

In the Middle Ages, liturgy was music, expressing itself in two different forms: Plain-chant, music of rituals that does not exist for itself but for its pure spiritual function; and polyphony, which testifies to a more social, artistic, and professional practice. The conflict between these two uses, revealed by the famous bull of Pope John XXII, which manifests as a final stiffening in the face of new practices, rapidly turns to the absolute and final triumph of polyphony from the pontificate of Clement VI (1342-1352). The chapel became autonomous and professional, and the papal model spread throughout Europe, beginning with the great princely courts of France and England.

The traveler who arrives in Avignon from the west, coming from Villeneuve-lès-Avignon and crossing the Rhone, is struck today, like probably in the Middle Ages, by one of the most beautiful urban landscapes of France: the imposing mass of the Palais des Papes dominates the ancient city gathered at the foot of the rock of the Doms and enclosed in the crenellated ramparts built by Urbain V. This traveler cannot fail to wonder about the reasons of the Existence in this average city of the most imposing Medieval palace of our heritage.

For a little less than a century, the Christian world had its eyes set on Avignon, for French popes lived there from 1309 on. Its wealth, its splendors, its places of power attracted kings, princes and the greatest artists of the century. Populated from 5 to 6,000 inhabitants at the arrival of Clement V, Avignon would become in a few years the second largest city in France behind Paris. There were 100,000 foreigners in the papal city in the middle of the century. One can easily understand the frenzy of construction that seized the city, which nevertheless never ended the shortage of necessary housing: bourgeois houses, churches, convents, liveries, and of course the Palais des Papes, overturned the physiognomy of Avignon and its immediate surroundings. We can also understand the anathemas launched by Petrarch, who castigates the "captivity of Babylon", against the excesses of life in the Rhone town.

It was only political circumstances that led Clement V (Bertrand de Got) to settle, provisionally in Avignon, continuing the tradition of the itinerant papacy of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (several popes of the thirteenth century never came in Rome!). "Ubi papa, ibi Roma": Where the pope is, there is the seat of Christendom. Philippe le Bel, who had favored the election of this Pope of Gascon origin and who still retained a strong influence over him, had pushed him to settle in a region where he could exercise his authority much more easily than in Italy, unstable and shaken by many political crises. Throughout this century, the Church will be a place of power struggle between the various sovereigns of Europe and will reveal the importance and then the decline of the French predominance. The same troubles in the Pontifical States delayed the return of the Sovereign Pontiff in 1376 to the city of which he was also the bishop: Rome.

As long as the influence of the successive kings of France knew how to become very prominent in the college of cardinals, that is to say almost throughout the fourteenth century, French popes were elected to the supreme office. Very different personalities succeeded one another on the Holy Chair. From the authoritarian Jean XXII (the cahourcin Jacques Duèse) to the obstinate Benedict XIII (the Aragonese Pedro de Luna) who refused to abdicate until his death in exile at 95 years, while the great kings of the Christian world had long since resolved to put an end to the Great Schism. For example, the austere Cistercian Benedict XII (the Gascon Jacques Fournier), the great defender of Catharism, was succeeded by the brilliant Clement VI, the "Magnificent" (the Limousin Pierre Roger) who transformed the Curia and the palace of his predecessor into one of the most brilliant courts in Europe, making Avignon the capital of Arts and Letters. The commonalities between these different French Popes were, on the one hand,

very strong ties with the kings of France, diplomatic and political ties which often did not exclude a certain friendship, and on the other hand an "absolute nepotism", which saw each sovereign pontiff, with the notable exception of Benedict XII, systematically appoint members of his family to the offices of cardinals or important officers of the Curia.

These colorful characters crossed a particularly rich century of fundamental evolutions, upheavals and dramatic events, which ended in the confusion of the Great Schism. The great black plague of 1348, coming from Marseille, is widely known. In Avignon, it was, alas, only the first of a long series (1348, 1361, 1397, 1406). France had 20 million inhabitants in 1328, as at the end of the 17th century, but only 10 million in 1450! Indeed, incessant and murderous wars were added to the scourge of the plague. At the end of the fourteenth century, the nobility, despoiled by these ruinous wars, no longer truly played its traditional role of protecting the population, and even seems to take refuge in a sort of flight forward in luxury and pleasures. The music of the fourteenth century is of course the reflection of this world and of those so disturbed times, of this society that is secularized. The very foundations of medieval thought, which describes the world as a mirror of universal harmony, are shaken by a true scientific revolution that begins to reason without the aid of faith. And it is of course during this century that the individual expression of the artist is personalized strongly by seeking to free oneself from the traditional canons.

