**Account of a festival**

(Feast of the Pheasant, 1454)

From F. Alberto: *Gallo Music of the Middle Ages II*

In 1429 when he married Isabella of Portugal, Philip of Burgundy founded the Order of the Knights of the Golden Fleece, whose insignia was a golden chain from which hung a gold fleece inscribed with the motto `pretium non vile laborum'. Meetings of the members of the order were held periodically in the different cities of the duchy, and provided some of the many festive occasions on which the singers the and instrumentalists of the duke (who took a keen interest in music) were on show. Philip was also interested in the literary and figurative patronized the painter Jan van Eyck. Philip paid a great deal of attention to the education of his son Charles, who succeeded him in 1467: based on 'humanist' ideals, this education also included music, so that from childhood Charles learnt to play the harp and, according

to contemporary evidence, was probably also capable of composing pieces of mensural polyphony.

Father and son both attended the feast organized for the meeting of the Knights of the Golden Fleece at Lille on 17 February 1454. This meeting had a special purpose: on 29 May 1453 the Turks had seized Constantinople, destroying the last remnants of the Eastern Roman Empire, and prompted by this Philip organized the meeting of the knights as an occasion on which to announce publicly the idea of a new crusade and his commitment to it. The announcement was at the end of a banquet enlivened by musical and dramatic *entremetz* (following a custom already established at the court of France since at least the end of the previous century)[[1]](#endnote-1) of which an official description was written and then circulated in various versions.[[2]](#endnote-2) The text provides major evidence about the way in which music was used in the fifteenth century.

In a large hall, whose walls were covered by tapestries, there were three platforms, one large, one medium and one small. On the medium-sized one, at the centre of which sat the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, a church was built in which there were four singers, an organ and a bell. On the large platform, in the centre of which sat the duke's son, Charles the Bold, a small fort was built, which held twenty-eight singers and instrumentalists. As soon as the guests were seated, the church bell began to sound and then the four singers, three boys for the upper voices and a tenor for the lowest, sang a polyphonic piece as a blessing on the meal. Immediately after this, an instrumentalist from the fort dressed as a shepherd played a piece on a bagpipe (*cornemuse*). Then came the first show: a horse advanced backwards into the hall from the main door, on it two trumpeters who played a trumpet piece. Then it was again the turn of the church, from which an organ piece was performed 'moult doucement', immediately followed by a composition using a German cornett played from the fort 'moult estrangement'. At this point a monster, half griffin and half man, entered the hall and went round it, carrying on its shoulders a man standing on his hands with his feet in the air. The singers in the church resumed their singing with a piece performed 'très bien et très doucement'; the fort replied with a piece performed by an instrumental trio made up of a lute, a *dolzaina* and a third unspecified `instrument concordant'.

At one end of the hall a stage was constructed, hidden by a curtain of green silk, from which four *chiarine* (clarino trumpets) played loudly. Once their sound had died away, the curtain was removed and the first of a series of scenes representing episodes from the myth of Jason's quest for the golden fleece took place: in this the hero fought angry bulls. Music was resumed from the church, where the organ played a solo piece which lasted `comme le loing d'un motet', and which might even have been an instrumental transcription of an actual motet, followed by a `chanchon' with three vocal parts from the fort, *La saulvegarde de ma vie* (now lost). Then a stag `merveilluesement grant et bel' entered the hall: on its back was a twelve-year-old girl who began to sing 'moult hauls et cler' the upper voice of a polyphonic piece, while a singer inside the stag sang the tenor part. The piece performed on this occasion was the rondeau *Je ne vis onque la pareille*, variously attributed in those manuscripts in which it survives to Dufay or Binchois. The pattern of alternating performances resumed: the four church singers sang a motet; two of the fort's singers performed a piece accompanied by a lute. After the *chiarine*, once more played from the stage, a second episode from the story of Jason was enacted: this time the hero defeated the serpent. From the church an organ piece was played, and from the fort a piece for four flutes. A flaming dragon flew across the hall above the heads of the audience. Next the church presented a purely vocal performance, to which the fort replied with a piece sung by one of the ladies-in-waiting of the Duchess of Burgundy, accompanied by two *vielles* and a lute. A hunting scene followed: from one end of the hall a heron rose in flight and immediately two falcons flew up from the other end and quickly struck down the heron who fell into the middle of the hall. Another unspecified vocal piece was heard from the church, and from the fort the sound of three drummers (usually also equipped with small flutes) who together played 'une très joyeuse chanson'. The four *chiarine* sounded again from the stage, followed by the third episode of the story of Jason: the hero sowed the teeth of the serpent he had slain, and from the teeth sprang up warriors, who fought and killed each other. A final piece for solo organ came from the church, and a piece imitating the sounds of a hunt from the fort, with the singers barking like dogs and the trumpets playing as if they were deep in a forest. The final show was that of a giant dressed like a Turk, who entered the hall leading an elephant on whose back was a castle containing a lady dressed in white and wrapped in a black cloak. Reciting a rondeau, the lady invited the giant to come to a halt, which he did as soon as he had reached the central platform where the duke was seated. At this point the lady 'commença sa complaints et lamentacion à voix piteuse et femmenine'. What she recited was a long text in verse revealing that she represented the Catholic Church; she lamented the deplorable state to which she had been reduced by the power of the Turks, and called the princes of Christendom to her aid. (This 'lamentation scene' probably inspired Dufay, who in the following year composed four `lamentacions de Constantinoble', as he called them. One of these, a four-voice piece entitled *Lamentatto sancte matris ecclesie ConstantinOpolitane* still survives. In it the upper voice sings a French text *O tres pitieulx de tout espoir fontaine*, while the *tenor* sings Latin words from the lamentations of Jeremiah, *Omnes amici eius spreverunt eam*.) Once he had listened to this, the Duke of Burgundy read his own declaration in which he vowed to dedicate all his efforts to undertaking a crusade against the infidels. The lady then thanked him by singing another brief poem and left the room while all the knights who were present joined their vows to the duke's.

