MUSIC IN WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Paul Henry Lang

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Greek Vase with Cithara Player (*Metropolitan Museum of Art*)

TO ANNE

Who Watched, Guided, Waited, and Understood

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P. H. L.

Singing Angels from the Ghent Altar, Hubert (1366–1426) and Jan van Eyck (1380–1440)

INTRODUCTION

EVERY civilization is a synthesis of man's conquest of life. Art is the ultimate symbol of this conquest, the utmost unity man can achieve. Yet the spirit of an epoch is reflected not in the arts alone, but in every field of human endeavor, from theology to engineering. Nor must we take it for granted that there is a uniform spirit of the age which is invariably expressed in every phase of art, and which transmits to us the same content and meaning in each. Rather, we find what we are seeking in the sum of the meanings of the various arts, which taken thus in conjunction form the essence of the artistic spirit of the age.

Artistic conception and forms of expression depend on time, place, and the temperament of the artist. It is the historian's duty to master these elements which separate us from a work of art. In the past, writers on music believed it possible to explain a musician's contribution in terms of the forms he perfected, maintaining with some art critics that in artistic value "there is no difference between a well painted vegetable and a well painted Madonna." When the pendulum swung in the other direction everything was considered from the biographical-psychological angle, and anecdotes and "interpretations" served as the medium of evaluation to the exclusion of aesthetic criteria. But for a just appraisal, the two methods must be held in constant balance.

Every great artist is part of his times, but he also helps to create them. We speak of the "times," but time in itself is empty and meaningless unless made conceivable by phenomena. Time is expressed through life, and life is conflict, motion within the times. Thus time can never evoke one style only; an individual may dominate his generation, but if we attach ourselves to the one outstanding personality we may miss the significance of the whole era. By examining the individuals and following their development without regard for a larger aim we jeopardize a true understanding of the development of an art. Wagner was almost twenty years old when Goethe died; J. S. Bach was working on the last will and testament of polyphony when Pergolesi's comic opera opened new vistas for music; Beethoven soared to the pinnacle of classic symphonic architecture when

Weber was inaugurating the romanticism of the German forest and the eerie atmosphere of nocturnal fairy tale. Beethoven, Schubert, and Weber lived together in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. We conveniently group Beethoven with Haydn and Mozart and call this trio of vastly different artistic personalities the "Viennese school." With Beethoven thus disposed of, we can then consider the two remaining "romanticists," one of whom died one year before Beethoven, the other one year after.

Every period of time has three elements: the dying past, the flourishing present, and the promising future. If we single out and emphasize one of the three, we miss our aim. Although we may point out the line of development in technical terms, we shall not be able to gain a complete picture, for we are neglecting the idea. It is a great mistake, indeed, to consider the second half of the eighteenth century—to take another example—as reflected only in the moral decadence of the rococo. The intellectual peaks of this great period were the creation of aesthetics and natural sciences as independent branches of learning, and the political philosophy of the Enlightenment; there were, furthermore, men like Klopstock, Lessing, and Herder, the French Encyclopedists, Burke, Kant, and Goethe, and, what interests us most of all, the galaxy of great musicians, the Bach sons and Hasse, Grétry and Monsigny, Jommelli and Piccini, Gluck, Haydn, and Mozart, to mention a handful from among the host of composers. Again, we cannot lift some of these composers from their environment and discuss their sonata forms or their orchestration, for no amount of technical analysis will explain the operatic conceptions and the symphonic thought of the classic school unless the whole broad expanse of the Enlightenment and the *Sturm und Drang* is traversed. Then we may find the starting point of classicism, and discover how and why the miniature and mosaiclike sensitive fabric of the *style galant* turned into the architectural logic and dramaturgy of classicism.

If we are so ill prepared to grasp the music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, what will we face when approaching more remote periods? Those who cherish and admire the canvases of old masters, who look with awe at the soaring stone mazes of medieval cathedrals, who read with devotion the plays of Aristophanes and Shakespeare, experiencing the thrill of emotion which only great art can impart, are yet content to call these very same centuries a preparatory era for the coming art of music. For it is a deeply ingrained fallacy that music was slow in coming of age, that it trailed the other arts by centuries. Music of the centuries prior to the eighteenth, called "old" or "pre-Bach" music, is still shrouded in mystery. It was not until the nineteenth century that this music was "rediscovered," because in reality the music of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the baroque era had ceased to be a living art; its traditions had vanished and all that was

known were specimens. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that Mendelssohn's performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829 had the effect of a revelation and started a veritable Bach renaissance. The old master died only seventy-nine years before the memorable Berlin revival; how, then, can we expect music from the times of Bede, of Dante, or of Michelangelo to be alive and enjoyed? Our immediate musical heritage is that of nineteenth-century romanticism. Romanticism discovered old music because the antiquarian tendency was one of its basic traits. But while the poetry and painting of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance were soon giving out light of their own, besides reflecting the glow of the romantic enthusiasm that brought them to life, the nineteenth century stood impressed but strangely remote before its musical discovery.

