

Piffaro's Beginning

Ah, Beginnings...they can be exciting, stimulating and even a little scary at times. They may mark a break with the preexistent in an attempt to chart some new course, or revive an older, lost tradition. So it was with a fledgling group of reed players from the Collegium Musicum at the University of Pennsylvania in 1980, when they decided to launch their own ensemble, calling it simply and graphically, the Renaissance Wind Band. Their intent was to pursue renaissance wind playing, especially the double-reed instruments, the shawms, dulcians, krumhorns and bagpipes, in a way that was lacking in the nascent early music revival in this country at the time, at least on a professional level. It was a courageous and daring leap into the unknown in many ways. And it was Piffaro's beginning!

On a somewhat ragtag collection of instruments, the best available at the time, the group formed a 5-part band and began collecting repertoire, teaching themselves the challenging techniques demanded by the horns, learned how to make successful reeds and figured out who played what, when and how. It was exciting and groundbreaking, something new and uncharted. As with many a nascent experiment in group formation, personnel changed over the first 4 years of ensemble building, but eventually settled into a coterie of like-minded individuals committed to creating an entity with roots that might support the growth of a vibrant and lasting ensemble.

What's a musical ensemble to do but perform, so by the winter of 1984 the group decided it was time to go public, to make the leap into that great unknown of audience response. December of that year saw the inaugural show, a Christmas-themed program with a guest singer. Michael Caruso in his review of the concert summed up the audience response with these words: "I attended one of the most unusual yet delightful Christmas concerts of my entire life Saturday evening...it featured music of the season in renditions that sparkled with fine musicianship and good holiday cheer." Emboldened by this reaction, the Renaissance Wind Band decided to self-present again in the Spring of 1995, again to positive audience reaction.

The success of those first shows led them to apply for and receive non-profit status with the IRS, engage a small board of directors, incorporate in the State of Pennsylvania as The Philadelphia Renaissance Wind Band and thus achieve "official" status, the scary part of this beginning. How to make a living out of this endeavor became the next challenge, leading to the decision to begin an annual concert series in the Delaware Valley. And here it is, Fall of 2019, and the group, now Piffaro, The Renaissance Band, is beginning its 35th year of that series, performing late medieval through early baroque music on period instruments for local audiences, just as dreamed almost 40 years ago. Who knew? Who could have known? An auspicious beginning, a new venture, a lasting endeavor. The rest is, as they say, history!

Today's concert, and this whole season, takes its impetus from an anniversary-inspired reflection on beginnings - on the "new." The first piece on the program has as the first word of its title and text the Latin word Nova, "New." An annunciatory piece for the Christmas season, it serves in this concert to launch the new season and open today's concert in dramatic fashion. Fittingly, the first sounds heard come from two instruments new to Piffaro, straight trumpets having their debut sounding in this weekend's concerts. Pursuit of the new has guided the ensemble for these many years - new instruments, new personnel, new repertoire, even new compositions - not for its own sake, but in order to serve the primary goal of presenting the music in the best possible light, on the best equipment available and in the most learned and entertaining programs.

Burgundian Beginnings

Today's program draws its conception from another consequential beginning, one rooted in the musical tradition emanating from the great courts of the dukes of Burgundy that spanned the better part of the 15th century. A brief historical note may clarify here.

By the middle of the 14th century the main and most striking polyphonic tradition of composition in continental Europe was the French *Ars subtilior*, a style that came to revel in a mathematical complexity of rhythm that, in the hands of composers like Solage, verged on obsession by the end of the century. There was little room for further rhythmic development and, had there been, the notation itself would have been hard pressed to represent it. This was music for a learned elite, both in the composing and the performing. It was the culmination of a couple of centuries of development that had reached a terminus beyond which composers, to say nothing of performers and listeners, could not travel. There was need for a change and change came.

The music historian, Allan Atlas, described the moment succinctly:

"In the end, a reaction was bound to set in: a movement toward simplification and clarity. And when it did, around the turn of the fifteenth century, it emerged in the form of a new central tradition in the Low Countries, much of which fell within the domains of the dukes of Burgundy."

He goes on to note a certain inevitability involved in this reaction in Burgundian lands, this new beginning for musical composition and performance:

"It was not by accident that this new tradition was spawned in and around the duchy of Burgundy rather than in royal France. Patronage of the arts simply followed political power and commercial wealth. So when France fell on hard times around the turn of the fifteenth century, the void was filled by the independent duchy of Burgundy, which had been created by the French crown itself just a few decades earlier and had quickly grown into the most powerful and wealthy dynasty in Europe."

To be true to history, it was the English composers at the end of the 14th c., most notably John Dunstable, who had initiated the change. This new course of composition, however, quickly crossed the English channel and took root on continental soil, where it flourished in the hands of composers, chief among them Gilles Binchois, Guillaume Du Fay and Antoine Busnois, all of whom served the Burgundian dukes.

