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*The New  
Oxford History of  
Music*

**IV**

**THE AGE OF HUMANISM**

**1540-1630**



# THE AGE OF HUMANISM

1540-1630

EDITED BY  
GERALD ABRAHAM

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

THE present work is designed to replace the *Oxford History of Music*, first published in six volumes under the general editorship of Sir Henry Hadow between 1901 and 1905. Five authors contributed to that ambitious publication—the first of its kind to appear in English. The first two volumes, dealing with the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century, were the work of H. E. Wooldridge. In the third Sir Hubert Parry examined the music of the seventeenth century. The fourth, by J. A. Fuller Maitland, was devoted to the age of Bach and Handel; the fifth, by Hadow himself, to the period bounded by C. P. E. Bach and Schubert. In the final volume Edward Dannreuther discussed the Romantic period, with which, in the editor's words, it was 'thought advisable to stop'. The importance of the work—particularly of the first two volumes—was widely recognized, and it became an indispensable part of a musician's library. The scheme was further extended in the new edition issued under the editorship of Sir Percy Buck between 1929 and 1938. An introductory volume, the work of several hands, was designed to supplement the story of music in the ancient world and the Middle Ages. New material, including two complete chapters, was added to volumes i and ii, while the third volume was reissued with minor corrections and a number of supplementary notes by Edward J. Dent. The history was also brought nearer to the twentieth century by the addition of a seventh volume, by H. C. Colles, entitled *Symphony and Drama, 1850–1900*.

Revision of an historical work is always difficult. If it is to be fully effective, it may well involve changes so comprehensive that very little of the original remains. Such radical revision was not the purpose of the second edition of the *Oxford History of Music*. To have attempted it in a third edition would have been impossible. During the first half of the present century an enormous amount of detailed work has been done on every period covered by the original volumes. New materials have been discovered, new relationships revealed, new interpretations made possible. Perhaps the most valuable achievement has been the publication in reliable modern editions of a mass of music which was previously available only in manuscript or in rare printed copies. These developments have immeasurably increased the historian's opportunities, but they have also added heavily to his responsibilities. To attempt a detailed survey of the whole history of

music is no longer within the power of a single writer. It may even be doubted whether the burden can be adequately shouldered by a team of five.

The *New Oxford History of Music* is therefore not a revision of the older work, nor is it the product of a small group of writers. It has been planned as an entirely new survey of music from the earliest times down to comparatively recent years, including not only the achievements of the Western world but also the contributions made by eastern civilizations and primitive societies. The examination of this immense field is the work of a large number of contributors, British and foreign. The attempt has been made to achieve uniformity without any loss of individuality. If this attempt has been successful, the result is due largely to the patience and co-operation shown by the contributors themselves. Overlapping has to some extent been avoided by the use of frequent cross-references; but we have not thought it proper to prevent different authors from expressing different views about the same subject, where it could legitimately be regarded as falling into more than one category.

The scope of the work is sufficiently indicated by the titles of the several volumes. Our object throughout has been to present music, not as an isolated phenomenon or the work of a few outstanding composers, but as an art developing in constant association with every form of human culture and activity. The biographies of individuals are therefore merely incidental to the main plan of the history, and those who want detailed information of this kind must seek it elsewhere. No hard and fast system of division into chapters has been attempted. The treatment is sometimes by forms, sometimes by periods, sometimes also by countries, according to the importance which one element or another may assume. The division into volumes has to some extent been determined by practical considerations; but pains have been taken to ensure that the breaks occur at points which are logically and historically justifiable. The result may be that the work of a single composer who lived to a ripe age is divided between two volumes. The later operas of Monteverdi, for example, belong to the history of Venetian opera and hence find their natural place in volume v, not with the discussion of his earlier operas to be found in volume iv. On the other hand, we have not insisted on a rigid chronological division where the result would be illogical or confusing. If a subject finds its natural conclusion some ten years after the date assigned for the end of a period, it is obviously preferable to complete it within the limits of one volume rather than to

allow it to overflow into a second. An exception to the general scheme of continuous chronology is to be found in volumes v and vi, which deal with different aspects of the same period and so are complementary to each other.

