

On Secularization of Western Choral Music

ANALYSE DE LA SÉCULARISATION DE LA MUSIQUE CHORALE OCCIDENTALE

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Abstract: Although Western choral music was born in the soil of religious culture, it has been in the process of secularization ever since the Middle Ages. Renaissance and the Religion Reformation resulted in a combination of religious chorus and secular chorus and such a combination develops towards a more harmonious and intimate relationship in modern times. This article is to analyze the process and significance of the secularization of western choral music.

Key words: chorus, Renaissance, Religion Reformation, secularization

Résumé: Bien que née dans un contexte religieux, la musique chorale de l'Occident se situe toujours dans le processus de sécularisation depuis la dernière période du Moyen-Age. Sous l'influence de la Renaissance et de la Réforme religieuse, le chœur religieux et le chœurs profane s'intègrent mutuellement et présente à l'époque contemporaine une tendance de fusion « l'un est dans l'autre ». Le présent article tente de procéder à une analyse sur la sécularisation de la musique chorale occidentale et sa signifiante.

Mots-Clés: chœur, Renaissance, Réforme religieuse, sécularisation

Although Western choral music was born in the soil of religious culture, it has been in the process of secularization ever since the Middle Ages. Renaissance and the Religion Reformation resulted in a combination of religious chorus and secular chorus and such a combination develops towards a more harmonious and intimate relationship in modern times. This article is to analyze the process and significance of the secularization of western choral music.

1. EARLY BUDDING OF SECULARIZATION OF CHORAL MUSIC

Strictly speaking, western music originated from ancient Greek music; but because the music materials of ancient Greece were almost gone without retention, we conventionally regard the Middle Ages as an important starting point to study western music. In this sense, western music in the early medieval times was Christian music. At that time, western music was dominated by Christian music and represented mainly by church chorus.

The most representative form of early chorals³ was

Gregorian Chant. As the etiquette songs of Catholic, Gregorian Chant was only sung by padres. The melody of the Chant was detached, quiet and indifferent, which means that the early choral music did not serve for human being's sentiment, instead, it expressed admiration for the other shore and pioussness towards God. Thus the early chant music represented by Gregorian Chant was not for appreciation purpose; rather, it was created purely for religious etiquette. Therefore, the chant music did not pay attention to the listening aesthetic; neither did it emphasize the music fun embedded.

As the main music form in early medieval times, Gregorian Chant spread to various places with fast speed, and was especially well received in the north part of Italy, England, Ireland, France, etc. During the 11th to 12th centuries AD, Gregorian Chant got new developments both in horizontal and vertical dimensions. Special attention should be granted to its vertical development. Some monk musicians at that time tried to add a fourth or fifth parallel to Gregorian Chant so as to change its monophony to polyphony, which made the chant to become chorus in real sense.

instead of chorus because it has not yet formed multi-vocal form. However, as one of the important sources of western chorus and even western music, it is regarded as chorus in the broad sense in this article.

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³ In the narrow sense, Gregorian Chant belongs to unison

This simplified multi-phonic form is called Organum. At the end of the 11th century, multi-phonic music gradually developed some important forms. One of them was Discantus, principled by reverse procedures, allowed voice crossing and permitted the process of third interval, sixth interval, which made the melody richer. It was mostly used for church with the main melody of motet and mass. Other forms include Conductus and Motet.

The creation of polyphony music on the one hand expands people's understanding and appreciation of the other shore through the conception of harmony mediated by the chorus; on the other hand, it implies the great influence of human beings on the practice of music. It is exactly due to human being's initiative creativity and the empty appreciation of the other shore that human beings are bound to come back to the real world and concern about themselves, the result of which is represented by the process of western religious chorus being secularized. In fact, in the motets in 13th century, secular elements began to be found in western chorus music. "at the beginning, there appeared Latin religious motets; after that, there appeared the process of replacing the Latin lyrics with French lyrics and began to walk to the secular end"; "the motets for court, civil citizens and clergies were supplemented by the monophony art of French troubadours, which expanded the music choices for artists, vaudeville artists and troubadours."⁴