Just who were these dukes and how consequential was the duchy in late medieval and renaissance European history? A walk through the dynastic line with pertinent facts puts this new beginning, both political and musical, into perspective.

The Duchy and Valois dukes of Burgundy

Philip the Bold (17 January 1342 – 27 April 1404)

fourth and youngest son of King John II of France and his wife, Bonne of Luxembourg.

younger brother of French Charles V who invested him with the area known as Burgundy in 1364.

married Margaret of Flanders, 1369.

inherited her family's domains in the Low Countries in 1389, where he established his court.

John the Fearless (28 May 1371 – 10 September 1419)

son of Philip the Bold, consolidated the patrimony.

rash, unscrupulous, and violent political dealings contributed to the eruption of the Armagnac-Burgundian Civil War in France, and culminated in his assassination in 1419.

Philip the Good (31 July 1396 – 15 June 1467, i.e. Philip III)

succeeded John the Fearless in 1419; Duke of Burgundy as Philip III until his death..

added territories of Holland, Brabant and Hainaut to the duchy.

loved ostentatious display and lavishly patronized arts in the Low Countries

a member of a cadet line of the Valois dynasty, to which all the 15th-century kings of France belonged.

During his reign, Burgundy reached the apex of its prosperity and prestige and became a leading center of the arts.

known in history for his administrative reforms, his patronage of Flemish artists such as Jan van Eyck and Franco-Flemish composers such as Gilles Binchois, and the capture of Joan of Arc.

alternated between alliances with the English and the French in an attempt to improve his dynasty's position.

As ruler of Flanders, Brabant, Limburg, Artois, Hainaut, Holland, Zeeland, Friesland and Namur, he played an important role in the history of the Low Countries.

Charles the Bold (10 November 1433 – 5 January 1477)

name also translated as Charles the Reckless.

baptised Charles Martin, he was Duke of Burgundy from 1467 to 1477, when he died without male heirs - the last Duke of Burgundy from the House of Valois.

His early death at the Battle of Nancy at the hands of Swiss mercenaries fighting for René II, Duke of Lorraine was of great consequence in European history. The Burgundian domains, long wedged between the growing powers of France and the Habsburg Empire, were divided, but the precise disposition of the possessions was disputed among the European powers for centuries.

Mary the Rich (13 February 1457 – 27 March 1482)

Duchess of Burgundy, reigned over many of the territories of the Duchy of Burgundy, now mainly in France and the Low Countries, from 1477 until her death.

The only child of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, and his wife Isabella of Bourbon, she inherited the duchy upon the death of her father.

Owing to the great prosperity of many of her territories, Mary was often referred to as Mary the Rich.

Mary selected Archduke Maximilian of Austria, the future Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, to become her husband and co-ruler. The marriage took place at Ghent on 19 August 1477. Mary's marriage into the House of Habsburg initiated two centuries of contention between France and the Habsburgs (later of Kings of Spain as well as Holy Roman Emperors), a struggle that climaxed with the War of the Spanish Succession in the years 1701–1714.

In the Netherlands, French aggression was temporarily checked and internal peace was largely restored.

Philip the Fair (i.e. the Handsome, 22 July 1478 – 25 September 1506)

son of Mary and Maximilian I, Duke of Burgundy from 1482 to 1506 and the first member of the house of Habsburg to be King of Castile as Philip I.

the progenitor of every later monarch of Spain, even up to today. died before his father, and therefore never inherited his father's territories or became Holy Roman Emperor. the pivot around which the Habsburg dynasty acquired a large portion of its extensive lands, inheriting Burgundy from his mother (which included present-day Netherlands, Belgium and parts of France) and acquiring much of Spain and its possessions in the New World by marriage to Joanna; his progeny would dominate European history for the next two centuries.

Charles V (24 February 1500 – 21 September 1558)

son of Philip the Fair and Joanna the Mad.

became Holy Roman emperor at the early death of his father.

united the Habsburg, Burgundian, Castilian, and Aragonese inheritances.

Atlas once again: "Finally, the sixteenth century saw the entire realm – much of Germany-Austria, the Low Countries, and all of Spain (with its possessions in the Americas) – united in the hands of Philip and Joanna's son (Charles the Bold's great-grandson), the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who thus ruled an empire the extent of which would not be matched until the time of Napoleon."

Not a shabby outcome to the Burgundian beginnings in the late 14th century.

