Browsing Through a Little-Known Manuscript

(Prague, Strahov Monastery, D.G. IV. 47)

By DRAGAN PLAMENAC

Although the two manuscripts have a number of compositions in common, the Strahov Codex differs basically from the Speciálnik in that its repertory does not include works by Czech composers or with Czech text and its provenance is unknown. As will be seen, however, certain features make possible a conjecture in this respect.

While less voluminous than the Speciálnik, the Strahov Codex by virtue of its sheer bulk — it contains 306 folios (610 pages), 21.5 x 15 cm in size — ranks with the more important sources of polyphonic music of the later 15th century. It is by no means a carefully written collection; errors and negligence abound in it. The scribe's handwriting shows affinity with the handwriting in parts of the Trent Codices. The manuscript's prime interest resides in its repertory, which consists overwhelmingly of sacred works by Western composers of the 15th century, except for a few secular pieces scattered here and there through the volume. Adding to its interest is the fact that the sacred repertory appears to have been grouped according to a systematic plan based on a variety of musico-liturgical forms and at times on the sequence of the ecclesiastical year. The MS opens with an extended group of 49 anonymous polyphonic Mass introits, a number of which may also be found in the Trent Codices. This group is followed by a group of Kyries and other sections of the Ordinary, Alleluias, motets, hymns, and Magnificats. As far as composers are concerned, Orel, on page 185 of his Počátky, gives a list of names appearing either in the Speciálnik or in one of the other Bohemian sources containing polyphonic music, including the Strahov Codex; but careful scrutiny will show that Orel's list of names is seriously defective. Ascriptions found in Strahov comprise the following names, in the order of their appearance in the manuscript: Standly, T(h)aur(t)h, philippi (Philippi frant. . .?), philippus Johannes, Flemmik, Batty, watlin frew, duffay. Identifications that can be made on the basis of attributions in other sources include Barbingant and Barth. Brollo. Of these names, those of Standly, philippi, watlin frew, duffay, and Brollo have been completely omitted in Orel's list.

Among composers whose names appear in the Codex, Touront and Pillois are represented with comparatively numerous compositions. It is interesting to state that these two men are also exceptionally well represented in the Trent collections and in such an outstanding south-German source as the Schiedel Liederbuch in Munich. Standly, an English composer, can also be found in Trent. Works by this group of composers seem to have belonged to a common stock of compositions favored by the period in south-German border areas. "Batty," by whom virtually all the compositions cited in the Speciálnik have subsequently been utilized, might possibly be identical with H. Battre, whose works occupy the final fascicles in Trent Codex 87. Barth. Brollo's apparently extremely popular Entrepris sui par grant lysse (Oxford, Can. misc. 213), found in the Schiedel and Glogau songbooks as well as in the Buxheim Organ Book (No. 106), turns up in Strahov, fol. 239v-240, as a contra-

1 Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich VII (1900), p. 29.
2 The Strahov Manuscript has also been mentioned by Orel in a paper written in German and published in the Guido Adler-Fest-

103
factum. Congratulamini michi omnes. Viminibus cinge, a cryptic Latin piece with overtones of a magical incantation formula and involving isorhythmic features, has been known to date from a single copy in Glogau (No. 142). Another copy of the piece may be found in Strahov, fol. 252*-253. Of O florens rosa, which bears an attribution to Walter Frye in Schedel and is found with the substituted text “Ave regina” in Trent (No. 1087), there are in Strahov two copies, fol. 204*f and 251*f, both anonymous.

If, in addition to the above-mentioned correspondences between the Strahov Codex and some of the best-known south-German manuscripts of the period, further support were needed to buttress the theory of a southeastern-German origin of the Strahov scribe, it could be found in the appearance in the MS of hitherto unknown polyphonic versions of 15th-century German lieder and of German words accompanying some of the sacred compositions included in the volume. Since I have discussed these pieces in a paper presented at the Congress of the International Musical Society in Cologne in June 1958, there is no need to return to the matter here.

