

MATTEO NANNI

Basle

TRANSMISSION OF MUSICAL KNOWLEDGE
AND HISTORY OF EUROPEAN CULTURE
IN THE EARLY DECADES OF THE 15TH CENTURY

The century of the great Councils of Constance and Basle is marked by a rapid evolution in music, boosted by unprecedented opportunities for exchange between different musical conceptions, aesthetic ideals and cultural impulses. In the years that followed the Council of Constance, we can observe a paradigmatic humanist renewal, based on the meeting and intermingling of different artistic and thought traditions. The category of ‘evolution’ and the very idea of ‘rebirth’, i.e. that “legend of a progress” that takes place in connection with the arts and music, as discussed by Reinhard Strohm¹ – these notions must be read today not only in the light of stylistic harmonization, but also as a distinctive aspect of the search for a cultural identity. Even from a historical-musical point of view, what we witness is the building of a new European taste from the fusion of several local styles and practices, which was to spread across the whole continent thanks to the circulation of manuscript collections,² and was also embraced, albeit not consistently, by composers from more distant regions. The 15th century can be regarded as the century in which a new, broad-spectrum European musical identity emerged. The paradigm of this search for an identity, with all the problematic, but also productive, implications inherent in the very notion of identity,³ provides us with a historical-operative category that can help us think beyond the late-Medieval historiographical object. Relying on a dialectical reading, we will be able to fully exploit the notion of cultural identity by putting it in a wider context, in relation to, more generally, the transmission of musical knowledge.

Shaken by the uncertainties of the 14th century, a few decades after the beginning of the schism, Europe undertook the search for a new cultural

¹ R. STROHM, *Guillaume Du Fay, Martin le Franc und die humanistische Legende der Musik*, Winterthur (Switzerland), Amadeus, 2007, p. 34.

² Some of the most significant manuscripts: Trento, Museo Provinciale d’Arte, Castello del Buonconsiglio, 1374-1379 (*olim* 87-92); Trento, Archivio Diocesano, 93* (*olim* BL); Aosta, Biblioteca del Seminario Maggiore, 15; *olim* Strasbourg, Bibliothèque Municipale, 222 C. 22 (lost); Bologna, Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica di Bologna, Q.15; München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14274 (*olim* Mus. ms 3232a; Codice St. Emmeram).

³ On this subject see *Identität und Krise? Zur Deutung vormoderner Selbst-, Welt- und Fremderfahrungen*, ed. by C. Dartmann and C. Meyer, Münster, Rhema, 2007.

identity, in which the wish for political-religious unity and the renewal of culture and the arts acted as a substitute for what could not be found in the real world. Although in 1417 the schism had officially ended with the election of Pope Martin V during the Council of Constance, divisions within the Christian world remained, as shown by the Hussite wars or the many elections of antipopes. The Council of Basle, too,⁴ is to be regarded as one such attempt at establishing a new balance, which may have failed politically, but was successful in terms of cultural history. The goals set in 1431 included fighting heresy, reuniting the Christian peoples in one church, putting an end to internal conflicts, and a pressing reform of the Church. Undoubtedly, the Council of Basle as a historical event is particularly significant for the humanist research of a new cultural identity and, as we will see, it was instrumental in the meeting and interchange of people and of real practices in music culture. The question we should ask ourselves is, therefore, how the historical evolution of music in the first half of the 15th century, characterised by an internationalization of European musical culture, can be read as a continuation of the cultural process of early Humanism.

