

Musical Development: Evidence of the Influence of Humanism on Music in the Renaissance

Maria R. Drollinger
Cedarville University, mdrollinger@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/rs_symposium

Drollinger, Maria R., "Musical Development: Evidence of the Influence of Humanism on Music in the Renaissance" (2021). *The Research and Scholarship Symposium*. 1.
https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/rs_symposium/2021/podium_presentations/1

This Podium Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Research and Scholarship Symposium by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

Musical Development:

Evidence of the Influence of Humanism on Music of the Renaissance

Maria Drollinger

Music History I

November 24, 2020

Music development has been influenced by the philosophies and religions of different cultures and the individuals involved in writing and performing music since the beginning of time. An example of this can be found in the development of music during the Renaissance which bears recognizable traces of the philosophy that emerged during that time. This philosophy, humanism, is the result of the combination of old ideas from Ancient times and new interpretations that greatly influenced the musical ideals and values that rose to the surface during that era. The purpose of this paper is to give the values of the music during the Renaissance and the values of humanism in order to compare and trace how the one influenced the other.

The relationship between humanism and music must begin with an understanding of the development of that philosophy over time. Humanism as define by the Oxford English dictionary is “a Renaissance cultural movement which turned away from medieval scholasticism and revived interest in ancient Greek and Roman thought.”¹ This philosophy had a deep influence on all the products and creations of that time period. *A History of Western Music* explains a key element of humanism, “At the core of Renaissance Humanism was using the study of classical texts to alter contemporary thinking, breaking with the medieval mindset and creating something new.”²

From these sources it can be determined that understanding the values of humanism requires an understanding of the historical development beginning with the Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers as well as a comparison with the philosophy of scholasticism.

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

2. Robert Wilde, "A Guide to Renaissance Humanism" *ThoughtCo*, (February 2020) accessed November 20, 2020. <https://www.thoughtco.com/renaissance-humanism-p2-1221781>.

Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers are the foundation for many aspects of musical composition, theory, and musical purpose that are assumed about music in the present age just as it was in the time of the Renaissance. One example is the understanding that mathematics is a vital part of creating music. Pythagoras, an Ancient Greek philosopher, is accredited with the discovery of the relationship between pitches and mathematical proportions. This is the foundation for the development of the modes and eventually the present-day scales. Due to the involvement of mathematics with music, it was regarded as an essential part of educating men to their full potential. The purpose of music was greatly debated among the philosophers of the time. A common belief was that music was meant for reasoning rather than performing, therefore a true musician was one who understood the rationale and logic behind a composition even if he did not understand how to perform the piece in question. There was also a strong belief in the power of music, that music could influence emotion and that emotions are the foundations of actions. Therefore, music was believed to have the power to affect the manner in which a person conducted themselves. For this reason, there was much discussion on what music was appropriate for people based on their personality and character traits.

Another aspect of Greek and Roman culture that is of interest is the fascination with humanity and the human form. There was much idolatry of man as the perfect being and a constant motivation to pursue being the full, perfect man who was characterized by being well educated and well balanced in character, action, and thought. Music was part of the process of becoming this perfect version of mankind. Artwork and literature reflected this obsession with the physical form of man which influenced later artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. A phrase that gives a wonderful summation of the core of the Greek and Roman

cultural belief is that “man is the measure of all things,”³ a philosophy accredited to Protagoras. Everything was based on that statement: art, architecture, literature, politics, religion, music, etc. Examples of this would be the Pantheon, writings of Plato and Aristotle, and the statue *Doryphoros*. These things were of value only if they were able to show the exactness of the ideal man or if they were able to influence men to become more like the idolized version they all strived to become. Music was judged in the same manner, gathering value in ancient men’s eyes by its ability to influence man to become his full potential or losing its value by causing the listener to become unbalanced and inferior in personality.