Our program is very closely linked to a prestigious and relatively well-preserved building: the Palais des Papes, mainly built by Benedict XII and Clement VI, and particularly the chapel "St. Peter" (chapel "Clementine") in which all solemn liturgies were concentrated. Many other places of worship existed in the palace, which had six chapels and many large rooms capable of receiving portable altars. We must imagine the immense and empty places that we can visit today as they could be in the days of their splendor. The furnishings were luxurious; the walls were largely covered with richly decorated tapestries, giving a glimpse of the sumptuous pictorial decoration that we can still admire nowadays.

On important occasions, the crowd followed the many processions and was allowed to attend the liturgies. In order to see better the cardinals' charming clothes, the brilliant decorations adorning the altar and the choir, the magnificent cathedral of the pope behind the altar, and to listen to the extraordinary and new polyphonic compositions of the chanters lodged in their special enclosure to the east of the chapel St. Pierre.

As early as the 1330s, the Church collected its revenues very efficiently, which was not the case in the previous period, and the money chests quickly filled. It is difficult to imagine the luxury of the Curia of Avignon, so not evangelical. If it seems shocking to us today, we must admit that the Palais des Papes quickly became a fundamental artistic center, ideally placed halfway between Rome and Paris, for which the greatest artists of this time worked: musicians, painters, poets, sculptors, architects... Artists from northern Europe learned the art of Italian fresco and miniature, while Italian artists became familiar with sculpture and architecture of northern Europe. At the beginning of the reign of Clement VI, for example, five of the most brilliant figures of the century, the musician Philippe de Vitry, the painter Matteo Giovannetti, the poet Petrarch, the astronomer Johannes de Muris, and the mathematician Levi ben Gerson had very rich discussions together, no doubt!

Within the Curia, "the papal chapel" is an institution created by Benedict XII in 1334 to replace the Roman "Schola cantorum", which did not follow the Pope in his numerous displacements.

From the outset, it consisted of 12 chaplains, a number that would vary little, not to be confused with the "commensal" chaplains, high-ranking dignitaries sharing the Pope's meal, often councilors or high officials of the Curia. This ensemble of cantors gained considerable fame during the 14th century and this light will later attract Dufay, Agricola, Josquin... If the painters chosen for the decoration of the palace were mainly Italian, the majority of clerics called to participate in the chapel came from the north of France. Clement VI took up a practice already established and institutionalized a tradition that will last more than two centuries, thus explaining the strong French influence henceforth exerted on the papal liturgy, until then very Roman. These chaplains were the best singers of the Western world. The Pope did not hesitate to recruit them in the great cathedrals or in the private chapels of the cardinals and kings. Engaged to sing Masses and Canonical Hours, they were also often composers of sacred music as profane and were most likely to participate at the end of meal entertainment of the pontiff and his distinguished guests by singing their motets. In the name of the strict observance of the rule prohibiting the Curia from mixing the sacred and profane domains, the Pope could not have had minstrels in his private service, but his chaplains and the musicians of his hosts filled this lack. The "pape gay qui jolyement et doucement escouteras sans desplaysance" described in the manuscript of Chantilly, is probably Clement VII (Robert of Geneva), an amateur of extraordinary festivities, of which it is known that he sang remarkably. His pontificate at the end of the century represents the pinnacle of the pomp of Avignon. The Vatican archives were fortunately preserved and it is moving for us to know very exactly the name of all the chaplains and their "magister" who succeeded one another in the Palace of the Popes. The very precise accounts also show us the high degree of wealth which their function enabled them to attain at the end of the century. The "cantores" of the fourteenth century gave the impression of a very closed caste, of a solidary brotherhood of a very high artistic and intellectual level, and which is also strongly aware of it. The contacts between the chaplains of the various chapels were numerous and the repertoires seem to have circulated much more than was at first believed.