Summing up what has been said, there are strong reasons to believe that the Codex was compiled in one of the monasteries located in the border area between Bohemia and Silesia by a German scribe, in contrast to the Specidnik Codex of whose central-Bohemian provenance and Czech character there cannot be any doubt. On account of the outstanding repertory of 15th-century sacred polyphony that it contains, the Strahov Codex commands our full attention. Our aim here is only to draw attention to a few points of interest, since a comprehensive study of the manuscript is in preparation.

AN UNKNOWN BALLADE BY WALTER FRYE

Our knowledge of the works of this 15th-century English composer has been greatly advanced by recent writings of American scholars. Let us point here above all to Manfred Bukofzer’s researches, which were summarized in his article on Frye in Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart IV, 1069f, and Sylvia Kenney’s Yale dissertation of 1955, part of which has been printed in this Journal, Vol. VIII, pp. 182-202, under the title “Contrafacta in the Works of Walter Frye”.

Among the works that can be ascribed to Frye with certainty, on the basis of documentary evidence, there are two secular compositions in ballade form, originally set to English words. Alas, alas is my chief song and So ys emprentid in my remembrance, and a French rondeau, Tout a par moy. Ascription of the two English ballades to Frye is based on evidence furnished by the two most important sources that contain works of the English composer in the smaller forms: the Mellon Chansonnier in the Yale University Library and the Schedel Liederbuch in Munich. Alas, alas is found in Mellon without the name of a composer but appears in Schedel with an attribution to “Frey” under the guise of a contrafactum with sacred text (“O sacrum convivium”). Of So ys emprentid there exist no less than eight copies in various sources displaying a startling diversity as to accompanying texts. In fact, Mellon is the only source in which the piece is found with its presumably original English words; in all the other sources the composition is found accompanied by either one of two French texts differing from one another, or as a contrafactum with sacred Latin text. A list of concordances may be found on p. 199 of Miss Kenney’s article, mentioned above. As far as Tout a par moy is concerned, the Mellon MS is again the only source that carries the correct attribution to Frye, for the Nivelle de la Chaussee Chansonnier ascribes the piece to Binchois, which is almost surely erroneous. In all other sources the chanson is found without the name of a composer.

In addition to the three pieces named, Miss Kenney’s list of chansons by Frye includes another English ballade, Myn bert is lust, found anonymous in the Mellon manuscript. In ascribing the composition to Frye Miss Kenney followed a suggestion that had first been advanced by Bukofzer “on stylistic and linguistic grounds.” However, the composition, much better known with a French text beginning Grant temps ai eit, to which it is set in four other sources, is ascribed in two of them to another 15th-century English composer, Bedingham. At the time he suggested Frye as the composer of Myn bert is lust, Bukofzer was unaware of the identity between the Mellon piece and Grant temps ai eit. After he became aware of the identity he dropped his suggestion that the composition be given to Frye, and his article in MGG lists only the three chansons previously mentioned as authentic works by Frye in the small forms of secular music.