In addition, influenced by the Francis religion movement, a form of religion chorus named Landi Spirituali was formed and got popular in Italy. At the very beginning, this kind of chorus took the popular melody and the secular lyrics, being colored by a life atmosphere. Although as a religious chorus, it was not sung in the church; rather, it was sung at the home of the roman citizens when people were getting together to do prays. Later, this kind of chorus was colored by some conversation elements, presented by the form of different parties singing in pairs, making use of some simple harmony and popularized tones. The secular features were obvious to be detected. Because of this, the secularization orientation in western choral music was strengthened since 14th century. In the music life of secular society, secular chorus became an important component of the music culture of later medieval times. Compared with religious works, most secular chorus took their materials from the lives of aristocrats. The "French troubadours" in France, "love poets" and "famous singers" in Germany all expressed their praises and appreciations for war, love and nature through singing. So the materials for music at that time became freer and more natural. In terms of the composition approaches, the secular works broke the traditional regulation of forbidding tone alternation and

tone-in-half. In terms of music mode, the secular music often used Aeolian and Ionian, which were once abandoned by traditional churches; Aeolian and Ionian were later developed into the major and minor modes which occupy great importance in modern music history. In terms of performance style, the secular music was less artificial and had an element of improvisation. All these lead to the conclusion that choral music were paying more and more attention to human sentiment and feelings; its secularization was inevitable. In addition, the Arts Nova appeared in France and Italy, which helped composers gradually get rid of the fetter that forbid using music to display one's music technique; this started a new phase where musicians can exert their talents in the composition of music. Guillaume de Machaut was one of the most important representatives of that time. His 23 motets and around 100 secular songs constructed the core components of the Arts Nova in the 14th century France. We found that the number of secular music he composed was far more than that of religious music, which evidenced that Arts Nova accelerated the secularization process of chorus in France and the whole Europe.

Influenced by France, the Arts Nova in Italy at that time learned largely from the composition techniques of polyphony music; works in that time emphasized more on protruding the characteristics and personalities of the composers themselves. The blind musician Landini became one of the leaders of Italian novel music. In its culture center Florence, musicians created three kinds of novel music styles, that is, Madrigale, Ballata, and Caceia. These styles were extensively used in music creation with their content vividly reflecting the secular life in later medieval times and were quite popular as that time.

We can see from the secularization process of music in later Middle Ages that chorus as one part of religion etiquette, was controlled by the church both in its form and content, transferring the voice of God and trying to control human being's soul. But because the object it was praising — God, was an other shore and transcendental object, the choral music under the influence of over-subjective mentalism would inevitably lead to human being's spiritual suppression and universal hypocrisy, which would result in a false illusion of the glorified God. Once chorus started to concern more about human beings themselves and began to embrace secular sentiment in content and walk out of the fetter of church in form, it could further develop itself, which was best proved by the prosperity of choral music art in modern times.

2. THE INFLUENCE OF RENAISSANCE AND RELIGION REFORMATION ON SECULARIZATION

⁴Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, *Musik im Abendland*; translated by Liu, Jingshu, Hunan Literature Press, 2005, Changsha, P117.

Renaissance was a sign of the transformation process experienced by the European society from a religion specified society to a secular society, which was based on the recovery of humanism and the awakening of free human personality. This was first represented in the human personality liberation. Renaissance on the one hand, combined the concept of individuality in humanism and the concept of secularity; on the other hand, it included a strong realism spirit, which was highly represented by the individuals' emphasis on life details, making efforts to explore the spiritual and sentimental world of human beings. Due to this, scholars in Renaissance did some archaeological work on ancient Roman culture and broke the fetter of church on human's spirit and thought, forming the cultural spirit of a new era.