During the years of the Council of Basle, the famous theologian and philosopher Nicholas of Cusa started a seminal debate on the question of identity. Many of his writings testify to, and reflect on, a redefinition of the relationship between faith and knowledge from a philosophical and theological standpoint, as well as on the relationship between different cultures – especially among the three great monotheistic religions, and finally on the difficult issue of the cultural identity of the Christian world. A work like *De concordantia catholica*, written in Basle between 1432 and 1433 with the planned purpose of proposing a solution to the violent conflict with the Hussites, can be taken as a model of that search for balance between reform and unification, which marked the first half of the 15th century. The reflections of Cusa reveal one of the most central intellectual visions in the history of culture in the 15th century and, at the same time, they reflect a common sensibility: the widespread desire for a religious and cultural identity. The very presence in Basle of such prominent intellectual figures as, just to name a few, Cusa himself, Juan de Segovia, Enea Silvio Piccolomini and Pietro da Noceto, clearly shows that Basle in the Council years had turned into the breeding ground for the new humanist cultural project.

⁴ See the two main collections of sources: *Monumenta conciliorum generalium seculi decimi quinti*, 4 vols., ed. by K. Stehlin, K. W. Hieronimus and G. Boner, Vienna-Basle, F. Palacky, 1873-1935, and *Concilium Basiliense. Studien und Quellen zur Geschichte des Konzils von Basel*, 8 vols., ed. by J. Haller, G. Beckmann, R. Wackernagel, G. Coggiola and H. Herre, Basle, J. Haller, 1896-1936, as well as the studies: *Das Basler Konzil: 1431-1449. Forschungsstand und Probleme*, ed. by J. Helmuth, Cologne, Böhlau, 1987, and *Die Konzilien von Pisa (1409), Konstanz (1414-1418) und Basel (1431-1449). Institution und Personen*, ed. by H. Müller and J. Helmuth, Ostfildern, Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2007.

Even the conversational, anecdotic diary of Andrea Gatari,⁵ the seneschal who accompanied Venetian envoy Giovan Francesco Capodilista to the Council from September 1433 to October 1435, depicts the city, while it was hosting a political event of such importance, as a true crucible of cultures. Over a few years, the late-medieval town, crowded and overflowing with wealth, attracted many of the protagonists of European culture, and gave them opportunities for a busy intellectual exchange, thus influencing a whole generation of intellectuals and artists. For some cultural figures, we know that they lived in Basle in those years – for others, although we do not have any documents, we can be sure that they strongly partook of the humanist spirit of renewal. First of all we should mention painter Konrad Witz and poet Martin Le Franc, as well as musicians Nicolas de Merques, Johannes Brassart, Petrus Wilhelmi of Grudencz and Oswald von Wolkenstein, and secondly composers such Guillaume Du Fay, Gilles de Bins dit Binchois and Johannes de Sarto.

While, on the one hand, Margaret Bent was rightly sceptical about a possible, direct relationship between music and the literary ideals of Humanism (even though she proved that the Humanists were themselves strongly interested in polyphonic music),⁶ on the other hand it was shown that the evolution of music in the 15th century is to be regarded as a response, however mediated, to the Humanist ideal of *renaissance of arts*, as Strohm,⁷ among others, pointed out from a historiographical interdisciplinary perspective. In the years that followed, the Council of Basle saw the rise of intense cultural and artistic experiences that were the product of a new, specifically European evolution of

⁵ *Diario del concilio di Basilea di Andrea Gatari (1433-1435)*, ed. by G. Coggiola, in *Concilium Basiliense. Studien und Quellen* cit., V, 1904, pp. 377-422.

⁶ «I have argued against a too-ready projection of the ideals of the *studia humanitatis*, specifically the rediscovery of ancient literary texts, onto other areas of culture»: M. BENT, *Bishop Francesco Malipiero, Music, and the Vicenza Delegation to Basel*, in *Music and Culture in the Age of the Council of Basel*, ed. by M. Nanni, Turnhout, Brepols, 2013 (currently in print), pp. 167-176. See also M. BENT, *Humanists and Music, Music and Humanities*, in *Tendenze e Metodi nella Ricerca Musicologica*, Proceedings of the international conference (Latina, September 27-29 1990), ed. by R. Pozzi, Florence, Olschki, 1995, pp. 29-38; ID., *Music and the Early Veneto Humanists*, Proceedings of the British Academy, CI, 1998 (Lectures and Memoirs), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 101-130.