Burgundian Composers & Beyond

With this political picture in mind, the concert program travels from Nicolas Grenon, French composer who served the court of John the Fearless, to Nicolas Gombert, composer of Flemish origin who by 1526 was a singer in the court chapel of Emperor Charles V. In between these termini the works of Gilles Binchois and Guillaume Du Fay, who both flourished under the lavish patronage of Philip the Good, of Antoine Busnois, whose career was largely spent at the court of Charles the Bold, and the works of lesser known composers, provide a cross section of the types of compositions that sounded throughout Burgundian lands and beyond.

The above-named composers are often referred to as the Burgundian School in the main through their service to the Burgundian dukes themselves. However, at the intersection of the Burgundian duchy and the Habsburg line, when Mary the Rich married Maximilian I, the compositional baton is passed to composers better known today as Franco-Flemish. The program makes this transition in its second half, beginning with the works of one of the most famous of the Franco-Flemish group, Johannes Ockeghem. His connection to the Burgundian School lies in his studies with Gilles Binchois, for whom he wrote the famous lament that opens our second half, *Mort tu as navré*. Its archaic flavor and ballade form were characteristic of the medieval motet tradition and a nod of homage to a formative teacher.

This student-teacher relationship reads like another dynastic lineage, as the next composer on the program, Josquin des Prez, learned much of his craft at the feet of Ockeghem. Josquin's lament on his teacher's death, *Nymphes des bois*, continues the tradition and in its text mentions four of the great Franco-Flemish composers of the day, including himself, Pierre de la Rue, Antoine Brumel and Loyset Compère. Josquin mastered all the inherited genres of composition and introduced new trends that made him one of the most pivotal composers of the time. His interest and success in writing homorhythmic works, like the rambunctious Scaramella, paved the way for the next generation of French composers especially.

Gombert's *Musae Jovis*, the lament on the death of his teacher, Josquin, continues the musical lineage that originated with the beginnings of the Burgundian era. He follows both Ockeghem and Josquin by setting his lament in the phrygian mode on E, often used to express sentiments of mourning and sadness, and by inserting a striking Bb moment that appears in both his predecessors' laments. The concert ends with a selection of dances published by Tylman Susato, a trumpeter at the Antwerp Cathedral by 1531, but most notably a music publisher who established the first important music press in the Low Countries by 1543.

Development of Brass Instruments in the Burgundian Period

Though the Renaissance Wind Band almost 40 years ago consisted entirely of reed players and intended at the outset to pursue reed instruments and performance, it was soon discovered that in order to represent wind playing and ensembles in the late medieval and renaissance periods with any historical veracity, it was necessary to add brass to the reed sound, forming what was the reed/brass combination of all the professional wind bands of court, cathedral and town from the mid 15th century on.

Major developments in brass instruments occurred in this Burgundian period and among "Burgundian" composers. At the outset of the duchy's storied history the straight or natural trumpet, called the *tuba*, was the only brass instrument in evidence. Its single length of tubing limited its possible notes to the overtone series produced by that length, and thus the instrument was only capable of fanfares utilizing the notes at the lower spectrum of that series. Numerous works from Burgundian composers seem to give evidence or at least hint at what these trumpeters, called *tibicen*, were playing, most notably the *Gloria ad modum tubae* of Du Fay, but also in the *Missa Tuba* of Cousins, the anonymous *Tuba gallicalis* and the *L'homme armé* of Morton. Without changing the length of the tubing, the trumpets were incapable of sounding a diatonic scale or playing a simple melody, except in the very upper, clarion register. Thus, in the iconography of the time, trumpets and trumpeters were generally depicted performing alone or often with percussion, especially in military settings.

That ability to play melodically was made partially successful by a development of the trumpet called a slide trumpet today. Though no such instrument survives, iconographic depictions suggest its emergence somewhere in the second quarter of the 15th century. With the fixed length of tubing set on a slide positioned right out of the mouthpiece, the player could alter the length of the tubing by moving the entire instrument in and out on the slide, and thus produce many more notes. Nevertheless, the instrument was still not fully diatonic in its primary octave. Despite this minor limitation, the slide trumpet seems to have joined the discant shawm and the bombard, the two main double-reed instruments at the time, forming what Johannes Tinctoris, musical theorist of the 15th c., termed the *alta capella*, or simply *alta*, according to one interpretation of the artistic depictions of this ensemble from the Burgundian period.

The final stage in this development most likely occurred at least by the 1470s, if not earlier, when the sackbut (from Old French *saqueboute*, "pull-push") displaced the slide trumpet. The new instrument's double slide made it fully chromatic and highly versatile with a broad range and dynamic capability. The sackbuts served the loud band by giving the shawm and bombard a true tenor to baritone range and thus 4-part writing could be performed by shawm, bombard and two sackbuts, among other configurations.

Today's concert seeks to show this history of the brass development together with the concomitant expansion of the wind band during the Burgundian period through the music itself and through the various combinations of instruments selected for the various pieces.

-Bob Wiemken