

## The Fourteenth-Century Avant-garde

This is a concert about ideas: exploring them, manipulating them, playing, pushing, and prodding to see just how far they might stretch – and how far performers might stretch to meet the ideas’ expectations.

The fourteenth century marks a high point in the intellectual life of Europe, when scholars at newly-established universities reintroduced the work of Classical thinkers and pursued cutting-edge approaches in mathematics and philosophy. The political infighting that resulted in the great Papal Schism (1378-1418) further weakened the Catholic Church’s exclusive claim on the pursuit of knowledge. The composers represented on this evening’s program felt liberated to explore their craft from a radically new perspective. Instead of adopting the traditional view of music as divinely inspired or reflecting a divinely-directed cosmic order, they sought to reconcile music with the physical properties – observed or hypothesized – of the natural world.

Composers working in a style that we today call “Ars subtilior” (the more subtle art) sought to conceive of music and time not in relation to the Holy Trinity, but with respect to mathematical abstraction. They invented new musical symbols to express their ideas or sometimes used old symbols in profoundly new ways. The fourteenth century’s unparalleled freedom of thought and increasing secularization inspired innovative composers to write music that fearlessly explored rhythmic complexity and flirted with the limits of the possible. The results make for intoxicating listening and music that sounds remarkably modern, even today.

Our program explores the connections between mathematics, science, symbol, and sound in late fourteenth-century France.

We begin with a set of three “high-concept” works that are also captivatingly beautiful. These are songs that seem conscious of their own existence: songs about being songs, in which the song itself hints at how it ought to be performed. For instance, Guillaume de Machaut’s *Ma fin est mon commencement* (“My end is my beginning”) is a musical palindrome composed in just two parts: the third part – as the text informs us – may be discovered by reading the Cantus part in reverse.

In Jacob de Senleches’ *La harpe de melodie* and Baude Cordier’s *Tout par compas*, the songs’ subjects are manifested in visual form on the page. In a manuscript fragment now at Chicago’s Newberry Library, Senleches’ *La harpe* is transmitted in the shape of a harp – harp strings standing in for staff lines – along with unique note shapes and different colored inks that transmit such subtle instructions regarding rhythmic performance that it is akin to trying to notate a great jazz musician’s solo rubato.

*Tout par compas* (“With a compass I was composed”) appears on the first opening of the famous Chantilly Codex (a songbook from about 1400 from which many works on tonight’s concert are drawn). Various texts and tributes are inscribed within circles at the four corners of the page; two concentric circles at the center of the page transmit the music, complete with frequent changes of meter, numerical proportions, and other notational tricks. Certainly, this score (and others like it) was not meant for sight-reading, but for puzzling over in appreciation of its wit, charm, and complexity.

Our second set, “The Rose,” explores the symbolism of flowers. *Belle que rose vermeille* exemplifies the rose’s symbolic fluidity: it may symbolize profane love one moment and the Virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven, at another. In Machaut’s beautiful four-voice rondeau *Rose, liz, printemps, verdure*, the rose and lily evoke the sweetness and “virtue” of springtime; the “Belle” addressed here, too, could easily be the Virgin Mary.

In the famous thirteenth-century lyric poem, *Li Romanz de la Rose*, the Rose symbolized the object of love onto which the lover projects his psychological drama. The enormously influential *Romanz de la Rose* survives in no less than 300 manuscripts, and its allegorical characters – such as Amours (Love), Bel Accueil (Fair Welcome), Dangier (Danger, Resistance, Dominion), and Esperance (Hope) – loomed large in the cultural imagination for centuries. The character of Esperance played a major part in Machaut’s narrative poem called the *Remede de Fortune*, from which the beautiful four-voice balladelle *En amer a douce vie*, sung by Esperance herself, is drawn.

*En amer a douce vie* in turn became the source for musical and poetic citations in a number of related songs, including the anonymous rondeau that opens our set, *Esperance qui en mon cuer s’embat / Sentir me fait d’amer la douce vie*. Citation was not simply about paying tribute to a respected composer or work. Rather, composers might lift a phrase of music (perhaps with its original text) from another piece, or even create a new work in which every phrase was borrowed from a different piece. Citation was a sort of coded game whose power to delight depended on recognition. It also points out the close relationships between these composers and their overlapping circles of influence.

As Suzoy’s ballade *Pictagoras* implies, the composers of the fourteenth-century avant-garde saw themselves as inheritors of musical and intellectual traditions stretching back to the Classical philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras (who theorized the proportions of string lengths and their corresponding pitches) and beyond: Jubal is described in the book of Genesis as “the father of all such as handle the harp and organ,” while Orpheus is the legendary musician and poet of Greek myth. While the song’s text honors ancient musicians, its music is state-of-the-art, employing complex proportions and notating each voice in different, frequently-changing meters. The rather cranky message of Matheus de Sancto Johanne’s *Science n’a nul ennemi* (“Science has no enemy but ignorance”) is apt even in our own time. While the piece is far simpler rhythmically than *Pictagoras* (and thus not overly “scientific”), it is rife with challenging harmonies.

Our final set is inspired by the sounds of nature as symbols of love and fidelity. Birds and their songs have long been associated with rebirth, springtime, and love, but the birds in these works – the Nightingale (rossignol), Cuckoo (cocu), and Lark (alouette) – each held specific meaning. For instance, in Senleches’ *En ce gracieux tamps*, the Nightingale (typically associated with noble sentiments including anguish as well as the ecstasy of love) represents a faithful lover with a beautiful, seductive voice, while the Cuckoo, a symbol of infidelity, flits from branch to branch shrieking its harsh, raucous song for anyone who will listen. In *Ma tre dol rossignol joly*, the Lark assumes its traditional role as a messenger and retains its identity as the only bird that sings while flying up towards the heavens.

While this is music inspired perhaps more by ideas than sentiments, it is no less beautiful for that. Probably the first thing that will engage listeners who are new to the fourteenth century is the sheer beauty of the sound, and that may be enough to captivate you. But as you listen more

closely, you can perceive how that surface beauty is generated from a complex interplay between separate lines of music, each of which has its own purpose and logic. And layered into all that, in a rather complicated way, are subtle and challenging poetic texts which themselves have beautiful sonic surfaces, complex structures, and multiple meanings. So your attention can move from the whole to the parts, from line to line, from music to text, trying to take in as many components of the work as possible, or just enjoying the interplay between three or four musicians at play.

We hope you enjoy it!

—Debra Nagy