⁷ «The condemnation of older music, which underscores the need for a ‘rebirth’, reproduces the humanist *topos* of the ‘ineptitude’ or ‘coarseness’ of medieval arts and letters»: R. STROHM, *Music, Humanism, and the Idea of a “Rebirth” of the Arts*, in *New Oxford History of Music, III/1: Music As Concept and Practice in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. by R. Strohm and B. J. Blackburn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 364. See also, by Strohm: *The Rise of European Music: 1380-1500*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1993; *Neue Aspekte von Musik und Humanismus im 15. Jahrhundert*, «Acta Musicologica», LXXVI/2, 2004, pp. 135-157, and *Guillaume Du Fay, Martin le Franc* cit.

artistic, literary and musical taste. The number of mentions scattered in the writings of Leon Battista Alberti, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Lorenzo Valla, Martin Le Franc and later Johannes Tinctoris, all point to a *topos*, that of the break with the thought traditions and artistic practices of the past, which is not without ideological implications. The anti-Scholastic movement embodied by the earliest humanists, Coluccio Salutati and Gasparino Barzizza, and continued by Leonardo Bruni and Guarino Veronese, and finally the highly famous expression “contenance angloise”⁸ by Martin Le Franc, with its slightly polemical tone, and the emphasis with which the same poet talks about a “nouvelle pratique”⁹, when he celebrates the new composition practice of Du Fay and Binchois, must not be taken as mere rhetoric, but as indicators that these figures were part of a much broader effort to build a new identity. In a continuity with these identity-making strategies, the years around 1437, to which Tinctoris attaches symbolical value, can be taken as the beginning of a new age.¹⁰ It was in those years that most composers abandoned the «vetusta carmina ignotae auctoritatis» as they were unable to delight the ear, being «insulse composita»,¹¹ and thus started the new «ars nova»,¹² embodied by three generations of musicians who were able to create works of remarkable value: the English, led by Dunstaple, the French with Du Fay and Binchois, and the moderns, Okeghem, Antoine Busnoys, Johannes Regis and Firminus Caron.¹³

While much has already been said about the cultural exchanges that took place during the great Councils of the 15th century, little is known about actual encounters between musicians and composers that could have occurred in Basle. It is undoubtedly hard, if not impossible, to reconstruct such exchanges of ideas and repertoires in detail, and to assess their impact on the composition practice of individual authors. However, thanks to the studies of Martin

⁸ M. LE FRANC, *Le Champion des Dames*, IV, ed. by R. Deschaux, Paris, H. Champion, 1999 (verses 16.269-70). Jean-Claude Mühlethaler has recently highlighted the political meaning, more specifically the French ideals of cohesion and national identity, which can be inferred from the verses of Le Franc. Mühlethaler then suggests a new reading of the French poet’s assessment of English influences on the tendency of music to internationalize. See J.-C. MÜHLETHALER, *Amour et identité politique*, in *Le Champion des dames de Martin Le Franc*, in *Music and Culture in the Age of the Council of Basel* cit., pp. 73-85.

⁹ LE FRANC, *Le Champion des Dames* cit., IV, (verse 16.265).

¹⁰ On this topic see the observations of Strohm in his essay: *Music, Humanism, and the Idea of a “Rebirth” of the Arts* cit., p. 363.

¹¹ J. TINCTORIS, *Liber de arte contrapuncti*, in ID., *Proportionale musices. Liber de arte contrapuncti*, intr., trans. and comm. by G. D’Agostino, Florence, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2008, p. 138.

¹² J. TINCTORIS, *Proportionale musices*, in ID., *Proportionale musices. Liber de arte contrapuncti* cit., p. 26.

¹³ See *ibid.*

Tegen¹⁴ (1957), and to the following in-depth philological analyses,¹⁵ it is now possible to come up with a more accurate reconstruction of the presence of musicians at the time of the Council of Basle; finally, thanks to the studies of Stéphanie Berger,¹⁶ we are now able to throw fresh light on the extent of the *Kulturtransfer* that pervaded musical life during the Council of Basle.

