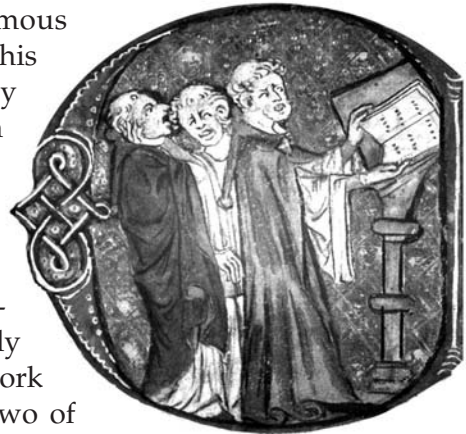


The Spiritual Ascent of Machaut

By William Mahrt

Guillaume de Machaut and Reims: Context and Meaning in his Musical Works by Anne Walters Robertson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xx, 456 pp. ISBN: 0 521 41876 3.

Guillaume de Machaut is the most famous composer of the fourteenth century, and part of his fame rests upon his role in a milestone of the history of liturgical music. He was the first known composer to have composed a complete polyphonic Mass—the genre that became the most widely-composed form of music in the Renaissance. His fame did not end there, however, for in his hands the motet (in its fourteenth-century form) and the chanson were substantially developed. Moreover, the preponderance of his work was poetry—long narrative romances in verse, two of which include numerous musical pieces. Machaut's early career, though he was a priest, was as a poet in a secular court, but at mid-life he returned to his home cathedral of Reims, where he was appointed canon, and where he functioned as an ecclesiastical dignitary for the rest of his life.



Anne Walters Robertson has undertaken extensive researches upon the institution of Reims cathedral in order to illuminate Machaut's life there; her *Guillaume de Machaut and Reims* has produced a very new view of this famous composer. Three important areas will be of particular interest to readers of *Sacred Music*: 1) the occasion for the first polyphonic Mass by a known composer, 2) the history of the inclusion of polyphonic music into the liturgy, and 3) the essentially sacred foundations of what has seemed to be a secular genre, the motet.

Machaut's *Messe Notre Dame* has seemed to scholars to be such an important work in the history of music that they sought to identify the occasion for its performance in an important historical event, and they settled upon the coronation of Charles V at Reims in 1364, though no concrete evidence supports such an occasion. That it was a Mass of Our Lady was explained by the dedication of Reims cathedral to the Blessed Virgin.

Robertson's research into the documents of Reims cathedral has indicated a much more interesting occasion for the work. Guillaume de Machaut and his brother established an endowment for the singing of a weekly votive Mass of the Blessed Virgin, and the amount of the endowment was sufficient to pay, not only for the priest to sing the Mass, but also for several singers, who could then sing the polyphonic ordinary for this votive Mass. Thus Machaut's Mass is now seen to have been

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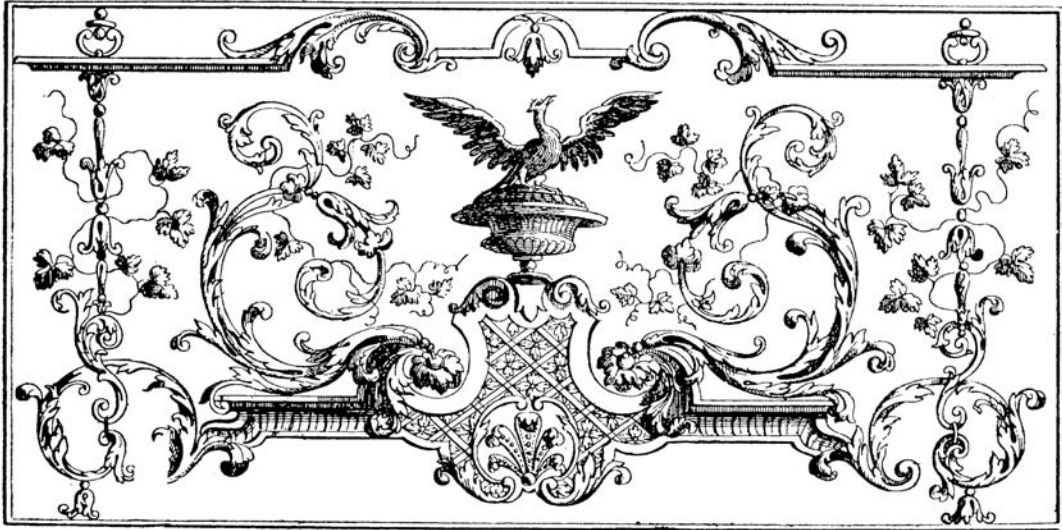
composed for a weekly Saturday Mass of the Blessed Virgin, sung one to a part, performed for the intentions of Machaut and his brother while they were alive and continued after their deaths for the repose of their souls. Records indicate that the memorial persisted at least into the beginning of the fifteenth century.

This is a substantial piece of the puzzle concerning the incorporation of polyphonic music into the liturgy. The first great polyphonic Mass was not for a solemn Mass at the high altar on a high feast day, as a modern historical imagination would have it. On those solemn occasions the assembled canons or their vicars sang the liturgy in Gregorian chant. Rather, polyphonic music first found its place on the periphery of the liturgy, a votive service sung at a side altar for the intentions of individuals. Polyphonic music in the thirteenth century had been developed at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris as a part of the principal cathedral liturgy. The Parisian *organa* were sung in choir on almost half of the days of the year in elaborate polyphonic music. But the bull of Pope John XXII, *Docta sanctorum* (1324), put an end to such elaborate polyphonic music, prohibiting elaborate polyphony from the principal liturgies. Thus polyphonic music only gradually returned and this from the periphery of the liturgy—in devotional services and in such votive Masses as Machaut's endowment. The development of the genres of polyphonic sacred music is of such historical significance that scholars have assumed it to have played a central role from its inception. Now history teaches quite the opposite. Even in the Renaissance, institutions of polyphonic music were exceptional. For every cathedral or chapel maintaining a polyphonic choir, there were dozens, at least, which conducted the extensive traditions of liturgy exclusively in Gregorian chant.

Machaut's body of motets comes in for reinterpretation by Robertson as well, and this is probably the most revolutionary part of her work. The motet in the fourteenth century has seemed to have been a principally secular form. Although its tenors were most often drawn from Gregorian chant, its upper voices usually carried secular texts—texts of courtly love; the majority of Machaut's motets have such texts. But the manuscripts in which Machaut assembled his works indicate that these works were ordered according to Machaut's design, though scholars have not been able to identify what the principal of order was. Until Robertson. Robertson's discovery is that the tenor voices of these motets, as the works are arranged in the manuscripts, form a coherent order, following a ladder of ascent to spiritual perfection depicted by a fourteenth-century Dominican theologian, Henry Suso.

Now what had seemed a miscellaneous assembly of mainly secular works is seen to be ordered on a sacred principal, so much so that their secular texts may now be reinterpreted as allegories of the sacred, much like the *Song of Songs* has always been read; what was thought to be a repertory of secular and courtly works now appears to be a large-scale body of works whose rationale is principally sacred.

These astonishing discoveries concerning major works in the history of music have earned Robertson the Kinkeldey prize of the American Musicological Society and the Haskins Medal of the Medieval Academy of America. She deserves the gratitude of all students of sacred music as well for the historical detail and illumination she has brought to the formative period of sacred polyphony. ■



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