The music of primitive tribes or of faraway Oriental nations strikes us by the unfamiliar nature of its melodies and rhythms. We acknowledge this strangeness by calling the music "exotic," and the term seems to qualify and justify such music. The majority of people—indeed, even trained musicians —gain a similar impression from medieval music; but since the term "exotic" cannot properly be applied to an art which grew with the great cathedrals, it is called primitive and undeveloped. Our ears are not so well educated as our eyes, and our musical knowledge and taste are so limited that we are at a loss when we try to reconcile music with the other arts of the centuries "before Bach." Opposed to this hazy and distant conception of ours stands the very real enjoyment of music expressed in the writings of men of letters contemporary with this "primitive" music, and the innumerable musical scenes that seem to have been the favorite subjects of painters and sculptors. If we read the inspired words addressed to music by Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, or Molière, we will realize that we have failed to acclimatize ourselves with this great music of the past, that we have carelessly deprived ourselves of a tremendous source of art and enjoyment.

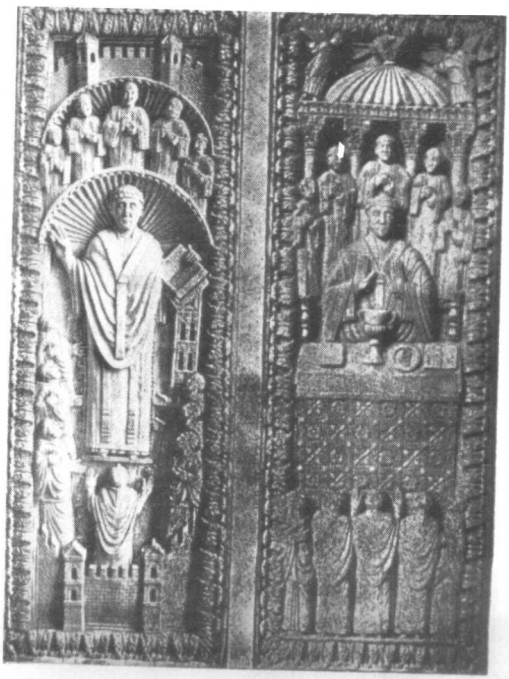
At this point modern musicology comes to the rescue, unearthing, deciphering, and explaining the music of the past centuries and making it available in modern editions to the public of today. The research work of the past two or three generations, carried out by a legion of scholars, is a monument of human ingenuity and erudition. Our duty is to utilize the fruits of all this labor, performed with almost monastic devotion, and derive spiritual nourishment from them.

In writing this history of music, I have addressed myself to those lovers of music who combine enjoyment of their art with a curiosity as to all that goes to form a part of their intellectual estate. The reader must not expect a technical or biographical essay, for this is a chronicle of the participation of music in the making of Western civilization. To write about art, and especially about music, is a most difficult task, since the scholar's and the

artist's views must be balanced. I have endeavored to prevent the many-sided shimmering wealth of art from becoming mere abstraction by searching always for the overtones that accompany facts and accomplishments, trying to see behind every detail the whole of the creative soul struggling for articulation and expression. The living man who attempts to penetrate into the mind of a strange human being, remote from him in time and space, finds in himself the deciding lines along which he reconstructs the picture of the past. This is why real historical understanding always exerts a fertile influence on the present. However far the object of our research is removed from us, we must somehow assimilate it within us, and when the hidden identity of this strange mind generates sparks in our mind, then, and only then, will the mind of the past become active again, because it carries with it something of our own.

Humboldt, the great representative of new humanism, once said that "the study of classical archaeology, philology, and history should lead to the understanding of the ancient man and his culture." This is the formula for all historical studies, for all humanism. The difference between our modern humanism and the older ones is only in the vastness of our researches, and the ability of the modern man to train his searchlight onto depths which once seemed bottomless. We are seeking the human being in the plenitude of his always new and yet typically related creations, because we find that every tone from the past raises an echo in us today.

