

Ars Nova and Trecento music in 14th-century Europe

The Middle Ages are often called the 'Dark Ages' of our Western civilisation, situated as they are between the blossoming of the Roman period and the revival of these classical ideals during the Renaissance. This view is perhaps applicable to the period of decline and fall, when Western Europe fought its struggle of emancipation against the Romans. However, once balance had been restored and feudal structures put in place, the high nobility were successful in centralising their resources and power to create a grandiose and exceptionally luxurious and refined way of life, today referred to as *Gothic*.

Originating in France, this new art (of living) – *Ars Nova* – spread throughout Europe, breaking wide open all the stiff and ponderous structures of the past (*Ars Antiqua*). The French model was eagerly adopted by the nobility and affluent bourgeoisie in 14th-century Italy; that model was now, however, embedded in that country's native (musical) tradition (*Trecento*).

In the same way that the walls of the Gothic cathedrals were broken open, music now explored for the first time the autonomy of each musical line. In this polyphonic voyage of discovery undertaken by 14th-century composers, it was particularly the organisation of time that went through an unprecedented process of refinement and complexity. Whereas in *Ars Antiqua*, all voices were synchronised (homophony), in the *Ars Nova*, each voice was accorded its

own characteristics in a strict pattern of roles most clearly evident in *isorhythmic* (occasional) *motets*. Through the highly refined treatment of each part's temporal subdivisions, a rhythmic complexity was created, the like of which Western-European music would never again equal.

In Italy, the composers of the *Trecento* were chiefly interested in brilliant virtuosity and new harmonies. The coming together of the two streams around 1400 led to a highly-refined tonal language (*Ars subtilior*), which was meticulously cultivated at certain courts around Europe.

In Flanders, too, this musical innovation left its mark. In Ghent, the great urban centre of the region, a great many works have been found, local versions of this Europe-wide movement.

All the dimensions of 14th-century music are heard in the course of the performance of 'Foi', including both 'learned' (notated) music, as found in mass movements, motets, courtly songs (the ballade, virelai and rondeau) and courtly dances, and 'simple' (non-notated) music, which has come down to us in oral traditions.

This diversity guarantees a varied selection of music that continues not only to captivate us today as listeners, but can also touch us emotionally and spiritually.

DIRK SNELLINGS — TRANSLATED BY STRATTON BULL