As time progressed, the ancient documents were lost or no longer accessible, resulting in the philosophies and thoughts of the ancient times becoming obscured. This culminated in scholasticism. Scholasticism was a philosophy greatly based on, not the original documentation of the Ancient texts, but rather on the authority of philosophers who wrote about their own interpretation of those Ancient manuscripts and philosophies. Oxford English dictionary defines scholasticism as “The system of theology and philosophy taught in medieval European universities, based on Aristotelian logic and the writings of the early Church Fathers and having a strong emphasis on tradition and dogma.”⁴ Another resource defined scholasticism as a “method of study, based on logic and dialectic.”⁵ It was a study that involved the debating of ideas and a strong reliance on logical reasoning. Therefore, much of the music composed during

3. Stephen Law, *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2011), 10.

4. *Oxford English Dictionary*

5. Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, and Frank M. Turner, *The Western Heritage*, 6th ed.(New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Simon & Schuster/A Viacom Company Upper Saddle River, 1998), 290.

this time strictly followed the traditions and rules set in place without trying to gather where these rules came from or what the original intent was of those traditions.

Petrarch, an Italian poet attributed with the title “father of humanism” by many sources, grew up under this philosophy of teaching however, he grew critical of the influence of scholasticism and its credibility. In fact, Petrarch’s independent research led him to reject scholasticism as being a result of the “narrow-mindedness of the schoolmen.”⁶ Due to his desire to understand and learn more from the ancient cultures, Petrarch greatly directed the development of Italian poetry as well as the development of humanism. His research laid the foundation for humanism by gathering the old documentation and evaluating the original ideas of ancient authorities such as Plato, Cicero, Socrates, Plautus, Lucretius, and Quintilian. This research led to the return of many of the philosophies of those ancient times as their credibility was validated. A source explained, “it was mainly during this period that music changed its orientation from the divine to the human.”⁷ To this point there had been a great deal of emphasis on the divine in music and art, with little to no acknowledgement of the real and the human. However, as they returned to the study of the human mind, body, and soul, so also was there a return to the emphasis on the human as seen in both art and music. In art there was a return to life-like reconstruction of the human body in masterpieces like Michelangelo’s *David*, his *Pieta*, and the magnificently painted ceiling in the Sistine Chapel as well as Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*, his anatomical studies, and his *Battle of Anghiari*. These amazing creations demonstrate one of the key values of humanism.

6. Roderick Conway Morris, “Petrarch, the first humanist,” *New York Times*, (May 29, 2004).

7. Gerald Abraham, *The New Oxford History of Music: Volume IV The Age of Humanism 1540-1630*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), xxi.

Humanism centers on man being the center of all things, just as the Greek and Latin philosophers believed. There is also an emphasis placed on emotion and power of music to influence that emotion, which is also a result of the influential power of those ancient philosophers. However, here there are a few differences between the Greek view and that of the Renaissance. Music ability to influence emotion is understood, but it is not attributed with as much power as it was in the Greek and Roman cultures. Rather, it was important to use music in order to express those emotions as much as possible. There was also a change in the view of the musician. The humanists of the Renaissance did not think music was just for rational understanding, but rather they believed that there was value in the actual performing of the music. Interpretation of a piece was just as important as constructing the music in a rational manner. And compositions gained value through the excellence with which it could be performed and the creativity with which it could be written. This change in the desire for more musical expression is one of the most influential and important results of the philosophy of humanism.

This change in the focus and purpose of music is explained by a source as, “the high esteem which humanism felt for the word, the wide-ranging indifference towards the agreement of musical accent and accentuation in church Latin was replaced by declamation that observed the accent of the word.”⁸ This led to more exploration in music as ingenuity in conveying musical idea and emotion became the center of the musicians goal in performing and writing music. Repetition of certain themes with the use of imitation as well as constantly changing rhythmic patterns and variety in harmonic texture began to be a common part of the structure

8. Willem Elders, “Humanism and Early-Renaissance Music: A Study of the Ceremonial Music by Ciconia and Dufay,” (Netherlands: Koninklijke Vereniging voor, 1997), 67, Accessed November 24, 2020. https://www.jstor.org/stable/938834?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents.

resulting from more creative composition. Music also began to shift from modality to tonality as seen in masterpieces such as Josquin des Prez' chansons and frottoles, which had a large impact on the writing of future chansons due to Josquin's development of "simpler and more humble art designed to match the lucidity of the poetic texts."⁹

There are two different ways in which music can be used in order to express the text with more accuracy. One is text depiction, which focuses on the visual images created by the words which is mirrored through musical gestures. The second is text expression, the communication of mood and emotion created as the overall background of the text and then emphasized through the accompanying music. These different approaches to music are seen in the different genres that emerged during the Renaissance under the influence of composers such as Josquin, Clement Janequin, Adrian Willaert, and Claudio Monteverdi.