This remark is particularly valid for the main genre which concerns us here: the polyphonic mass. The habit of singing the ordinary of the mass in polyphony will develop considerably in the second half of the century, at the initiative of the papal chapel. The repertoire of the Ecole de Notre Dame in the thirteenth century already included some short texts (Kyrie, Sanctus, and Agnus) put into polyphony, but composers of the fourteenth century generalized this practice and were particularly interested in the Gloria and Credo, whose length of the texts allow them to innovate more. At the end of the century, the polyphonic mass became a very important genre that quickly spread from its almost unique center of creation: the papal chapel. The manuscripts which transmit these music mass to us are almost all, indirectly, coming from the chapel, although many of the copies transmitted in Avignon have in fact been created elsewhere. The habit was then to choose, for a given day, the different pieces of the ordinary that had to be sung, without real musical relations between them, but the concern to give a unity that is no longer merely textual was done little by little. We proceeded in this way to "compose" the two masses of the program: one to three voices and a second which includes movements with four voices. The masses of Tournai, Machaut, Toulouse, and Barcelona are early exceptions, and the mass on a single cantus firmus will not appear until the fifteenth century, with Guillaume Dufay.

John XXII, in 1324-1325, rose up against the abuse of the young composers of the new school (Ars Nova), who introduced hockets and brief notes in their songs, and especially, as his two predecessors, against the risks of secularization of the sacred song, but the situation changed radically in 1342 when Clement VI began to systematically recruit the best singers from the north of France. From this date onwards, the polyphonic ordinary is attested in the papal chapel,

but it must have been there for a long time already during the great festivals. At the end of the century, polyphony was permitted during the masses for the whole liturgical time except the time of the Passion, about 50 weeks, even in the absence of the Pope! There is no polyphonic music for the canonical hours. The singers certainly had to improvise polyphonically on plain-chant.

The rule always respected in the papal chapel was the soloist singing a cappella, although the number of singers allowed to double the voices was sometimes used. The first mention of an organ concerns the chapel of the anti-pope in exile, Benedict XIII, at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Similarly, the voices of boys which are beginning to be used in the chapels of the cardinals are strictly prohibited in the service of the Sovereign Pontiff.

Between the two masses of the program, we sing three motets, a motet and two Gregorian pieces: a hymn and a response in plain-chant that served as melodic and textual inspiration to Philippe de Vitry for his famous PETRE CLEMENS / LUGENTIUM.

AUREA LUCE: Hymn to the holy apostles, sung in plain-chant. The third verse is traditionally devoted to St. Peter and evokes his clemency and kindness towards sinners. Here it takes a very special meaning and is transformed into a real panegyric of the new Pope, the successor of St. Peter, who took the name of Clement.

FIRMISSIME / ADESTO / ALLELUYA: Motet with three voices of Philippe De Vitry in honor of the Holy Trinity. The spectacular hoquet is not used here but the talent and originality of Vitry do wonders with a melodic sense of the neat phrasing of the two superior voices.

DEUS IN ADJUTORIUM / DEUS IN SE NOTUS: Anonymous motet-conduit with four voices. It is actually a re-use of a three-voices motet from the thirteenth century with a fourth voice added to the top, whose lyrics paraphrase the text "Deus in adjutorium..." which begins the Hours of the Office and thus gives an unusual musical amplitude and a wide range to the simple conduit of the beginning.

ECCE SACERDOS MAGNUS: Response (plain-chant) in honor of St. Peter who served as a source of inspiration for the following motet.

PETRE CLEMENS / LUGENTIUM: Motet of Philippe De Vitry, one of his masterpieces although we are unfortunately far from having kept all his production. In the two upper voices, Vitry praises his protector, Clement VI the Magnificent. This is a grandiose piece of work with virtuosic hoquet sections. With an extremely clever and subtle counterpoint, the two voices retain their independence and weave an astonishing entanglement of allusion, play on words, literary references mainly to glorify Clement the Magnificent, the Limousin Pierre Roger, successor of St. Peter.

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