The history as a whole is intended to be useful to the professed student of music, for whom the documentation of sources and the bibliographies are particularly designed. But the growing interest in the music of all periods shown by music-lovers in general has encouraged us to bear their interests also in mind. It is inevitable that a work of this kind should employ a large number of technical terms and deal with highly specialized matters. We have, however, tried to ensure that the technical terms are intelligible to the ordinary reader and that what is specialized is not necessarily wrapped in obscurity. Finally, since music must be heard to be fully appreciated, we have given references throughout to the records issued by His Master's Voice (R.C.A. Victor) under the general title *The History of Music in Sound*. These records are collected in a series numbered to correspond with the volumes of the present work, and have been designed to be used with it.

J. A. WESTRUP  
GERALD ABRAHAM  
ANSELM HUGHES  
EGON WELLESZ  
MARTIN COOPER

## INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME IV

THE title of the present volume of the *New Oxford History of Music* has already been explained in the Handbook to the accompanying volume of gramophone records in *The History of Music in Sound*: 'It was mainly during this period that music changed its orientation from the divine to the human. There had been plenty of secular music before . . . but the secular forms had been subordinate forms. Throughout the period covered by the present volume more and more importance is assumed by secular vocal forms—above all, the madrigal and, later, monody—and by instrumental music; the musical form in which Renaissance thought and the Renaissance spirit enjoyed their fullest flowering—opera—actually appeared only at the turn of the century.' And it may be worth while to emphasize that humanism generally, not merely its manifestation in music, did not saturate European thought (outside Italy) until long after it had impressed outstanding European minds. Italy led the way but even in Italy the universities were still organized on medieval lines and still using medieval textbooks at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The new influences of Italian thought made themselves felt in Germany in the fifteenth century but only in a few small circles, while France—above all the University of Paris, with its enormous international prestige—was still more conservative. So were England and Scotland. The position in England during the early decades of the sixteenth century is typical; one can point to the names of the great humanists, Colet and More and Skelton, and to Erasmus teaching at Cambridge, but scholasticism remained firmly entrenched at Oxford and the Scottish universities held out even longer. Professor H. W. Lawton concludes his survey of 'Vernacular Literature in Western Europe, 1493–1520' with the comment that 'the full impact of the revival of ancient learning (even in Italy itself) and of the Italian example was yet to reach the rest of Europe and then usually modified and in some cases limited by the effect of the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformations'.<sup>1</sup> The full humanist penetration of European thought and feeling, to such depth that musical composition became affected and later actually conditioned by it, was a long and slow process continuing throughout the sixteenth century.

<sup>1</sup> *The New Cambridge Modern History* i (Cambridge, 1957), p. 193.

The extent to which this process had not yet fulfilled itself musically even towards the end of the century is proclaimed by the fact that almost every country from Portugal to Poland justly claims the latter part of the century as the golden age of its polyphony. The essential manifestation of humanism in music is the domination of the word; it is not a mere coincidence that the essentially homophonic *frottola* 'flourished chiefly in the courts of northern Italy, especially in Mantua, Ferrara, Venice, Urbino, and Florence . . . the very ones in which Pietro Bembo . . . was influential'<sup>1</sup> and that the even more word-dominated Latin odes of the German composers originated in humanistic circles.<sup>2</sup> Polyphony—at any rate, 'golden age' polyphony—resists domination by the word; in its finest and purest forms it merely uses and absorbs and dissolves words; it is one of the supreme forms of absolute music. 'Golden age' polyphony is in fact the final flowering of that fourteenth-century *ars nova* which was 'the first full manifestation of pure musical art, freed from the service of religion or poetry and constructed according to its own laws'<sup>3</sup> and which Dufay and his contemporaries had drastically refined and purified yet essentially continued. It could, after all, continue to serve religion so long as religion remained beyond the grasp of human reason, the magic of sound matching the magic of faith; but when religion became 'reasonable' its music began to submit to the word.