In 1957 Martin Tegen compiled a list of the names of all *cantores* mentioned in the Council chronicles, published by Haller in 1896.¹⁷ Already from this preliminary work we can infer an essential fact, confirmed by the chronicles, which explicitly mention *cantores* from different *nationes*. In the chronicle of May, 19th 1432 we read that: «Die dominica ... fuit missa solemniss in ecclesia maiori Basiliensi celebrata per quemdam abbatem de natione Italica ... et decantarunt huiusmodi missam nonnulli cantores de natione Gallicana».¹⁸ The fact that the liturgy of Sunday was celebrated by an Italian priest accompanied by French singers, should be no wonder, if one considers that the Roman Papal chapel included a significant number of *cantores* from French-speaking regions.¹⁹ What is more surprising is the presence, as early as the

¹⁴ See M. TEGEN, *Baselkonciliet och kyrkomusiken omkr. 1440*, «Svensk Tidskrift för Musikforskning», XXIX, 1957, pp. 126-132.

¹⁵ On this subject see the following contributions: M. SCHULER, *Zur Geschichte der Kapelle Papst Eugens IV*, «Acta Musicologica», XL/4, 1968, pp. 220-227; D. FALLOWS, *Dufay*, London, Dent & Sons, 1982; P. WRIGHT, *The Aosta-Trent Relationship Reconsidered*, in *I codici musicali trentini a cento anni dalla loro riscoperta*, Proceedings of the conference *Laurence Feininger: la musicologia come missione* (Trent, Castello del Buonconsiglio, September 6-7 1985), ed. by N. Pirrotta and D. Curti, Trent, Provincia autonoma - Servizio beni culturali, 1986, pp. 138-157; R. J. BRADLEY, *Musical Life and Culture at Savoy: 1420-1450*, Ann Arbor, UMI, 1992; *I codici musicali trentini: nuove scoperte e nuovi orientamenti della ricerca*, Proceedings of the international conference (Trent, September 24 1994), ed. by P. Wright, Trent, Provincia autonoma - Servizi beni librari e archivistici, 1996; M. BENT, *Ciconia's dedicatee, Bologna Q15, Brassart, and the Council of Basel*, in *Manoscritti di Polifonia nel Quattrocento Europeo*, Proceedings of the international conference (Trent, Castello del Buonconsiglio, October 18-19 2002), ed. by M. Gozzi, Trent, Provincia autonoma - Soprintendenza per i beni librari e archivistici, 2004, pp. 35-56; ID., *Bologna Q15: The Making and Remaking of a Musical Manuscript. Introductory Study and Facsimile Edition*, I, Lucca, LIM, 2008; P. WRIGHT, *Trent 87 and 92: Questions of Origin, Repertory and Physical Make-Up*, in *Music and Culture in the Age of the Council of Basel* cit., pp. 115-137 and BENT, *Bishop Francesco Malipiero* cit.

¹⁶ See the graduation thesis of Stéphanie Berger, *Kulturtransfer am Basler Konzil 1431-1449. Untersuchung von Quellen und anderen Möglichkeiten zum Austausch von Musik*, Masterarbeit, Universität Basel 2011.

¹⁷ See footnote 4.

¹⁸ TEGEN, *Baselkonciliet och kyrkomusiken* cit., p. 127.

¹⁹ M. SCHULER, *Zur Geschichte der Kapelle Papst Martins V*, «Archiv für Musikwissenschaft», XXV/1, 1968, pp. 30-45.

following year, of *cantores* and musicians from several parts of Europe, an international presence that was to increase in the following years.

