Conjecture on the Function of the Robertsbridge Codex Estampies

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The one fragment and two complete estampies contained in the Robertsbridge Codex are part of the earliest preserved manuscript of music written specifically for the organ (England, ca. 1320-1330). The fact that these pieces and others in the Codex trace their origins to poetic and dance forms points to a decidedly secular usage. However, the majority of the other parameters of their composition tend towards the performance on cathedral organs and liturgical music techniques. Through examination of historical and contemporary sacred and secular organ practice, a reasonable conjecture may be made as to how they, and probably numerous of other works no longer extant, fit into late Medieval life.

Upon inspection of the notation itself, one is faced with the unusual juxtaposition in the primarily two voiced pieces, wherein the upper parts are written in Italian mensural notation and the lower parts in unmeasured letters A-G.[1] The use of these letters for pitches, known as *daseian notation*, was a refinement by Odo of Cluny in his treatise, *Dialogus de musica*, dating from the early tenth century, of the more antiquated system described by Boethius (ca. 500) in De Institutione musica.[2] Here, a synthesis of the modern and antique is established (this will prove to pervade other aspects of the works as well). The notational disparity is carried into the chromatic alteration of notes using modern accidentals in the upper parts as well as in the daseian lower ones. Rhythmically, the lower parts are vertically aligned with the measured notation above employing the letter *s* (sine) to indicate a rest. Examples of this type of combined notation does not

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[1]: Ed. Michael Radulescu. *Organum Antiquum*. Diletto Musicale Blingers Reihe Alter Musik (Vienna: Verlag Doblinger, 1980.), preface.

[2] Alma Colk Santosuosso. *Letter Notations in the Middle Ages*. (Ottowa: The Institute of Medieval Music, 1989), 36.

reappear until 1448 in the *Tablature of Adam Ileborgh* in which the letters indicate which notes are to be played on the pedals, often including double pedaling.[3] Taking into consideration that the lower parts of the Robertsbridge Codex estampies are often as active as the upper parts, especially in the second complete estampie, *Retrove*, compounded by the rudimentary state of the pedal at the turn of the fourteenth century, points away from any connection here.

The notation still leads to the possibility that, based on the layout of the composition, both parts were to be performed by a single player. Again, some inconsistencies arise: the pieces range from c-e''', however, in the period in which they were written, the positive organ was not built to handle such a tessitura. Even by 1380, such instruments as the Norrlanda example in Sweden[4] did not exceed an octave and a sixth (c-a' with eight pedal C-B, with Bb). The possibility that this movable organ, usually positioned behind the cathedral organist, played the lower parts is unlikely since the coupling of it under the gallery organ was uncommon until later in the fourteenth century in France, and not in England at all until the early fifteenth.[5]

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[3] Willi Apel. *The Notation of Polyphonic Music 900-1600*. (Cambridge: The Medieval Academy of America, 1953), 43.

[4] Kimberly Marshall. Iconographical Evidence for the Late Medieval Organ in French Flemish and English Manuscripts. Vol. 1. (London: Garland Publishers Inc., 1989), 61.

[5] Perrot, Jean. *The Organ: from its Invention in the Hellenistic Period to the end of the 13th Century*, trans. Norma Deane. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 273.

Another solution is suggested upon examining the implications of the treatise on organ specifications by Henri Arnaut de Zwolle.[6] He refers to a Dijon organ built in 1350 wherein the manual may be divided by the use of mechanism known as a *sperrventil*, similar to the Iberian organs of the sixteenth century. It is possible, then, that the lower voices of each of the estampies were assigned to 16' or 8' stops and the upper to 4' stops, both playing on the same manual. The use of this mechanism is not improbable in England when taking into account their extensive use of music from the Continent during this period. In point of fact, the other pieces in the Robertsbridge Codex are intabulations of Philipe de Vitry school motets found in the *Roman de Fauvel*.[7]

Another concurrent possibility would be the use of a portative organ. Used almost without exception, outside the church walls, and therefore a more appropriate instrument than the gallery or positive, this handheld organ had developed very little by the late thirteenth century[8] from its predecessors and maintained only around a one octave range. As well, the player was limited to playing monophonically with his right hand as the left was used to pump the bellows. Could then an *ensemble* of portatives been the manner of performance of these secular organ works? Some evidence that supports this proposition can be gathered by examining other instrumental performance practices of the period.

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[6] Peter Williams. "Organ." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Ed. Stanley Sadie. (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1980): 734-35.

[7] Radulescu, ibid.

[8] Parrot, 271.

