

BOSTON RENAISSANCE ENSEMBLE

LINER NOTES

by David Hahn

Discovering an affinity for dance music and improvisation, members of the Boston Renaissance Ensemble met informally at first, to play through the dance repertoire of the late fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries. Over a period of time, the group's repertoire and concept were gradually expanded to include chamber music - the pure, art music (as opposed to 'functional' dance music) written by the greatest composers of the time. It has been a policy of the Boston Renaissance Ensemble, that in concert performance, we would not attempt to distance our audience from the music, rather on the contrary, to give to this music its own integrity, now on the modern concert stage. It is appropriate, therefore, that what we have recorded here represents the two basic genres of Renaissance music in which we have specialized since our founding: side one is devoted to chamber music and side two, dance music.

To open fresh ears to the music of the Renaissance, it is important to keep in mind that it is a period which musicologists have defined rather arbitrarily by date (The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians suggests about 1430 to 1600). Certainly, there were changes in musical style in these points in time, however, the one truly landmark event in music history which took place was the advent of the dissemination of music printed by the new system of movable type. (For an iconoclastic view of music history, our friend and colleague Andrea von Ramm maintains that there are two truly important events: the French Revolution, which signaled the end of Absolutism, and the beginning of the application of the printing press to music. Her ideas are not without foundation.) On May 15, 1501, Ottaviano Petrucci (1466-1539), having received sole rights from the Signoria of Venice three years earlier, to print, sell, and distribute all music, printed his famous anthology of works entitled Harmonice musices odhecaton A. This publication has been an inspiration to the Ensemble in selecting repertoire.

There are multiple ramifications to the transmission of music by means

of a print rather than a manuscript. The print offers a standard and uniform reading of each piece, free from inconsistencies, if not textural error. The print allows for a more widespread distribution of the music, facilitating a greater influence on musicians of the time. While the materials and process of printing, with its two or three impressions per page, were expensive and difficult, the editor of the Odhecaton (the Dominican monk, Petrus Castellanus) was obliged to select pieces which were thought to be of value and worth preserving; and, of course, popular enough to sell the volume. Gustave Reese judges the importance of Petrucci's work very well: "The chief value of the Odhecaton ... lies ... in its position in the history of music as a living art. It opened the way for the procession, in printed guise, of polyphonic compositions, whose spread, in greater quantities and over wider areas than were within reach before, materially aided in making the approaching century the Golden Age it proved to be." ("The First Printed Collection of Part Music (The Odhecaton)", Musical Quarterly, v.XX, 1934).

The first group of pieces on side one are four, well-crafted polyphonic gems. The word 'polyphony' is not easily defined. On initial hearing of this music, an educated listener might say that polyphony would be defined as two or more melodic lines of equal interest and importance played simultaneously. The germ of the definition, however, may be found in Percy C. Buck's comment (from the 1929 Oxford History of Music): "the essence of the matter [polyphonic style] was the combination of rhythms." Nothing more clearly demonstrates this than La alfonsina, a piece from the Liber Fridolini Sichery, a manuscript contemporary with the Odhecaton. The juxtaposition of imitative rhythms into a sophisticated game clearly illustrates our fundamental definition of polyphony. The second and fourth pieces of the set, Cela sans plus and La plus des plus, were composed by one of the great musical geniuses of any era, Josquin Desprez (c1440-1521). Listening to or playing his music gives one the impression of a complete organic equilibrium established within each piece, as if no note could be changed or moved without disrupting the whole, similar to a problem in pure mathematics. Cela sans plus demonstrates one of the most fascinating compositional techniques of the sixteenth century: the use of the Golden Section in the work's structure. This method of composition relates the entire piece to its internal structure by means of ratios

and numbers. Malor me bat, a chanson attributed to Johannes Ockeghem (c1410-1497) among others, has been one of the signature pieces of the Ensemble. Long, elegant melodic lines, periods of imitation between voices and subtle shifts of rhythmic emphasis characterize this masterpiece.

