animent les « *cantorie* » situées des deux côtés du chœur du Dôme de Florence. Une « *cantoria* » est un balcon sur lequel les chanteurs sont debout pour faire leur travail, à savoir chanter pour le service liturgique, para-liturgique ou pour des événements politiques ou publics. Au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, les effectifs de la chapelle musicale devinrent tellement volumineux que de nouvelles « *cantorie* » durent être installées. Celles de Donatello et Della Robbia ne furent pas détruites mais déplacées dans le musée de la cathédrale. C'est depuis ces balcons que les chanteurs faisaient entendre les motets de Dufay. Pendant cette écoute, l'assemblée qui les regardait, scrutait également les motifs des sculptures et des bas-reliefs. Même si nous ne savons rien des chanteurs, nous connaissons cependant leurs noms. Les lire nous donne l'impression de les voir côte à côte : Guillaume Dufay, Gilles Flannel (surnommé « L'Enfant »), Jehan de la Croix (appelé « Monami »), Jacques Ragot, Guillaume Le Métayer (connu sous le nom de « Malbecque »), Richard Herbare, Jehan Marsille, Alfonso Garcia de Zamora, Enrico

Silvestri da Fondi et André Francmont. En dehors d'un Italien et d'un Espagnol, la plupart sont franco-flamands. Della Robbia a sculpté ces jeunes chanteurs et il est probable que cela ait également inspiré les anges chanteurs et musiciens de Van Eyck. En revanche, sur la « *cantoria* » de Donatello, figurent des enfants, des *putti*, qui dansent et se tiennent par la main en agitant des

guirlandes de feuilles. Ce sont ces éléments visuels qui accompagnaient l'interprétation des motets de Dufay. Était-ce la musique qui exhalait les mouvements de cette chorégraphie sculptée dans le marbre blanc des « *cantorie* » ? Est-ce que ces enfants et angelots chantants et dansants étaient une visualisation de la sensation sonore provoquée par ces nouvelles compositions de Dufay sur le public florentin ? Enfin, peut-on imaginer simplement que musique et sculpture partagent à ce point cette « *energeia* » nécessaire pour créer l'espace de « résonance » propre à ces œuvres d'art et de dévotion ?

Le Dufay que nous essayons de faire vivre avec Graindelavoix n'est pas celui des grands espaces mathématiques ni de la structure globale mais celui du geste intime et de l'émotion articulée. Il s'agit du Dufay chantant qui a ses pieds sur ces incroyables « *cantorie* », ce qui fait partie de l'expérience totale pour ce répertoire. En dépit du fait que ces balcons ne sont pas présents à Royaumont, il nous revient de les rendre sensibles, audibles, par le biais notamment de la danse, paramètre omniprésent dans tous les motets de Dufay.

Peinture, sculpture et motets de Dufay sont des machines à penser mais qui, tout en étant conceptuelles, ne demandent pas non plus d'avoir beaucoup d'esprit pour être perçues. Leur forme conceptuelle se trouve dans la partition, le diagramme musical. C'est alors aux interprètes et à l'interprétation de rendre ce concept perceptible d'un point de vue affectif. Ainsi, les motets de Dufay ne sont théologiques que dans cette dynamique. Ils créent des mystères totalement immanents, palpables, tactiles, sensibles, qui ne peuvent pas être expliqués comme un dogme par les théologiens. Pour ces motets, l'art du chant et de la performance est de rendre, pour le temps d'un moment, ce qui semble impossible, paradoxal ou mystérieux aussi spontané que la sensation elle-même, comme rendue à son stade pré-conscient. Que peut-on imaginer de plus approprié et de plus fort pour la musique aujourd'hui ?

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