Since works by Frye are so few in number, the smallest addition to them is of considerable interest. On fol. 245* (p. 489) there appears in Strahov a textless two-part composition inscribed “watlin frew” (see Plate I); the opposite recto page contains an equally textless three-part piece ascribed to “Tauranth” (i.e. Johannes Tauront). It has been said before that some manuscripts of southern- or southeastern-German origin, such as the Schedel and Glogau song-books, show affinities in their respective repertories with the repertory found in Strahov. Moreover, Schedel is one of the most important repositories of works by Frye, containing as it does three motets by the composer and one chanson under the guise of a contrafactum. It has also been pointed out above that Frye’s song-motet O florens rosa is found in Strahov twice, without ascription to a definite composer. All this shows that Frye was one of a limited group of composers whose works were favored by scribes of the region. There can be little doubt that “watlin frew” is nothing more than a corruption of Frye’s name, as entered in an unknown source from which it was copied into the Strahov MS. It is well to remem-
Any lingering doubt about the identity of "Watlin Frew" will be easily dispelled by a comparison of the Strahov piece with the preserved chansons of the English composer. Like Alas, alas and So yt emprentid, the piece is written in typical ballade form. The prima pars has ouvert and clos endings marked by fermatas and the cadential passage at the end of the seconda pars is shaped in analogy with the prima pars. Melodic style and two-part writing in the Strahov ballade are highly reminiscent of Frye's other secular works. Like these, the Strahov piece is written in the D mode, Bukofzer stresses the "finely wrought, expressive melodic features" and the "characteristic melancholy key-note" of Frye's chansons (MGG IV, 1071). All this applies to the Strahov piece also. Both Bukofzer and Kenney point to the fact that Frye's chansons are discant-tenor compositions displaying exceptionally smooth two-part writing between superius and tenor, while the contratenor is assigned a purely harmonic function. This is true of all three secular pieces by Frye preserved in 3-part settings. The Strahov ballade, written for two parts only, dispenses entirely with the contratenor. However, if we compare it, for example, with the 3-part So yt emprentid, added as an appendix to Miss Kenney's article in this JOURNAL, it will be seen that limitation to two parts does not create a structural void: the range of the tenor part in Strahov is simply extended somewhat downwards to assume the character of a combined tenor and contratenor part. While the standard rendering of a piece of this type in three-part setting is by a vocal duet with an accompanying instrument, even a purely vocal performance of a chanson by Frye, with the contratenor omitted, appears "perfectly satisfactory," as Bukofzer and Kenney have remarked. Miss Kenney goes as far as to observe that "all of Frye's chansons and chanson-motets, in fact, may have been conceived originally as two-part compositions"—i.e. in the form assumed by "Frew's" textless ballade in the Strahov Codex.

In this connection it will be found particularly appropriate to quote a passage from a minor treatise by Johannes Tinctoris. In his De inventione et usu musicae, the 15th-century theorist recounts having heard, at the time when he was teaching music to choir-boys at the Cathedral of Chartres, a fellow-countryman of his, Gerard of Brabant, perform the "miraculous" feat of singing simultaneously to perfection the parts of the superius and the tenor of Frye's French rondeau C'est a par moy. The feat was most probably based on some exceptional "ventriloquial" skill on the part of the singer. It is mentioned here because it brought about an authoritative contemporaneous report of a two-part performance, with the contratenor omitted, of Frye's rondeau, which has come down to us in a three-part version. At all events, its performance in this form seems to have impressed the theorist as having been highly satisfactory. Incidentally, a working a 2 of Frye's rondeau by Tinctoris himself may be found in the Segovia Codex, fols. CCIII-CCV.

Greatly revealing, for the understanding of Frye's personal idiom is a comparison of C'est a par moy with our textless ballade in the Strahov Codex. The melodic affinities between the two compositions are striking. As an example, let me quote the beginning of the tenor part in both pieces:

Ex. 1

Thus, on purely musical grounds, the identification of "Watlin Frew" with Walter Frye cannot be seriously doubted. The Strahov piece must be considered a most welcome addition to the small number of secular works by the English composer that have hitherto been known.

An Unknown Hymn-Setting by Dufay?

Browsing through the Strahov Codex we find the name of Dufay on fol. 278 (p. 554). The composition copied into the manuscript on the upper part of this page is a 4-part setting of the hymn "Exultet caelestia laudibus." (See Plate 2) As has been said above, the final portion of the Codex (from fol. 238 to the end) contains a substantial group of polyphonic hymns and Magnificats. All these compositions are anonymous; the only exception to this rule is the appearance of Dufay's name on fol. 278. However, the name—spelled "dufay"—is found there, not written above the Superius, but entered at the beginning of the Contratenor 2a, immediately following the identification of the voice-part. Dufay's contribution to polyphonic hymn composition is important and generally known. In the collection of polyphonic hymn-settings composed by him about 1430 in Rome and constituting a cycle for the entire ecclesiastical year, twenty-one have been recognized as authentic while eight are considered spurious or at least doubtful. The settings are regularly for three parts. The hymn-tune is usually found paraphrased in the top voice which, as pointed out by R. Gerber, is the only voice-part that carries the hymn text in the older sources (i.e. before 1500). This circumstance strongly...
suggests an originally mixed, vocal-instrumental manner of performance for these compositions. In the later sources (after 1500) the text is found added to all voices, which reflects the growing popularity of a cappella performance.