Twelfth-Century Sculpture from Chartres Cathedral Showing Carillon and Psaltery

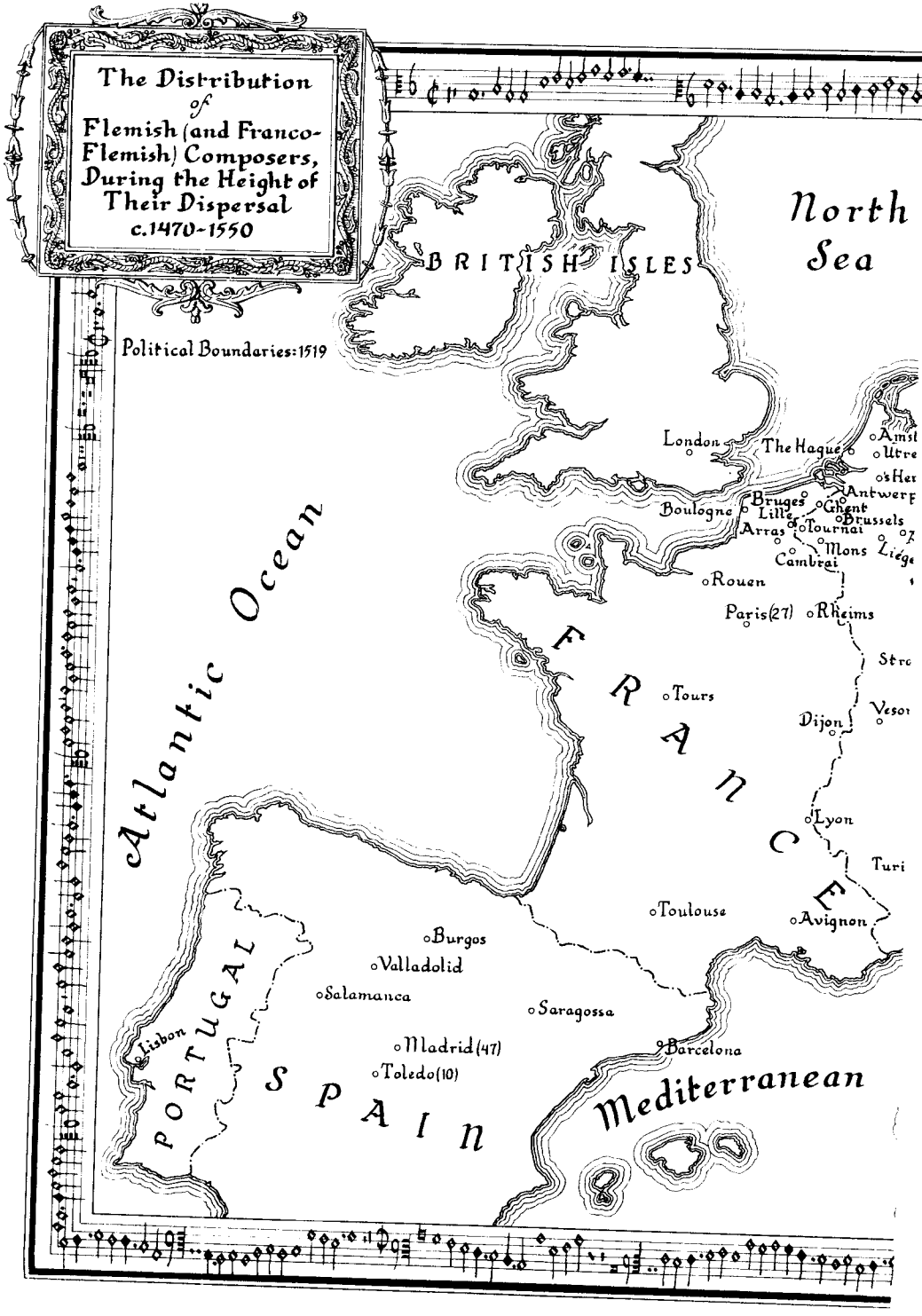


Carolingian Ivory with Liturgic Scene

Allegorical Bas-Relief from the Campanile in Florence, by Giotto (c. 1266–1337), and Andrea Pisano (1290–1343)

Late Fourteenth-Century Wood-carving from Bamberg Cathedral

Luca della Robbia (*1400–1482*), *Group of Singers from the Cantoria* (*Begun in 1431*)


The Distribution
of
Flemish (and Franco-
Flemish) Composers,
During the Height of
Their Dispersal
c.1470-1550
Political Boundaries: 1519
BRITISH ISLES
North
Sea
Atlantic Ocean
FRANCE
SPAIN
PORTUGAL
Mediterranean
London
The Hague
Amst
Utre
's Her
Antwerp
Bruges
Ghent
Brussels
Boulogne
Lille
Arras
Tournai
Mons
Liege
Cambrai
Rouen
Paris (27)
Rheims
Stra
Tours
Dijon
Vesoi
Lyon
Turi
Toulouse
Avignon
Burgos
Valladolid
Salamanca
Saragossa
Lisbon
Madrid (47)
Toledo (10)
Barcelona

This map naturally cannot lay claim to completeness. Many more Flemish composers could be found scattered through Europe and in the Spanish colonies in America. Moreover, dozens of musicians are listed in available sources merely as residing in "Germany," or as being members of the emperor's chapel choir, which may be located anywhere from Prague to Madrid. The figures in parentheses indicate the number of Flemish composers resident in the city during the period under consideration.

Raphael (1483–1520), "Ecstasy of St. Cecilia"

Matthias Grünewald (first third of 16th Cent.), Section from Isenheim Altar