Dufay – Musique Sacree & Ballades (1999)

Movements from the Ordinary of the Mass *1. Kyrie 11 2. Gloria 5 3. Credo 1 4. Sanctus 3 5. Sanctus papale 6. Gloria ad modum tubae*
Motets and Liturgical Pieces
7. Lamentatio sanctae matris ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae 8. Ave Regina Caelorum 9. Mittit ad Virginem 10. Veni Creator Spiritus (Hymnus in Penticostes festo)
Secular works
11. Quel fronte signorille (Ballata) 12. J'atendray tant qu'il vous playra (Rondeau) 13. Se la face ay pale (Ballade)
Capella Antiqua München Konrad Ruhland – conductor

The life and music of Guillaume Dufay (1397-1474) are among the most difficult to circumscribe for major Renaissance composers. One point of clarity is that Dufay was considered by far the leading composer of his day, a musician of almost unparalleled eminence, and one of the most famous men of his generation. Dufay's large and varied musical output, its extent only now coming into focus in some cases, acted to define the new musical style of the early-to-mid-fifteenth century and with it the course of Western music into the High Renaissance. Dufay's influence over musical composition was complete and permanent, affecting every genre and sphere. The singularity of his eminence can best be compared to that of Beethoven or perhaps Machaut, but in fact Dufay had the broader contemporary reputation.

Dufay was born near Cambrai around 1400, with recent documentary evidence presented by Alejandro Planchart suggesting the precise year 1397. As is typical for the era, the events of his early life are unclear, including an apparent apprenticeship with Richard Loqueville (d.1418) and appointments both in Italy and around Cambrai. By the mid-1420s, Dufay was already one of the most famous composers in Europe, having composed such landmark works as Adieu ces bons vins de Lannoys (in 3 parts) and Apostolo glorioso (in 5 parts), two of many compositions for which a specific historical occasion can be identified. The outlines of his career begin to take on greater clarity by 1428 when he was appointed to the Papal Choir, where he remained until

1433. The extent of Dufay's compositional activity during this period, including both hymns and plainchant along with more dramatic isorhythmic motets such as Ecclesie militantis (also in 5 parts), is only now being fully appraised. In the 1430s, Dufay is associated with some of the most important musical events in Italy, in Ferrara, Savoy, Florence, etc. By 1440, he returned to Cambrai to take up one of his absentee posts, only to go back to spend most of the 1450s in Savoy, and then return permanently to Cambrai. He continued composing there, including the cantilena motet Ave regina celorum (in 4 parts) as specified to be performed at his deathbed. Together with his activities as a composer, Dufay was a man of broad ability. He was a doctor of canon law, and was summoned to consult on numerous ecclesiastical events. He had documented contact with such other famous musical names as Binchois, Ockeghem and Squarcialupi, and owned various prebends and benefices over a broad area. By the time he settled permanently in Cambrai, he was a rich and powerful man, a truly cosmopolitan figure of keen judgement and broad influence.

The survival of individual pieces within Dufay's impressive musical output has been somewhat haphazard. However, the many harmonized chants he wrote mostly early in his career form the bulk of it. These consist of frequently straight-forward elaborations on plainchant, setting it in a harmonic context. Although relatively simple music, Dufay's gift for beautiful melody and clear harmonic direction is frequently evident. This repertory, much of it associated with the Vatican, also gives a historical indication of the increased role of liturgical polyphony during the period. In addition, it has been discovered that Dufay wrote plainchant himself, further broadening the scope of his output. During this period, Dufay also wrote a wide range of secular songs as well as various mass sections and complex isorhythmic motets for special occasions. The songs are among his most consistent and characteristic creations, with nearly a hundred of them surviving from all stages of his career. Together with those of Binchois, Dufay's songs are among the most charming and indicative compositions of the early Renaissance, especially as they reflect more vertically-oriented textures and compact phrasings than those of the previous generation. Dufay's early songs already show this style with full mastery, illustrating his most facile & exuberant command of melody and counterpoint.

Both the mass movements and motets can be divided into two fairly distinct styles. Some are highly technical isorhythmic works evocative of the music of the previous generation, and some are more closely allied to his simpler chant harmonizations. Dufay was the last great exponent of the isorhythmic style, and his large-scale festival motets such as Nuper rosarum flores (in 4 parts) are among the most spectacular creations of the period. This is the area in which Dufay's music most directly continues that of the previous generation, and it is also an area in which his stylistic development is clear. The mass movements in particular show a progression from isolated works of varying complexity, to partially linked cycles, to cycles linked in relatively simple ways, to the four "cantus firmus" masses of Dufay's late career. These cantus firmus masses in four parts are his most famous works today, and were apparently instrumental in solidifying the position of this genre as central to the development of fifteenth century music. Dufay's style in these masses can be viewed as a combination of the complex & angular

isorhythmic technique with the more fluid & straight-forward hymn writing. This was an important synthesis which he accomplished in some of his late motets (called "cantilena" motets to distinguish them from the isorhythmic variety), as well as in the later mass cycles such as the Missa Ecce ancilla Domini and Missa Ave regina celorum. They represent the definitive style followed by the next generations.

Detailing a specific individual style for Dufay is difficult, especially as his music naturally groups itself into different genres for completely different purposes. Within these genres, his works are frequently similar, although there is usually variety under the surface, especially in the songs. Dufay's music is sometimes described as following previous patterns, with a masterful sense of melody and counterpoint. Such a simple description neglects the synthesis he achieved, as well as the differing technical motivation for earlier counterpoint. However, Dufay's melodic gifts and influence are unquestioned. Although his polyphony may seem less "full" to our ears than that of subsequent generations, its grace and beauty remain easy to hear. ---Todd M. McComb, medieval.org

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