Tabl. 1 – List of *cantores* present in Basle in 1433

Godescaldus de Cimiterio (Strasbourg)
 Guillaume Amire (Rouen)
 Hugo Flamigni (Nevers)
 Hubertus de Chissiaco (Béziers)
 Jacobus de Villa (Reims)
 Johannes de Chauvreyo (Lyons)
 Johannes Consul (Rennes)
 Johannes de Medina (Salamanca)
 Johannes Brassart (Lièges)
 Nicolaus (Esztergom)
 Nicolaus de Merques (Arras)

The list itself, not particularly long, of the *cantores* who were present in 1433, already shows remarkable diversity in their places of origin. Only two years on from the beginning of the synod, we have the simultaneous presence of musicians from northern, central, and southern France, the Flemish region, Spain and Hungary. However, as is known, the Council chapel did not remain the same throughout the Council, but underwent constant change due to the incessant arrival and departure of musicians and *cantores* from different European regions. When analysing the places of origin of musicians between 1433 and 1449, we must add those coming from England, Germany, Poland, and French Switzerland. What emerges clearly is that in the Council chapel there must have been a rather broad range of repertoires and musical styles, as well as several different notions of music practice. The map reproduced below shows the regions of origin of the European *cantores* and, besides confirming the existence of a lively interchange of musical experiences, it graphically shows the source of the new international taste that was on the rise.

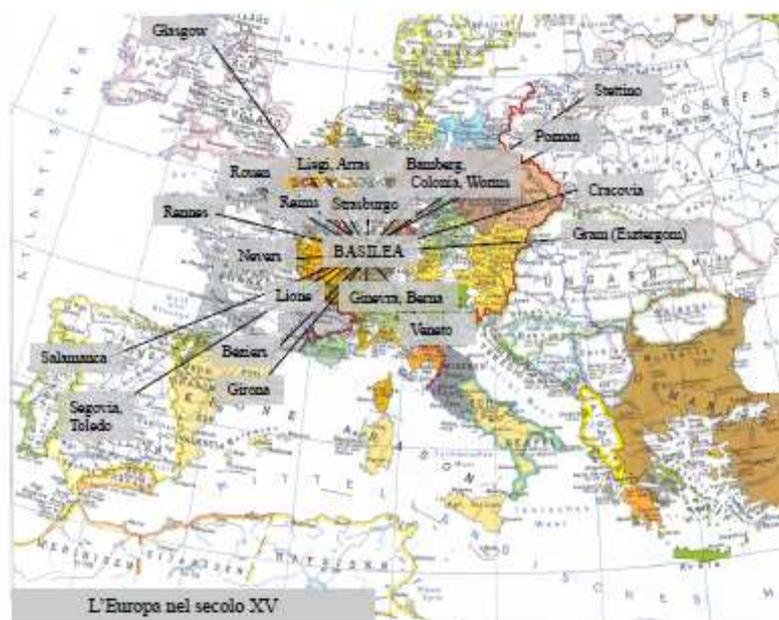


Fig. 1 – Map of Europe in the 15th century: *cantores* residing in Basle between 1433 and 1449.

The Council of Basle, however, does not only constitute a historical event, limited to the years in which the synod took place; we should also not regard it as an incidental fact whose impact was limited to the northern Swiss city. It should instead be taken as a paradigmatic event in the cultural history of the 15th century. The encounters between intellectuals and artists, and the interaction between musicians from different European regions, who met thanks to the highly frequent travels of courts and chapels, turned the Council into a virtual platform for the search of a new cultural identity and for the emergence of new repertoires and music practices. The Council, therefore, transcends the actual boundaries of the city of Basle, expanding into a true “cultural process”,²⁰ in which each individual contributes to the permanent transmission and fusion of musical experiences, and becomes the vehicle for a new musical mentality that reached to the remotest corners of Europe.

(Translation by Elisabetta Zoni)

²⁰ On this subject see M. NANNI, *Urbanity, Identity Construction, and Humanism: Toward a Cultural History of Fifteenth-Century Music*, in *Music and Culture in the Age of the Council of Basel* cit. pp. 13-17.