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2022

Music and Love in France From the Middle Ages through the Baroque

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Moore, Joseph and Eanes, James Edward III, "Music and Love in France From the Middle Ages through the Baroque" (2022). *Symposium of Student Scholars*. 75.

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Joseph Moore

December 8, 2021

Dr. Eanes

Music History

Annotated Playlist: Music Across Time

European culture has shaped the world in many ways. In almost every country in the world, you can find European influences. These influences range from socioeconomic ideas to developments of the arts. However, an influence that most wouldn't think has been shaped by Europe is our view of love. Many people see the modern-day vision of love as very personal and unique to each person. Although everyone does express love in many different ways the modern overarching view of love in our society was heavily influenced by France.

French culture has never ceased to astonish the world. Time and time again whether through art, music, architecture, cuisine, or fashion France has always seemed to innovate in a way that makes it unique to their own culture. This is why it's no great surprise that France is known as the country of love. As written by Marilyn Yalom in "How the French invented love" "It occupies a privileged place in their national identity, on par with fashion, food and human rights." Yalom also goes on to state that "A French man or woman without desire is considered defective, like someone missing the sense of taste or smell." This rich culture of love is so pervasive it can be seen all around the world. For example, Paris is globally recognized as the city of love. Other examples are the spread of well-known terms such as "French Kissing" and "Menage a trois" are used in everyday media all around the world.

But, how exactly did France achieve this status of being the "country of love"? What

influenced the development of love in France? In this Annotated Playlist, we will explore these questions and how music helped to develop the vision of love in France.

The Medieval Period (500-1450 CE)

[“Can vei la lauzeta mover”](#)

written by Bernart de Ventadorn (12th century)

Medieval France better known at the time as “the kingdom of the Franks” was divided by many leaders but under the influence of the Capetian dynasty became the kingdom of France. This was truly a time of kings, courts, and dynasties. And in the time of kings and courts comes the birth of courtly love. Courtly love is known to the French as “Amour Courtois” which is defined by Britannica as “a highly conventionalized code that prescribed the behavior of ladies and their lovers”. This theme is born in southern France towards the end of the 11th century by the French troubadours. The French troubadours were poets of southern France who were favored in royal courts and thrived from having a “freedom of speech” that the commoner of the day wasn’t afforded. The greatest historical influence of the troubadour was the way they changed the role of women in society over the course of the medieval period. During this time women were often used as objects such as tender in business transactions or as sacrificial marriage to unite two kingdoms. The troubadour shifted this view of women from objects to be used to a prize to be sought after and won. Troubadours did this through their poems which were adapted to songs often labeled as chansons and were monophonic. The storyline of these poems included “The Courtly Lover” who would fall in love with a woman who was often in a forced marriage of some kind. As written in Britannica “The courtly lover existed to serve his lady. His love was invariably adulterous...”. This idea developed throughout the period eventually “The courtly Lover” was to be seen as a “slave

of passion” which was invigorated by a respect for his “lady”. These developments birthed the concept of chivalry and created a culture that demanded respect for women which hadn’t previously existed.

Our first work on this playlist is “Can vei la lauzeta mover” written by Bernart de Ventadorn. Bernart de Ventadorn was an extremely prominent troubadour of the time who once said “In my opinion, a person is not worth anything if he or she does not desire love”. There is not much known of the life of Bernart. However, what is known is that he was from a Limousin, France from a “Castle of low breeding”. His mother was a baker and his father was a farmworker. In Bernart’s early years it seems his father taught him music which he had a gift for. So gifted that he became a singer for the “Viscount of Ventadorn” who was a nobleman of the area and his wife. However, Bernart fell in love with the viscount's wife and eventually stole her from him. Which is curiously similar to the story of “the courtly lover”. “Can vei la lauzeta mover” is Bernart’s most known song and was so influential in its time that Dante paraphrased it in the opening of “Paradiso”. The song is also known as “The fool on the Bridge” is a first-person narrative of a “Courtly Lover” who in an outburst of emotion expressed his love to his lady. However, his lady “wants to be a good woman” so she flees. The Lover then in despair sighs and “proposes to go into exile if his lady does not show him mercy”. Here we see classic themes of the troubadour's poetry. The “Courtly lover” is tortured by his passion. According to Marylin Yalom, this is an important factor in the development of the idealization of love in France. In “how the French invented love” Yalom talks about how French love is so pervasive because unlike other cultures “the French ideas of love includes the darker elements”. In this case, being the despair of being unable to be with the one you love is the fate of the “courtly lover”. This hyperbolizing of negative emotion helps to emphasize how amazing true love must be to cause such heartbreak. It romanticizes passion which

at the time helps men of the time to learn to romance a woman rather than feel entitled to her. Some might even consider this period the birth of romance in France.

The Renaissance Period (1450-1600)

“[Dueil Angoisseux](#)” written by Gilles Binchois

Text by Christine de Pisan

The renaissance period was a complex and dark time in French history. During this period France went through what is known as the Wars of religion. These wars were based on the splitting of Christianity between Roman Catholicism and protestant Christianity. Other factors that affected this era were the plague and the hundred years war which left France’s economy in disarray. However, despite these setbacks, the renaissance still managed to reach France through French invasions of Italy that occurred between 1494 and 1525. The French renaissance brought about the birth of innovations in architecture, sculpture, music, literature, theatre, cuisine, and the life of the everyday commoner. One important development was the writings of Christine de Pisan who aimed to further challenge the misogynistic views of the time. Some might even say that the troubadours of the middle ages paved the path for this development. In the realm of music, there wasn’t a ton of innovation in France. While other countries were realizing treatises on harmony and evolving the theories of music France was focused on spreading the fundamentals of music across France with the development of music printing. However, France was adopting the innovations of their neighbors primarily exploring the newfound texture of polyphony. Another part of the renaissance that found its way into French culture was humanism and the revival of antiquity. With it came the fascination in the connection between music and poetry in Ancient

Greece. According to The French Review the humanist of the time "...realized that, for the ancients, music and poetry were intimately united". This is quite evident in the music of the time especially music written about love. These lyric poems explored the relationship between "The Lover, The beloved, and the meaning of love". However, meaning in this context is speaking less of the actual meaning and more of how meaning is expressed and felt. Therefore, much poetry of this era deals with heartbreak and loss. Occurrences remind you to not take love for granted. This I believe is an instrumental part of the development of love in France.

