



Binchois Studies



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Introduction

ANDREW KIRKMAN AND DENNIS SLAVIN

Though most of it had long been available in various old editions, the bringing together of Binchois's complete sacred music was the source of many surprises.¹ First among these was the sheer bulk of the composer's sacred oeuvre, which, as now became obvious, considerably outweighed that of his surviving secular output.² The emphasis hitherto accorded to Binchois the composer of songs suddenly seemed disproportionate. But the surprises only multiplied through awareness of the wide diversity of styles and idioms encompassed by the various genres, sacred and secular, in which he worked. On its own, Binchois's oeuvre presents an image which to modern perceptions—particularly when compared with the surviving output of his most celebrated contemporary, Dufay—appears paradoxical. If Binchois had a musical 'personality', that personality was split, it would appear, in different and unrelated directions. The familiar modern process whereby an image of the 'author' is constructed as it were in retrospect from a notional consistency in his or her surviving products seems in his case closed for us.³ Neither can the stylistic differences encompassed by Binchois's output be resolved by recourse to narratives predicated on such 'internally'-driven notions as that of stylistic change or development. Modern precepts concerning what composers are or what they do, and the analytical strategies which emerge from them, promise little help in rationalizing the stylistic distinctions that divide the various areas of his output. A 'coherent' image of Binchois's music can arise only from stepping outside it and examining it from the perspective of the various

¹ *The Sacred Music of Gilles Binchois*, ed. Philip Kaye (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

² A point made at length by David Fallows in his review of Kaye's edition, *Early Music*, 21 (1993), 282–4.

³ A procedure famously elucidated by Michel Foucault: '... these aspects of an individual which we designate as making him an author are only a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice'. See 'What is an Author?', repr. in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London and New York: Longman, 1988), 197–210 at 203.

circumstances under which it was created, and which gave rise to its particular forms.

An understanding of Binchois the musician, then, must be built on a construction of Binchois the man. At first blush this goal appears unpromising. To turn from the apparently chameleon-like image of Binchois the composer to the person of Binchois himself is to be confronted by an enigma: if the music suggests little sense of a consistent musical 'personality', the biography seems, on the face of it, to offer less still.⁴ A handful of anecdotes mostly from the earlier part of his life and the text of Ockeghem's famous *déploration*, *Mort tu as navré*, provide almost the only palpable access to a living human being. Even the substance of the surviving executors' account, though a source of the names of relatives and a list of possessions at death and transactions after it, seems to offer little to separate Binchois from other recently deceased church functionaries of his day, and certainly—in common with most contemporary executors' accounts of known musicians—no hint that he was ever involved in music.⁵

The image improves, however, as we widen the focus from the man to the political-social arena in which he moved and for which his music was shaped. Such a field of vision offers the possibility of at least some measure of historically grounded access to the music: what needs was this music shaped to fulfil? Who paid for it and why? How did it interact with other manifestations of Binchois's cultural and working environment? What particular forces within Binchois's career may have been at work in giving his musical profile the particular contours it has? And finally, as a corollary to this, in what ways, and why, does his music correspond to, or differ from, that of other composers of his time? Intriguing in its own right, Binchois's music promises further yields as a focus of contrast, having powerful implications for an understanding of the surviving output of his contemporaries.

Beyond its musical implications, Binchois's biography is of considerable interest for the more general cultural insights it affords. First, it offers glimpses of the role of a skilled protagonist of the distant and rarefied culture to which he belonged. These are glimpses, furthermore, which provide an important counter-image to that presented by Dufay: cosmopolitan and peripatetic, Dufay's career followed a trajectory in sharp contrast to that of Binchois, situated as it was in the courts, politics, and culture of his native region. As a player on a rich and volatile political and cultural stage, Binchois was close to, and indeed at times embroiled in, events of deep significance in the political life of northern Europe. Only frag-

⁴ For a summary of Binchois's biography see David Fallows, 'Binchois, Gilles de Bins, *dit*', *New Grove*, ii, 709–10.

⁵ This is true even of its recorded dealings with (including payments from) the duke of Burgundy. While these entries reveal that Binchois was a ducal familiar of sufficient status to have received '... ij medechins que notre redoubte prince envoya a sougnies [*sic*] pour viziter ledit defunct en se [*sic*] maladie' (fo. 5^v), and that '... en le court de notre redoubte prince monseigneur le ducq messeigneurs les chappellains firent .ii. Obseques pour ledit defunct' (fo. 5^r), there is no indication that music played a role in that status. (The account is preserved as Mons, Archives de l'État, Chapitre de Soignies, testament 42.)

ments remain, yet these—including the Benoit testimony alluded to below and, most significantly, his motet *Nove cantum melodie*, whose contemporary significance is explored in this volume by Philip Weller—are rich with potential meaning.

While our first records of the composer are payments made to the ‘young’ Binchois between 1419 and 1423 for playing the organ in Sainte-Waudru, Mons,⁶ there is no evidence that he was ever a choirboy. Indeed, the fact that he was neither a priest nor held a university degree may suggest that he was not: the typical career path for a musician of his time, progressing from choirboy to vicar to canon, taking in a degree in arts or canon law on the way, seems not to have been the route that he took.⁷ But whether or not his training took place within a *maîtrise*, Binchois’s career, inevitably for its time, was deeply enmeshed with religious institutions. Aspects of that involvement are highlighted in this volume in the chapters by Barbara Haggh and Sean Gallagher.