The music for the 1454 feast was carefully arranged so that vocal performances alternated with instrumental ones. It is likely that the former were entrusted to the musicians of the ducal chapel, which in 1454 had some twenty members, and the latter to the group of ten regularly retained instrumentalists. The organ in the church on the medium-sized platform was probably made by Henricus Arnault, born at Zwolle in Germany, but resident in Dijon where he died in 1465; he was not only 'ducum Burgundie medicus et astrologus perfectissimus' but also an expert on the construction of musical instruments, about which he left notes and drawings. The pieces performed by the instruments were probably instrumental transcrip­tions of vocal compositions: much of the music of Dufay, as well as that of Binchois and other composers who worked at the court of Burgundy, is to be found copied in instrumental versions in a contemporary German manuscript (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbib­liothek, Mus.3725, the so-called *Buxheimer Orgelbuch* after the Charterhouse of Buxheim in which it was preserved). This manuscript, it seems, came from the school of the German organist and instrumentalist Conrad Paumann, whom Philip the Good heard play at the court of Bavaria in May of that same year, 1454. In this period, especially in Germany, there was an increased interest in collections of instrumental music, which grew in importance and autonomy in subsequent centuries.

The whole entertainment made up of these eighteen *entremetz* was constructed according to rigidly symmetrical rules: nine of the *entremetz* were musical, each made up of one performance by the church and one by the fort; nine were dramatic, made up of three scenes involving Jason inserted between six shows in the hall, which were distributed between two 'invented' visions (the horse and the man on the monster), two aerial visions (the dragon and the heron), and two female characters on animals (the stag and the elephant). Here is the sequence, the dramatic *entremetz* distinguished from the musical ones by bold type.

four singers / cornemuse

**show of the horse**

organ / cornett

**show of the monster**

four singers / lute, dolzaina, and one other instrument

**first scene of the story of Jason**

organ / three singers

**show of the girl on the stag**

four singers / two singers and a lute second scene of the story of Jason organ / four flutes

**show of the dragon**

four singers / female singers, two v0es and a lute

**show of the heron**

four singers / three drums (with small flutes) third scene of the story of Jason organ / singers and trumpets

**show of the church on the elephant**

Within this structure music had very specific purposes and significance in relation to both the spatial and the temporal dimensions of the entertainment. Spatially, there was a clear distinction between the sacred (the singers and the organist in the church) and the secular (the singers and instrumentalists in the fort). The coexistence of these two aspects, which indeed combined in their successive entrances, can be seen almost as symbolizing an important principle of mensural polyphony: secular motets were created on liturgical melodies, while Masses were based on the tunes of secular songs. Then there was the distinction between the music which came from the platforms and acted as general background to the whole spectacle, and the `toccate' of the *chiarine* from the end of the stage which introduced the three episodes of the story of Jason. And finally there was the distinction between the platform and stage music, which was extraneous to the action, and the music included in some of the shows crossing the hall, which was an integral part of the spectacle. As for the temporal element, the sequence was controlled in such a way that musical and dramatic moments alternated regularly; conse­quently, in relation to the double purpose of the entertainment (to reunite the knights of the order and to plan the crusade against the Turks), the series of nine musical interludes had the double task of framing the three scenes of Jason in search of the golden fleece and of setting the pace in preparation for the final entrance of the church begging for help.

`Music increases the joyfulness of banquets': this is the eighteenth of the twenty effects described by Tinctoris in his treatise, *Complexus effectuum musices*, quoted above, in which he sought past precedents for the habit of listening to music which he claimed to be very common in his own time amongst `magnatibus splendide ac solemniter epulantibus'. He did not seem to realize that in fifteenth-century entertainments like the one held at Lille music was no longer simply something to be listened to, but something which introduced, accompanied and set the pace of an event, a spectacle to be watched (or imagined). And he could not foresee that this was to be the role of music in the future.

1. G. Reaney ‘Music in the late medieval entrements’ *Annals Musicologique* 7 1964-77, 51-65 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Chronique de Mathieu d’Escouchy* and *Memoires d’;Olivier de la Marche* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)