Gilles Binchois was a well-known composer of his time who primarily wrote church music and secular chansons. According to the new world encyclopedia, Gilles Binchois was considered to be the "finest melodist of the fifteenth century". He was the leading composer of the court of Burgundy for a time. Gilles is known best for his chansons which are mostly sad and are based upon the subject of unrequited love and often have a sad, melancholy tone. The chanson was looking at in this annotated-playlist is "Dueil Angoisseux" translated to English is anguishing grief based on the poetry of Christine de Pisan. This chanson highlights the developments in polyphony of the time as well as exploring the past with the poetry of Christine de Pisan. Christine de Pisan was a French poet of the medieval period who championed the social status of women. Her poem Anguishing Grief was written after her husband died and outlines her grief. Here again, we see the French use the dark sides of love such as heartbreak, grief, and jealousy to emphasize the lighter parts. In this specific example, her grief is a symbol of the depth of her and her husband's love for each other. To grieve someone with such intensity you must have loved them with as much passion. It seems that for the French, passion despite its connotation is the key to love. Maybe this is why the French don't see a reason to romanticize love to a point that we forget the negative aspects?

The Baroque Period (1600-1750)

[“Vos mespris chaque jour”](#) Written by Michel Lambert

The baroque era was one of great prosperity for France and French music. A move towards what is defined as “monarchical absolutism” by the Centre for French Baroque Music caused a strict divide in music. Music was either written to uplift the king or god. While there were many developments during this time in music including the French opera and the comedie-ballet. Our focus lies on the development of the French Air. The French air was one of the most popular forms of the solo song during the baroque period in France. The French air was categorized as a “courtly love song” the same label held by the chanson of the troubadours. However, they differ widely. While the chanson often describes a man whose sole purpose is to serve his lady the air is described as “instead of placing the beloved on a pedestal to be admired and worshiped, the male poetic voice complains of her harsh treatment, at times even insulting her, claiming that she is inhumane, unfaithful, and aloof, all the while lamenting her rejection. In a few airs, he either tries to persuade her to love him in return, or he celebrates their mutual love.”. According to *Music and the Language of Love* written by Catherine Gordon-Seifert the air was a highly cultivated genre with many different kinds of airs “There were airs de cour (courtly airs), airs à boire (drinking songs), airs à danser (dance airs), airs sérieux (serious airs), chansonnettes (“little” songs), and brunetes (any air with pastoral references, the actual name brunete not appearing in publications until the first decade of the eighteenth century” as well as the “air leger” also known as the light air. To simplify the air overall was a solo song mostly written in binary form that varied depending on the context and contents of the song. While all forms of the air gained popularity at one point or another the serious air was said to be “the finest musical genre for solo voice and accompaniment during the seventeenth century”. The most famous writer of this sub-genre of airs was Michel

Lambert. As a child, Lambert was chosen to work for King Louis XIII's younger brother and overtime earned the title of "maître de musique de la Chambre du Roi in 1661". Lambert's popularity can be attributed to his influence from the "salon of Henriette de Coligny, Comtesse de La Suze". The poetry he heard at these gatherings heavily influenced his writings that explored all aspects of love which was an extremely popular subject among the society during this time. Delving into Lambert's work, we see four topics specifically that he often bases his works on. These being "(1) painful love; (2) bittersweet love; (3) enticing love; and (4) joyous or pleasurable, usually shared, love". These categories often separate his works into different styles the first two painful and bittersweet into the serious air category and the second two enticing and joyous/pleasurable as light. Here we see a development of the ideals of the renaissance and medieval. Rather than, always including the dark side of love we see the inclusion of some of the lighter sides of love.

This brings us to our last song of the playlist "Vous Mespris Chaque Jour". This specific example from Lambert is an example of the bittersweet variety of Air. The translation of this piece reads "Your contempt every day causes me a thousand alarms, But I cherish my fate, although it is rigorous: Alas! if in my ills I find so many charms, I would die of pleasure if I were happier". I chose this example because I find it interesting that it contrast's its predecessors in that it doesn't paint the beloved/his lady as a goddess-like figure who could do no wrong. It's as though over time the concept of either the lover or the beloved needing to be seen as an imperfect being is no longer needed. The French have in essence found a way to romanticize love while including the negative aspects on both sides of the spectrum. The example of this we see here is that despite the beloved contempt the lover is still passionately drawn to his beloved.

In conclusion, I would say that the reason France is known as the country of love is that together they taught each other how to love. Often times in history we see morals and ideals taught through the arts such as storytelling. Here we can see starting in the medieval period music that teaches men to romance and chases after women with respect and passion through the Chanson. While simultaneously teaching them through storytelling to respectfully accept rejection. In the renaissance, we see an exploration of what gives love meaning by using the darker sides of love to emphasize the intensity of passion at which love can be felt. Then finally, in the baroque, we see through the art of *The French Air* see the romanticizing of the imperfections of love and a deeper narrative within the French society about all aspects of love. I believe this exploration and appreciation of love throughout France's history weaved love into the fabric of their society.

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