The four earlier settings of *In Seculum*, found at the conclusion of the Bamberg Codex are examples of purely instrumental music.[9] The extensive use of the hocket technique in two of the compositions, *In Seculum longum* and *In Seculum breve*, is not unlike the Robertsbridge estampies. One of the Bamberg pieces goes as far as to suggest an instrumental ensemble of vielles in performance. In light of the secular connotations of both the estampies and the *In Seculum* series, the portative ensemble proposition seems reasonable, yet an historical perspective on the usages of the organ can suggest further possibilities, including shedding light on the use of the gallery organ itself.

In 757 King Pepin was given the gift of a Byzantine organ, recorded contemporaneously as an *organum.*[10] Between the fourth and tenth centuries, these Byzantine instruments were played by two players simultaneously, producing parallel fifths, a similar polyphonic characteristic of early Western organum,[11] suggesting that it was vocal music that imitated the organ practice and not vice versa. By the late tenth century, with the addition of mixtures of up to ten ranks, the use of two players became unnecessary as the sesquialtera pitch sounded with the fundamental innately[12] as there were no stops as such so that individual ranks could be played alone, nor was this particularly desired.

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[9] Richard H.Hoppin. *Medieval Music.* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 345.

[10] Williams, 727.

[11] Willi Apel, *The History of Keyboard Music to 1700*, trans. Hans Tischler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 21.

[12] Francis Routh,. *Early English Organ Music from the Middle Ages to 1837.* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1973), 8.

The advancements in keyboard construction between the tenth and twelfth centuries, specifically alleviating the need for handheld draw-slides to activate pitch, allowed a single player to articulate florid lines, such as those found in the vox organalis of St.Martial and Santiago de Compostela schools, as well as the sustained tones they have always been thought to have been relegated to.[13] It has been suggested that Perotin himself may have accompanied his own dupulm and triplum organa on the gallery organ, creating a flowering of modal rhythmic figurations, doubling themselves at the fifth and the octave.[14] By the early twelfth century, the introduction of the so-called Greek keyboard, and especially the development of stops,[15] allowed for greater flexibility on the part of the organist in that all the speaking overtones of a pitch need not sound along with its fundamental. Theorist Jehan de Murs mentions the introduction of more chromatic keys on gallery and positive organs to allow for perfect consonances whem playing polyphonice music.[16] A contemporary scholar of his, Jacques de Liege (fl. 1330), indicates that most organs had in fact become fully chromatic. Whether or not polyphony returned to the implementation of the antiquated two player method is not explicit, although now possible. Nonetheless, the continuity of the polyphonic sounds on the organ of predominantly parallel fifths from its earliest liturgical use is evidently still a

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[13] Apel, *The History*, 21.

[14] Willi Apel, "Early History of the Organ." *Early European Keyboard Music*. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989): 133.

[15] Routh, p. 9.

[16] Nicholas Meeus, "Keyboard." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Ed. Stanley Sadie. (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1980): 10: 9-10, 9.

primary performance practice. Now, as the estampies of the Robertsbridge Codex testify, it was being implemented in secular music as well.

As the thirteenth century saw the motet develop from liturgical to decidedly non-liturgical usage (there are four examples of sacred tenore that were derived, themselves, from estampies, and many others from the trouvère chanson repertory[17]), so can it also be said of the organ. It is not difficult to believe that the students of the French universities began to take not only what they learned of conductus and substitute clausulae and apply it to their secular motets,[18] but that they applied their knowledge of organ practice and used it for their own amusement as well. It is certain that the organ was used in support of the voices in liturgical practice, doubling the tenor pitches in organa, counductus, and motet performances.[19] With the heritage of sesquialtera polyphony, it is reasonable to assume, therefore, that works of the Robertsbridge Codex were to be played by one ecclesiastically educated on a cathedral gallery organ, but most probably at his leisure, as there is no evidence to support the modern day notion of an organ prelude, or the like, being used in this period.

The composer(s) of the estampies was most certainly French based on the fact that the English style of parallel harmony in polyphonic settings of plainchant was in thirds and sixths (called *gymel* in the early fifteenth century).[20] There is evidence that this was a practice common in the early fourteenth century as well.

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[17] Hoppin, 341.

[18] Ibid., 253-54.

[19] Routh, 15.

[20] Ibid., p. 18.

The Codex, now approached with these established roots in perspective, serves to give an understanding of types of accompanying roles that the organ played. The intabulations of the Philippe de Vitry school motets show distinct improvisatory traits in setting of the motetus parts.[21] A florid style, elaborating the vocal lines with heterophonic figuration, has strong implications on the manner that not only secular music was instrumentally accompanied, but, based on this source's connections with the cathedral organ, perhaps how sacred duplum and triplum organa were embellished.

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[21] Howard Fergusen, "Keyboard Music." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Ed. Stanley Sadie. (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1980): 10: 11-20, 12.

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