Clement Janequin, "who brought the chanson to its highest stage of development"¹⁰, was a French composer. His chanson *Au joly mois de may* is characterized by a sweet, graceful sound that is full of different rhythmic variations in order to convey the meaning of the text "this tendril is so sweet that it almost makes me lose my senses." He uses some chromaticism in order to convey how losing senses is a loss that is deeply felt while still maintaining the graceful, childlike beauty of the harmony and melody. He incorporated some of Josquin des Prez's methods of dividing the voices into pairs and using imitation to place further emphasis on the text.

The chanson was not the only genre of music that was used to convey meaning more effectively. There was also the very important and influential development of the madrigal,

9. Abraham, *The New Oxford History of Music*, 2.

10. Abraham, *The New Oxford History of Music*, 11.

which was instrumental in the creation of opera. The madrigal was an Italian genre of vocal music set to Italian poetry, which was greatly influenced by Petrarch as Renaissance musicians studied his sonnets and the ideas he expressed in his work. It was through-composed without any repetitions and was shaped after the meaning of the text using different combinations of homophony with an equal emphasis being placed on all the voices participating. Text expression was accomplished through different combinations in the texture, the rhythms, and the use of word painting. During that time, composers believed that bitterness was best expressed through major sixths and major thirds because they considered them to be harsh, while they used minor thirds and minor sixths to convey sadness, which were though sweet and soft.

Adrian Willaert, a Netherlandish composer, used much of Petrarch's poetry in his compositions. His approach to the madrigal tended to be more leisurely, being both more elaborate and more relaxed. Often, he would use pauses between phrases and words to give the words more expression. His use of pauses allowed for each voice to be heard individually at certain points and created a more open texture. One of his madrigals, *Amore mi fa morire* uses a great deal of chromaticism to communicate the emotion of the piece. This is used to create a beautiful heartfelt cry about love being a torment yet, love is still sought and even embraced despite the pain it causes. The piece is exquisitely composed with Willaert's normal emphasis on the usage of rests to draw out the melody and create a beautiful, gentle texture.

Humanism also led to a more isolated focus on the individual. It had been the habit of the culture for music to be considered most profitable for the listener and the participants if it was a solemn reflection on the glory of God. This was due to the prevalence of the church as an influential part of the cultural development in much of Europe during the Medieval time period. It was believed by most that music should be uniform with no one voice gaining more attention

than the others and that it was not appropriate for there to be any distraction from the sacred text. This is the reason that music in church was merely choral rather than instrumental. It is also the cause for the hesitancy to permit dissonance into the compositions presented in the service. As humanism rose, so did a change in submitting to this uniformity in polyphonic music. Harmonies began to branch out, incorporating more dissonance, rhythmic variety, melodic diversity using themes, as well as clearer structure in the form of the music.

The combined effort at creating music that was more expressive and that allowed the importance of the individual to rise is seen in the development of opera. Here the importance of the performer's interpretation and skill is seen, reflecting one of the newer aspects of humanistic values. Dramatization was used in creating a beautiful staged story using music to artfully craft an environment that increased the meaning and mood as the story was acted out on stage. Opera directly ties to Greek tragedy, which is believed by many scholars to be a story completely communicated by sung solos and choruses. Opera was the culmination of many elements of humanism resulting in the speechlike, dramatic recitatives and the harmonically rich arias and choruses. One resource stated that opera was the fulfillment of the 'Renaissance spirit.'¹¹ The recitative was extremely effective at communicating the text clearly as the voice was free to move above the basso continuo. These were often meant to help develop more of the story through monologues and dialogues of the characters at climatic moments. The aria was used to express the emotions of the characters with fuller and more complex harmonic texture. These two different types of songs were effective in the story telling aspect of the music as they conveyed meaning with great depth either by the simplicity or the complexity of the musical contour and texture.

11. Abraham, *The New Oxford History of Music*, xxi.

One of the influential composers involved in the genre of opera was Claudio Monteverdi, an Italian composer from the mid 15th century to the mid 16th century. He composed multiple works, one of which was his successful opera *L'Arianna*. The only part of this opera that survived was the lament, *Lamento d'Arianna*. It is the sad cry of Arianna who is mourning the broken promise of marriage that Theseus had offered in return for her assistance and rebellion against her father. The words are emphasized by very little accompaniment, with freedom in the voice, and with the use of chromaticism in the melody. The downward leaps and little runs up when she recollects the hope she had, communicate the loss she feels, the betrayal that breaks her heart, and the memory of what she had been promised. Monteverdi truly mastered the ability to communicate emotional turmoil through music as can also be seen in many of his other works.