Under the great influence of European Renaissance, the European chorus art experienced a profound reformation. The choral music in that time gradually got rid of the mysticism in medieval in content, and became clearer, simpler, and sincerer, which got fuller development in secular culture. Music composers of Basilica patriarcale di San Marco di Venezia in the 15th century, such as Guillaume Dufay, Johannes Okegham, Jacob Obrecht, and Josquin des Pres combined the creation technique of poly-choral with secular materials, which expanded development space of the choral art. In the 16th century, secular chorus which took Italian Madrigale and French Chanson as main styles got fully developed.

Facing the consequence brought by the human-suppression of Christianity in medieval times and when the Italian humanists were striving for their individual rights and practice freedom which brought a new era of music creation in Renaissance, the northern minority in north Alps was creating another scene for chorus development featuring their sincere and pious characteristics — the sudden prosperity of Germany chorus art. This prosperity was first of all benefited from the influence of the Religion Reformation. In the views of Martine Luther King, who was the leader of the Religion Reformation, the belief of God was not the outside education and practice, instead, it was rooted in the inner part of human being's experience. He found a religion inside people's heart and moved the religious basis from the other shore to the reality world through an emphasis on belief, thus breaking down the fetter religion imposed on people's spirit as well as on behavior, setting people free in their spiritual world in real sense. Therefore, on the surface level, the authority of religious belief was challenged; in fact, it was merely the authority of churches that was broken down; the status of belief rose in stead of falling. In other words, "when Martine Luther King lowered the sacred down to secular, at the same time he raised the secular up to the sacred."⁵ This undoubtedly gives the best explanation

of the secularization process of western chorus. As a reformist, Martine Luther King regarded the reformation of music as an important part of Religion Reformation. He himself led the process of Chorale creation for the new religion. This is a kind of four-vocal religious song; but the materials can both be religious and folk; the melody lay in its high-pitch vocal; the lyrics used Germany instead of Latin, which made it more popular and easy to follow. Among them, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* was one of the most famous pieces, and was quite popular at that time, which was evaluated as the 16th century *la Marseille* in German by Engels.

Influenced by the Religion Reformation, Catholic underwent some internal changes. In order to protest against the invasion of secular chorus, Catholic churches advocated the "anti-religion reformation movement" which was oriented towards "purifying the church" and suppressing the development of Lutheranism. The religious chorus was among the one of the most important reformation items. In order to resist the increasing infiltration of secular chorus, Catholics tried to forbid all religious chants except the Gregorian Chant. But this did not seem to work in successfully resisting the process of secularization of chorus. As the Religion Reformation further continued, the Catholic chorus went further back to return to human nature. One of the typical musician representatives was the Italian composer Palestrina. As a religion musician, he created many religious music pieces (mostly motets), which had already had some spirit of the times and nationality consciousness. At the same time, he created some secular music pieces, which could not be separated from the background of religion culture. Thus his work represented the characteristic of a combination of religious music and secular music. All these indicated the forthcoming of the secularization of western music in modern times.

Sine the 17th century, with the fast development of the secular music as well as the further combination of secular music and religious materials, choral music showed a new development orientation. Oratorio was born in the 17th century, and it belonged to the religious etiquette music both in its form and its content. But it disappeared in the late 17th century and was replaced by the secular oratorio which took their content materials freely. Although secular oratorio still used the Christian materials as the main content and topic, it was not used as the religious etiquette music anymore; rather, it was used in the concert, serving for people's cultural life and entertainment and is still popular even today. The most famous works were the ones of the Italian musician G. Carissimi and the Germany musician J. G. Anshütz, followed by George Frideric Handel, who was famous for his oratorio. His representative work *Messiah* got great success when it was first played in London Music Hall in 1743. When the second scene of *Hallelujah* was finished, the England Queen George II stood up to pay her respect.

⁵ Zhao, lin. *Western Religion Culture*, Changjiang Literature Press, 1997, Wuhan, P355.