Much of the present volume is devoted naturally to this 'golden age'. We may no longer think of the later sixteenth century as, above all, 'the age of Palestrina' nor even be as confident as our fathers that Palestrina's music represents the acme of pure polyphony, but the highest musical achievements of the period were polyphonic, based on techniques evolved through centuries and now brought to that perfection which is in any art a sign of inner decadence. For artistic styles are like political empires, nurturing always within them the forces which are to bring about their decay, and never more strongly than when they themselves appear to be at the height of their power. The greatest Masses and motets of Palestrina and Lassus and Victoria are unsurpassable in their kind, but the study of these masterpieces is additionally fascinating to the historian because within their very perfection he detects the symptoms of that which was (temporarily) to supersede them. The domination of the word makes itself felt, in homophonic, note-against-note passages, in a large proportion of this 'polyphonic' music. And this is very

<sup>1</sup> See vol. iii, p. 394.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 370-1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.



different from the occasional, exceptional note-against-note passage in Machaut or Dufay; nor has it anything to do with the Council of Trent or the Commission of Cardinals. The humanistic subordination of music to text, the insistence that music shall have meaning through carrying words or shall simply heighten the effect of words, is as evident in religious music as in *frottola*, madrigal, and *chanson*. And in the religious music both of the Catholics and of every variety of Protestant: Lutheran hymn and Calvinist psalm, Cranmer's 'as near as may be, for every syllable a note', and the injunctions of the Council of Trent, all point in the same direction. The problem was really simpler in religious music where homophony or near-homophony, allowing the text to be clearly audible, was often an adequate solution. Secular composers attempted a number of quite different solutions: the verse scansion of the German ode-composers and the French practitioners of *musique mesurée*, the symbolic illustration of the text practised by the madrigalists, the supposedly Greek recitative of the Florentine monodists, the empirical matching of words and music in the English lute ayres. With historical hindsight we see that *musique mesurée* was a blind alley and that recitative was the 'right' solution, but can we deny that much of the charm of the madrigal springs from the incongruous crossing of polished polyphony with naïve symbolism or point to more perfect marriage of verse and music than in the best of the English ayres? (For that matter, *musique mesurée* also has its masterpieces.)

Instead of 'art constantly aspiring towards the condition of music', as Pater put it, music aspired towards the condition of poetry. It surrendered a part of its magic, its purely musical sense, for the sake of extra-musical sense. But there is one kind of music, besides vocal polyphony, which finds it difficult to take on extra-musical sense: independent instrumental music. All through the Middle Ages instrumental music had been essentially indistinguishable from vocal music, imitated from it, or elaborated from it in terms of some peculiar instrumental technique (lute or keyboard music); until the middle of the fifteenth century music arising out of the very nature of an instrument was infinitesimal in quantity and negligible in artistic quality. Independent instrumental music was bound to develop on its own lines, but it seems probable that its more intense cultivation during the period of the present volume was a species of compensation for the increasing rationalization of vocal music. From the first, lute and keyboard music had led the way in technical emancipation and, broadly speaking, technical emancipation—emancipation

of idiom—preceded structural emancipation, which was made fully possible only through the replacement of modality by tonality, or (rather) by the conception of organized modulation and key-structure arising out of tonality.