Josquin de Prez's chanson, Claudio Monteverdi's opera, and Cipriano de Rore's madrigal all show the values of the music of the Renaissance. There is a heightened amount of creativity and diversity in the elements used in constructing the melodies and the harmonies involved in these pieces, which is a result of the desire to express the text with moving accuracy. There is also the emerging importance of the performer, in regards, to music interpretation that correlates with the importance of ingenuity in both improvisation and composition of music. These values, individual performance excellence and expression of the text, directly relate back to the humanistic values of using music to express emotion through emphasis on language and the rising importance of recognizing the individual.

This paper attempted to show that there is a direct correlation between philosophy of a society and the products of that society by showing the connection between Renaissance music and the philosophy of humanism. The historical background of the development of humanism gave much evidence for the values of that philosophy that were directly reflected in the values of

the music from that time period. There are many more ways that that relationship can be shown, but this was a short overview of just a few of those aspects as seen in music and philosophical history.

Bibliography

- Abraham, Gerald. *The New Oxford History of Music: Volume IV The Age of Humanism 1540-1630*. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Arkenberg, Rebecca. "Music in the Renaissance." *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002.
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/renm/hd_renm.htm.
- Bose, Mishtooni. *Humanism, English Music and the Rhetoric of Criticism*. Oxford University Press, 1996. 1-21 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/737534>.
- Brown, Howard Mayer, and Edward E. Lowinsky. *Monuments of Renaissance Music*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1975.
- Burkholder, J. Peter, Grout, Jay Donald, and Palisca, Claude V. *A History of Western Music*. 10th ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019.
- Burkholder, J. Peter and Palisca, Claude V. *Norton Anthology of Western Music: Volume One Ancient to Baroque*, 8th ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019.
- Bush, Douglas. *The Renaissance and English Humanism*. Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1965.
- Campbell, Gordon. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Renaissance*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Elders, Willem. "Humanism and Early-Renaissance Music: A Study of the Ceremonial Music by Ciconia and Dufay." *Tijdschrift Van De Vereniging Voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 27, no. 2 (1977): 65-101. Netherlands: Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/938834?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents.
doi:10.2307/938834.
- Ferguson, Wallace K. *The Renaissance: Berkshire Studies in European History*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966.
- Haar, James. "Humanism." Grover Music Online, 2001.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40601>.
- Jackson, Jefferey H., and Stanley C. Pelkey. *Music and History: Bridging the Disciples*. University Press of Mississippi, 2005.
- Kagan, Donald; Ozment, Steven; and Turner, Frank M. *The Western Heritage*, 6th ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Simon & Schuster/A Viacom Company Upper Saddle River, 1998.

- Law, Stephen. *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2011.
- Morris, Roderick Conway. "Petrarch, the first humanist," *New York Times* (New York), (May 29, 2004). <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/29/style/petrarch-the-first-humanist.html>
- Ongaro, Giulio. *Music of the Renaissance*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198609810.001.0001/acref-9780198609810-e-6285>
- Ray, Michael. "Josquin des Prez." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. (August 2020). L: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Josquin-des-Prez>.
- Rossellini, Ingrid. *Know Thyself: Western Identity from Classical Greece to the Renaissance*. New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2018.
- Sharpe, Robert A. *Music and Humanism: An Essay in the Aesthetics of Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Stamou, Lelouda. "Plato and Aristotle on Music and Music Education: Lessons from Ancient Greece." *International Journal of Music Education*. Tampa: International Centre for Research in Music Education, (May 2002). DOI: [10.1177/025576140203900102](https://doi.org/10.1177/025576140203900102)
- Whitfield, John Humphreys. *Petrarch: Italian poet*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, (July 16, 2020). <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Petrarch#ref5635>
- Wilde, Robert. "A Guide to Renaissance Humanism." ThoughtCo. (February 2020). <https://www.thoughtco.com/renaissance-humanism-p2-1221781>.