The choral music occupied a very important place in Goldbach's music creation. As a pious protestant, Goldbach created a large number of religious choral pieces, among which there were five pieces of Mass songs (*J.S.Bach: Mass in B minor* the most famous), six pieces of Motets, two hundred pieces of cantata and some oratorio about Passion, such as Matthew Passion, St John Passion, and Christmas Oratorio. On the surface, the music creation of Goldbach went back to mysticism; in fact he inherited the tradition of new religion; in the seemingly other shore talk, he finished the transformation from the pursuit of religion to the pursuit of the real sacred and noble spirit itself, which was exactly the tradition of new religion since Martin Luther King. In this sense, the religion was secularized in real sense; the religious chorus could be said to advocate and experience human beings' subjectivity rather than to appreciate the Almighty God. In this sense, the resurrection of Goldbach's chorus works and other music pieces in the Romanticism was not by accident. After Goldbach, the modern chorus which began from the classical times finally finished its process of secularization.

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SECULARIZATION OF RELIGIOUS CHORUS—TAKE THE BLACK MUSIC AS AN INSTANCE

Black Gospel, as the important representational form of the secularization of contemporary western chorus, is the products of a combination of African Black music culture and American social culture as well as the combination of Black music and religion. It retained many complicated rhythms which is specific to Africa, expressing black people's piety to God and their longing for family, good life and freedom, with simple melody and plain enthusiasm. The famous Black Gospels are almost all adapted into choral works; for instance, the famous gospel the Battle of Jericho, which is edited by the famous black American musician Moses Hogan gets international reputation.

If we regard it as a pure religious work, we can see that it has a tight framework in its form, complex rhythm, Spirito and Ponderoso harmony, as well as fast tempo and enthusiastic emotion, which makes it hard for us to associate it with religion. In fact, the materials for this piece were retrieved from the story of the Bible, that of Joshua attacking the city Jericho. There are merely three lines of lyrics through out the lyrics; the story had not much to do with the religious forms. The biggest characteristic of this work, just as any other black gospel, is the sentiment and the enjoyment of listening as well as its rhymed style (just like some folk poems recited by children). Because of these reasons, it is quite popular not only among black people but also among other races. Thus, we can see that performing

similar works is not for religious purpose prey; more primarily, it is for fun. To be more specific, people experience their own life through the joy of music. So, how much pure religious meaning does this kind of music hold? I'm afraid not much. A more typical example is gospel hymn. Also as the product of black American culture, compared with the traditional and regularized black gospel, it is wilder in its form, enjoys more freedom in voice and has a lot of impromptu element. Many impromptu creations make the gospel chorus full of dynamic energy, which can be called the peak of the secularization of religious chorus.

Viewing the development history of western chorus, we find that the secularization process is inevitable. The process in fact draws the distance between human and music, transforming chorus from purely serving the religion purpose to serving human being themselves. In the contemporary western chorus, religious chorus still exist, but its scared hypocrisy in middle ages has disappeared completely. It has become an important spiritual activity of human beings as subjects and an important component of music practice human beings participate. Under the background of advanced creation conception and composition techniques, the braveness and fashionness of religious chorus in modern and contemporary times has already broke the traditional religious conception and been cauterized as heresy. So it is not important whether the contemporary religious chorus eulogize the other shore God or not; what matters is whether people can get sense of beauty and nobleness from the music. In this sense, the value of music itself is far higher than religion, which is a great improvement of contemporary religion. At the same time, the western chorus in contemporary times develops steadily from the medieval traces and shows diversity in music themes, creation techniques, and chorus stereo. In the eyes of Hegel, especially the diversities in creation ways and the richness of music stereo make the secular music the real realization of God (spirit) that is outwardly represented by the richness of the music world. Thus it was a return to the original meaning of religion on a higher level—this developmental orientation of the convergence of western religious music and secular music is the final place where the secularization of western chorus belong.

All in all, the art of chorus, as a human spiritual creation, would inevitably return to human beings, whatever its initiations are. It will inevitably lose its vitality without the participation and creation of human beings, without the investment of human sentiment. As for participants, chorus in fact is a kind of music life that is both secular and sacred, both common and noble. If one can feel the harmony of music in the chorus, if one can relax oneself both physically and mentally and cultivate oneself through music, the basic function of chorus is realized. This is in fact one of the most essential functions of the art of chorus.

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