During the Renaissance, a common compositional technique began with a line of music, a melody called generically a "tenor", newly composed or pre-existent, and a piece of music was constructed by adding other lines of music to sound simultaneously with the tenor. The following melody, called "De tous biens playne", was used as a tenor for over two dozen compositions:

A handwritten musical score for the melody "De tous biens playne". The score consists of seven staves of music, all in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The time signature is 2/2. The notation includes various note values (half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes), rests, and accidentals. There are several handwritten annotations above the staves: the first staff has a large 'X' at the beginning; the second staff has a large 'X' in the middle; the third staff has "(#)(4) (#)" above the first three notes and "(4)" above the fourth note; the fifth staff has "(#)(#) (#)" above the first three notes. The score ends with a double bar line on the seventh staff.

This tenor serves as the unifying element for the next five pieces.

The first two settings are both found as one piece in the Odhecaton. Hayne van Ghizeghem's (c1445-between 1472 and 1495) three-part piece is transformed into the four-part by the addition of the "si placet" part (so-called in the print meaning, "if it so pleases [play this part also]"). The si placet part is thought to have been written by Petrus Castellanus, perhaps as an attempt to appease the current fashion for four-part music. The duet, played here by recorder and viola da gamba, by Johannes Obrecht (c1450-1505) is the middle of three sections from the Agnus Dei movement of his Missa De Tous Biens Playne. As the title suggests, the mass uses this tenor for its entire composition. The fourth setting by Alexander Agricola (?1446-1506) displays the skill and virtuosity often found in his music. The lute and viola da gamba weave intricate, imitative lines while the tenor stoically continues through the texture. Finally, Josquin's setting includes two lines from the van Ghizeghem piece while adding a jaunty rhythmic canon at the unison. Listen to the clever game of the close canon, played here by the lute and pizzicato viola da gamba, set against the slower-moving tenor and superius.

On side two, we become a dance band, requiring a different style of playing and listening. Our concert suite of branles arrangements comes from the Troisième livre de danseries (1556) edited by Claude Gervaise (fl. Paris 1540-1560). A branle is a general term for a group dance and it was popular throughout the sixteenth century as the beginning dance at a court ball. Thoinot Arbeau's Orchésographie (1588) contains many branles with specific choreographies. While our concert medley does not have a specific choreography, our interpretation of these dances has been greatly aided by actually working with dancers and allowing what we see to shape what we play. The music of these branles is characterized by being quite tuneful, often having irregular phrases (listen especially to Simple III and Gay) and having a strong rhythmic drive.

Examples of some of the earliest social dances with specific choreographies can be found in Fabritio Caroso's Nobiltà di dame (1600) and Cesare Negri's Le gratie d'amore (1602). Along with detailed instructions on social deportment

at a court ball, these manuals give us several score dances with verbal step descriptions and music for each dance. We have performed this music with dancers under the direction of Julia Sutton, with the New England Conservatory Collegium Terpsichore, and Charles Garth and Elizabeth Aldrich, with the Court Dance Company of New York. In our recorded versions of this music, we have generally attempted to keep tempi and musical from in order to fit relevant choreography.

Concerning the music found in the dance manuals. Julia Sutton, in her translation of Nobiltà, remarks, "Without question the music in Nobiltà di dame is 'music for use' in the most fundamental sense. We have no clues as to its authorship. The pieces obviously vary in quality, Most, however, appear to be essentially skeletal, musical 'cue sheets'. On them the expert dance players in the employ of the great families named in the book would have elaborated through improvised diminutions (or variations), during the many repetitions required by the dances."

The final five pieces on side two give 'functional' examples of most of the important dance types of the late Renaissance. Nido d'Amore and Furioso alla Spagnuola are dance suites which together include examples of the pavan, galliard, rotta or saltarello, and canary. Passo e Mezzo, based on a chord progression often used in the Renaissance for the structure of a composition or improvisation, was probably a familiar favorite of the court dance bands. It also provides a beautiful foundation for the improvised variations played here on the recorder. Contrapasso, a charming melody in triple time, is accompanied in the manual by a rosette drawing mirroring the danced floor pattern with the following quote: "Contrapasso, created according to correct mathematical principles based on Ovid's verses." From Negri's manual, we have selected Torneo Amorofo, the "tournament of love", which in its strong, martial beginning, presents a parody of a joust - a danced battle of the sexes.