

The Renaissance in Sound

I. Announcements

- A. NJ Symphony Concert: March 15, 2026 (Bartok, Chopin)—Bus leaves at 1:30 pm from parking lot of St. Paul’s Church. Background materials on both composers and the works to be performed will be made available the week prior to the concert.

II. What Was the Renaissance?

- A. What we commonly call the “Renaissance” is the product of applying a categorization drawn from cultural and political history to the study of music. The period usually referred to as “Music of the Renaissance” can be dated approximately from the first three decades of the 15th century to the end of the sixteenth century (1420/30 to 1600).
- B. Characteristics of Renaissance culture included a focus on reclaiming ideas from ancient Greece and Rome, although interest among scholars in those ideas had been developing during the Middle Ages in selected areas of Europe, as well as in Moorish Spain. Jacob Burckhardt, whose very influential work *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* was published in Germany in 1860, also stressed the development of individualism and a gradual movement away from absolute adherence to religious doctrines that had stifled discovery and experimentation in the arts.
- C. Despite Burckhardt’s impressive historical study, it became problematic to overlay his ideas about social change into the study of music, since there were no surviving manuscripts from the music of ancient Greece and Rome. Additionally, secular polyphony had been expanding in the music of Northern Europe (The Netherlands and France) and it was not until Johannes Tinctoris’ treatise *Liber de Arte Contrapuncti* (1477) that a “rebirth” in the art of music was articulated that was indebted to ideas from classical antiquity.
- D. Tinctoris claimed that the “rebirth” was to be dated from approximately 1430, citing works by Guillaume Dufay, Gilles Binchois and John Dunstable as representing the “new” music of “rebirth”.
- E. The spread of music that was increasingly polyphonic, more reliant on chromatic scales, and with a much greater emphasis on matching words to music came to characterize what we today call “Renaissance Music”.
- F. Concurrently with these musical developments, we find the term “humanism” applied to cultural shifts during the Renaissance—meaning a focus on inquiry by humans into the world that was not reliant on divine theology and Medieval

scholasticism but rather on secular study, science, and reason, all indebted to Greek and Roman philosophy.

III. Renaissance “Sounds”

- A. What we recognize today as the sounds of musical instruments are a far cry in some ways from what was heard between 1430-1600.
- B. The technology of instrument making was changing in the Renaissance, but in general we find wind instruments that were limited in their ability to produce loud volumes of sound. For example, the dominant woodwind instrument of the time was the recorder, also called a “flauto dolce”, which has a soft sound that does not project like a modern flute. Other wind instruments such as the krumhorn, cornetto and sackbut tended to be made of wood, which does not have the brilliant tone of modern brass instruments.
- C. All music of the Renaissance was played at a different pitch than what we associated with modern instruments, and there was not one standardized pitch. In modern musical performances, excepting those played by replicas of Renaissance instruments, concert pitch is set at A440 (the A above middle C on the piano). In the Renaissance, pitches could be 466, A415, or others.
- D. Earlier versions of modern instruments, notably those which are played with a bow (violin, viola, cello) or plucked (guitar, lute, harpsichord) continued to develop to meet the needs of composers.
- E. Vocal music, ranging from individual singers through small ensembles and then larger choirs, was very familiar and ranged from religious to secular compositions and from local taverns, churches and festivals to the grandest of European courts. The madrigal became one of the most popular vocal music genres throughout Europe—it is a poetic/verse form that originated in Italy of the late 14th century and which became increasingly complex over time. During the last 50 years of the Renaissance, we find composers such as Giovanni Gabrieli utilizing combinations of instrumental and vocal musicians in large scale compositions.

IV. Today’s Music

- A. Guillaume Dufay, “Missa L’Homme arme” (Oxford Camerata)
- B. Madrigals from various European countries (The Kings Singers)
- C. Selections of Renaissance Wind Music (Ensemble Douce Memoire)
- D. Dances by Tieleman Susato (Musica Aurea)
- E. Canciones y Danzas de Espana de la Epoca de Cervantes (Hesperion XX)
- F. William Byrd, Anthems (Odyssean Ensemble)
- G. Instrumental Works by Giovanni Gabrieli for St. Marks, Venice (The Wallace Collection)

V. Sources

- A. “Renaissance, Music of the.” Harvard Dictionary of Music, 4th edition, Don Michael Randel, editor. Harvard University Press, 2003: pp. 717-18.

- B. “Renaissance and Reformation: Historical Background.” The Larousse Encyclopedia of Music, Geoffrey Hindley, editor. Crescent, 1971: 85-87.
- C. Romain Goldron. Music of the Renaissance. H. H. Stuttman, Publishers. 1968.
- D. Kenneth Kreitner. “Renaissance Pitch.” in Companion to Medieval & Renaissance Music, Tess Knighton and David Fallows, editors. University of California Press, 1997: 275-284.

Vi. Musical Sources

- A. *Dufay, Missa L’homme arme*. Naxos 8.553087.
- B. *The King’s Singers: Madrigals & Songs from the Renaissance*. Warner Classics 0190295702823
- C. *Renaissance Winds Ensemble Douce Memoire*. Dorian DOR-90261.
- D. *Dance Music of the High Renaissance, Volume 2*. Boston Skyline BSD 138.
- E. *Canciones y Danzas de Espana*. Ensemble Hesperion XX. EMI Classics 7243 8 26507 0
- F. *William Byrd: The Great Service & Anthems*. Linn CKD 608.
- G. *Gabrieli & St. Mark’s. The Wallace Collection*. Nimbus Records NI 5236.

VII. YouTube Films

- A. “Kyrie” from Dufay’s *Missa L’homme arme*. On a Sacred Note <https://youtu.be/GNzQwoPD2WE?si=8mrb00YJaGguV3PF>
- B. Amarcord, *The Book of Madrigals*. <https://youtu.be/ccg8tj-nKBg?si=YGvGDXwV7noZNjOl>
- C. Dowland, *The Earle of Essex Galliard*. https://youtu.be/WXkRgUvY6PM?si=JK2VkJFc4s_I-HLFW
- D. Stockholm Chamber Brass, *Susato Suite*. https://youtu.be/ZJHBBH9gh2Y?si=hc97iZ0F_26SLPkj
- E. Songs from *Cancionero de Montecassino*. Hesperion XXI. <https://youtu.be/w2satYdJWXk?si=Apm1qiQBr7tTStEf>
- F. William Byrd. *Ave Verum Corpus*. Ensemble Zene. https://youtu.be/ioBgfmzRLUE?si=EYrPwMDcMIG_ghZw
- G. Giovanni Gabrieli. *Canzon Septimi Toni*. The Green Mountain Project. <https://youtu.be/yB96NymHfLQ?si=R2j5K0dw2F0uu8T9>