CHAPTER 11

Court and Church Music in 14th- and 15th-Century Milan

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A concise overview of the role of music in the period must inevitably focus on the major phenomena and protagonists, those that brought substantial innovations in musical techniques, forms, and repertory, as well as in their relationship to contemporary society. Many general histories discuss the fifteenth century as a period in which ideal conditions brought about a radical increase in such musical activities, in Milan first of all: the synergy between the church and the court in the creation of the Duomo’s musical chapel would lead to the splendid flourishing of the ducal chapel founded by Galeazzo Maria Sforza. Yet this overview seeks to explore in some detail the preceding century as well, during which current musical historiography assigns a significant role to the musical patronage of the Visconti in Milan and Pavia.

Nonetheless, no close examination of Milanese music history, no matter how concise, can neglect to discuss the centrality, from the High Middle Ages on, of the repertory of liturgical monophonic chant specific to the diocese of Milan. Known as Ambrosian chant, this repertory is the oldest of the local traditions of Christian chant to have survived the development of the official liturgy and “Gregorian” chant of the Roman Catholic Church. Until the standardization of the liturgy by the Franks and the Papacy in the eleventh century and its establishment via the introduction of increasingly precise musical notation, music adorned the church rites in different ways from region to region. Innovations and reciprocal influences were due either to political, socio-economic or cultural circumstances. For instance, during the struggle against the Empress Justina and the Arian heresy, bishop Ambrose made a poet and musician of himself in order to lead his flock through song, and as such, he introduced to Milan (perhaps to the West in general) the practice of singing hymns—compositions on original texts that the faithful would intone in alternation with an organized group of singers, the schola cantorum. The allure of such a practice is exemplified in Augustine’s impassioned (and tearful) response to these newly composed chants, and the great success of this among other peculiarities, coupled with the growing importance of the city of Milan, brought about the notated preservation and dissemination of Ambrosian chant throughout
most of Northern Italy. Even if, in reality, very few of the hymns composed by Ambrose himself were preserved, the core ritual and musical structure of the Ambrosian liturgy resisted through the centuries and, strongly supported by the local Church, survived numerous attempts to abolish it. The geographical diffusion of this liturgy contracted and expanded in lockstep with the fortunes of the city, such that for centuries the cathedral of Milan held a central position in the history of Italian music. In enumerating the marvels of the city in 1288, Bonvesin de la Riva cites the presence of a number of copyists and fourteen “doctors” (or masters) of Ambrosian chant, along with 1500 notaries and 150 surgeons. This confirms what other documentary evidence indicates as well: for example, the large number of chant manuscripts known to have been compiled during the late Middle Ages.

If we shift our attention to the role of civil institutions in the promotion of musical activities, beginning in the communal age, Bonvesin, again, takes the time to describe in detail the “six principal trumpet players of the Comune, who are able to produce a sound so awesome, that it cannot be heard anywhere else in the world” and to explain that these Milanese performers “are honored and respected to a greater extent than any other trumpeters in the world.” All over Europe it was quite typical for players of wind instruments or percussion to be employed according to necessity; that is, they performed for specific events and occasions, such as accompanying officials when they proclaimed laws, attending public appearances of governing bodies, and riding with the militia. When, as in this case, a stable body of regularly salaried musicians is appointed, we usually take this as a sign of the importance of music within the civic apparatus. In fact, the proud Milanese poet acknowledges that these instrumentalists contribute to the greatness and strength of the city. Yet, at any rate, up until this point, life in Milan as in many other Italian cities

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1 Compared to the reformed “Gregorian” chants and to what we know about the original “old Roman” repertory, the Ambrosian melodies are considerably more elaborate, and in addition, they typically avoid any skips or leaps in the melodic line, but rather proceed in almost exclusively stepwise, undulating motion throughout. On a more general level, Ambrosian chant also differs from the Roman/Gregorian liturgy in the title of the chants and their arrangement. See Terence Baily, “Ambrosian Chant,” in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. Second Edition, ed. by Stanley Sadie (London, 2001), i, pp. 452–61. The New Grove Dictionary is the standard musicological reference in English: the reader can refer to individual entries on terms and especially composers mentioned in this chapter (an online edition, periodically updated, is available on subscription at www.oxfordmusiconline.com).

2 Bonvesin de la Riva, Mediolani Magnalia, ed. by Maria Corti (Milan, 1974), 3.20.

3 Ibidem.