

Guillaume Dufay and the World of the Bees

Willem Elders*

'Music History Before 1600', Utrecht University, France

*Corresponding author: Willem Elders, 'Music History Before 1600', Utrecht University, France, Tel: ++33 466 79 04 94; E-mail: willemelders@sf.fr

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Short Communication

It may surprise to } Q 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 V L [W pages), containing among other things a list of books which U H ~ t H a f W 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 } V H H e a t u y K

In the 1420s, 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.

H 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 ohthe church of S. Giacomo Maggiore at Bologna. e s s o M] M 5 hq

she makes her bride's ~ L J K LW- L J K W

Holy Saturday, the Exultet was sung during the solemn Easter Vigil.

The 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. The 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 13th century, no verbal connection 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 if 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 dimax 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 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 "have been read by a large number 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 1332 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. 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.