As concerns the Strahov setting, it must be stated that in accordance with general 15th-century practice the hymn-text in it is added only to the Superius. However, the primary bearer of the hymn-tune here is not the Superius, as is the rule in the accredited Dufay settings, but the Tenor, which retains rather faithfully the shape of the original melody. In connection with this, another statement must be made: the tune on which the Strahov setting is based is usually associated in older hymnals with the text Ad cenam agni providi rather than with Exultet caelum laudibus. It is with the Ad cenam text that the tune appears in the Worcester Hymnal (Chapter Library of Worcester Cathedral, F. 160)\(^{12}\), whereas Dufay’s known setting of Exultet caelum laudibus (Das Chorwerk 49, p. 20f) is based on a different melody.

The general style-characteristics of the Strahov setting, when compared to Dufay’s early hymn cycle, and the fact that the name is added exclusively to a subsidiary voice-part, the Contratenor 2\(^{\text{nd}}\), tend to disprove the view that the setting in its entirety might be claimed for the 15th-century composer. The circumstance, however, that the name of Dufay entered in this place is the only instance of a composer’s name appearing in the hymn and Magnificat sections of the Strahov Codex definitely supports the view that this entry is of greater significance and not simply due to a scribe’s whim or error. It seems likely that we are confronted with a three-part composition by an unknown composer, to which Dufay, for reasons of greater richness of texture and fullness of sound, has added a fourth part of his own. Such additions are frequently encountered in sources of the period, applied both to secular chansons and to sacred compositions in smaller forms of a song-like character. The three-part Ques mi vida by the Spaniard Cornago was thus transformed into a four-part composition by Ockeghem, who replaced Cornago’s Contratenor with two contratenor parts of his own composition, while Ockeghem’s D’ung autre amez was in turn provided with an added Bassus by an unknown composer. Similarly, Colinet de Launoit’s three-part Cela sans plus was fitted with a Bassus by Johannes Martini. It would be easy to adduce a considerable number of similar instances.

Thus the hymn-setting in Strahov, even if we decide against claiming it for Dufay in its entirety, remains connected with the great 15th-century composer through the additional part that the latter provided for it. Still, if we prefer to ascribe the entire piece to Dufay, it must of necessity have been a late work, written out of context with the composer’s known cycle.

Many other features make browsing through the Strahov Codex an interesting and rewarding experience.
BROWSING THROUGH A LITTLE-KNOWN MANUSCRIPT

Ex. 2 Watlin Frew, Strahov, Folio 245v (p. 489)
Here are just a few: polyphonic Mass cycles with motets as component parts; works by Touront, Pillois, Standley, not known from other sources; an intriguing name, "flem-mik," found in Strahov only; a threepart composition with the initial words "[O] Rosabella" (See Plate 3), the music of which shows no relation to the famous pieces ascribed to Dunstable (Bedingham) and Ciconia; an already mentioned, highly unusual Latin piece, *Viminibus cinge*, known also from the Glogauer Liederbuch, whose partly isorhythmic character has been obscured in the modern transcription published in *Das Erbe deutscher Musik*, I, Band 8.

These few remarks may serve to indicate the very real interest that the Strahov Codex holds out to the student of 15th-century polyphony.

University of Illinois

---

1) MS d.
2) MS c.
3) Between a and a, the MS has a superfluous minima f.
4) MS has semibreve rest.
5) MS has brevis without a dot.
6) In the MS, the second note in the ligature lacks the dot.
7) Not altered? (Cf. measures 2-3.)