The gradual mutation of modality into tonality, making itself felt first in performance (use of *musica ficta*) rather than in notation, was a subtle, long-drawn, and still not clearly and completely understood process, but there can be little doubt that it was closely connected with the undermining of polyphony by homophony—notably in the *frottole*, though its beginnings were a good deal earlier. The development of the ideas of tonal unity and variety-within-unity can be traced through the familiar masterpieces of the sixteenth century from Josquin to Palestrina and beyond, but 'the evolution of tonal awareness in the sixteenth century does not proceed in a straight line. The chromaticists [Willaert, Rore, Lassus, Marenzio, Gesualdo] cause a switch of direction leading to phenomena that one might well define as "triadic atonality".'<sup>1</sup> All the same, sixteenth-century chromaticism is usually a form of 'symbolic illustration of text' rather than a purely musical phenomenon; its quasi-atonal extremes are aberrations in the sense that *musique mesurée* is an aberration.

Willaert's pupil Zarlino, the last great theorist to concern himself with the modal system and the first to advocate equal temperament, was also the first to differentiate consciously between major and minor harmonies and to associate them with cheerfulness and sadness: 'quando si pone la Terza maggiore nella parte grave l'Harmonia si fa allegra et quando si pone nell'acuto si fa mesta' (*Istitutioni harmoniche*, 1558).<sup>2</sup> Consequently progressions of minor chords 'will make the harmony very melancholy' (farebbe il concento molto maninconico). Zarlino recognized not only the expressive power of harmony, and hence the necessity of relating it to the verbal context, but the literally fundamental function of the bass and the importance of letting it move slowly (per movimenti alquanto tardi)—though he reveals that composers at the middle of the century were still writing the tenor first, the soprano next, and the bass only in the third place. The stage was already set for the *bassus pro organo* thirty years later and the *basso continuo* of the turn of the century.

<sup>1</sup> Edward Lowinsky, 'Awareness of Tonality in the 16th Century, *Report of the Eighth Congress of the International Musicological Society* (Kassel, 1961), p. 44. See also the same author's *Tonality and Atonality in Sixteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Zarlino, *Tutte l'opere*, i (Venice, 1589), p. 221.

The appearance in 1600 of Peri's *Euridice* and Caccini's, and of Cavalieri's *Rappresentazione*—followed by Caccini's *Nuove musiche* and Viadana's *Concerti ecclesiastici* in 1602—has lent that year the factitious importance of a dividing-line, like 1066. Palestrina and Lassus were six years dead; the mature work of Monteverdi was soon to come. Parry, like many others, was misled into declaring that 'the change in the character and methods of musical art at the end of the sixteenth century' was 'decisive and abrupt'.<sup>1</sup> But the old polyphonic style did not die with its greatest masters; it lived on in the 'silver age' of the Anerio brothers and the *prima prattica* of Monteverdi himself, while on the other hand his *seconda prattica* in which 'l'oratione sia padrona del armonia e non serva'<sup>2</sup> had its roots deep in the past. The present volume chronicles the rise of one and the heyday and decline of the other.

#### PUBLISHER'S NOTE

We record with regret the deaths of Edward J. Dent, Henry Coates, Théodore Gérold, Gerald Hayes, and Charles Van den Borren prior to the publication of this volume.

Acknowledgements are due to the following for their work of translation: Mr. Edward Lockspeiser (Chapter 1), Mr. Basil Lam (Chapter 3), Mr. Norman Suckling (Chapter 5*a* and *b*), Mrs. Ann Livermore (Chapter 7), and Miss Elizabeth Mercer (Chapter 8).

The bibliography has been largely compiled by Dr. John D. Bergsagel, the index by Miss Margaret Dean-Smith. The editor gratefully acknowledges the help of Dr. Nigel Fortune in reading proofs and suggesting emendations.

As is usual in publications of this kind, there has inevitably been a considerable gap between the final establishment of the text and the volume's appearance. Thus it has not been possible to incorporate references to the most recent publications—notably of sources—relating to the period.

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford History of Music*, iii (Oxford, 1902), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Giulio Cesare Monteverdi, 'Dichiaratione' appended to his brother's *Scherzi musicali* (Venice, 1607).

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