Haggh’s study offers a comprehensive examination of an aspect of Binchois’s sacred music which has long been a source of confusion: the liturgical antecedents of the chants on the basis of which most of it is constructed. As might be expected, a number of Binchois’s chants relate convincingly to the Parisian rite used by the dukes of Burgundy; less expected, however, is that a large number do not. Indeed, many of the chants he used cannot in the present state of knowledge be specifically associated with anywhere. Any future attempts to solve this (at the moment seemingly insuperable) problem will have to depart from an examination of liturgical practices of the churches where the composer held prebends and of the many foundations visited by the itinerant court of Burgundy. One conclusion seems clear from Haggh’s study, however: there seem few grounds to postulate (as has been attempted in the past) links between specific chants set by Binchois and particular English uses.

Gallagher’s essay offers new insights both into Binchois’s role as provost of the collegiate church of Saint-Vincent in Soignies at the end of his life and the possible implications of that position for the style of his fellow member of that establishment, Johannes Regis. His study is thus one of a number in this volume in which

⁶ See Fallows, ‘Binchois’, 709, for a summary of these accounts.

⁷ This view is reinforced by an anecdote reported by Reinhard Strohm concerning the election on 7 Jan. 1438 to the provostship of St Donatian, Bruges, of Jean de Bourgogne, a step-brother of Philip the Good. It seems that Binchois, having arrived late for the election, was at first denied admittance because he could not provide written evidence that he was in holy orders, a prerequisite for being able to vote. He was finally admitted after protesting that he was indeed in orders, an assertion that was backed up by another canon who was also a ducal singer. He was required, however, to forward proof of this, which he duly did, providing a letter which showed that he had been granted the rank of sub-deacon by the general vicar of the bishop of Cambrai in June 1437. See *Music in Late Medieval Bruges* (rev. edn., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 153. In other words, it was not until 1437, by which time he was an important member of the ducal chapel and a man of considerable substance, that Binchois received the most minor level of holy orders. The conclusion is difficult to escape that his elevation to sub-deacon was simply a convenience to enable him to assume precisely the sort of official roles as that just discussed and from which he would otherwise have been excluded.

biographical information is enlisted in the attempt to explain musical relationships between Binchois and other composers with whom he seems to have come into contact.

While Binchois was a participant in a world in which, as Philip Weller's chapter explores, sacred and secular interacted and intermeshed according to patterns and with an intensity alien to modern experience, his career nonetheless appears essentially to have been more that of the courtier than of the cleric. This is a view which resonates with his lack of higher orders and the information (whatever it may be worth) provided by *Mort tu as navré* that he was a 'soudart' in his youth.

Binchois may indeed—as suggested by the well-known anecdotes drawn from the testimony of Guillaume Benoit concerning an assassination attempt in 1424 on Philip the Good—have been a highly political animal.⁸ If this was the case, his political instincts could well have been honed in the context of the court of Hainault, at which his father, Jean de Binche, was a *conseiller*. Born into a well-connected family, he may not have needed the ecclesiastical education which was essential as an educational, career, and social foundation for those—such as Dufay—who were less fortunate. Further exploration of the Hainault court, as called for here by David Fallows, could offer fresh insight into the environment within which the young Binchois moved, the socio-political world within which his professional character and proclivities might plausibly have been formed.

None of this, of course, is virgin ground: Jeanne Marix and, more recently, Fallows and Walter Kemp have offered a wealth of detail and insight into Binchois's career, particularly at the court of Burgundy. But, as Fallows is first to acknowledge, a more complete and rounded image is sorely needed; needed, and indeed accessible: even documents such as the executors' account—discussed in various of its aspects by Manfred Schuler⁹ and Fallows—which have long been known to scholarship could yield new insights through further investigation. And the time is overdue for a re-examination of the original documentation of the Burgundian court used by Marix some sixty years ago and which could be supplemented by a wealth of as yet unconsidered material, not least being, as Fallows observes, the copiously surviving *quotidien* accounts of the court.

If Binchois's own world promises new insights, so indeed does the wider musical world into which his music travelled and with which it interpenetrated. The Benoit anecdotes give a hint of the contacts with English culture which must have been a major factor in one of the most oft-discussed aspects of his musical idiom: its interaction with and apparent indebtedness to the music of England, an area of enquiry revisited in this volume by Peter Wright and Andrew Kirkman. The lack

⁸ See A. Desplanque, 'Projet d'assassinat de Philippe le Bon par les anglais (1424–1426)', *Mémoires couronnés et mémoires des savants étrangers publiés par l'Académie royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique*, 33 (1865–7), 3–78 at 70, 72; quoted in Jeanne Marix, *Histoire de la musique et des musiciens de la cour de Bourgogne sous le règne de Philippe le Bon (1420–1467)* (Strasbourg: Heitz, 1939), 178–9, and Fallows, 'Binchois', 709. See also the discussion in Peter Wright, 'Binchois and England', this volume, Ch. 4.

⁹ Manfred Schuler, 'Neues zur Biographie von Gilles Binchois', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 33 (1976), 68–78.

of manuscripts of sacred music from northern Europe during this period has inevitably created a picture of a musical relationship between Binchois and England in which the traffic was largely one way; but such details as Bedyngham's authorship of a mass on *Dueil angoisseux*, Power's reliance on *De plus en plus* in his own *Anima mea liquefacta est*, and Skelton's mentions of *Vostre tres doulx regart* (all commented on in Wright's chapter) give some hint of the degree to which that picture may have been conditioned by accidents of transmission. Many of those features traditionally viewed as English are likely to have been of much more general northern European currency; and, situated as Binchois's career was in a time of intense dynastic interaction between England and Burgundy, it seems likely that the two courts, at least, shared areas of musical commonality.

But the enquiry into the relationships between Binchois's music and that of England inevitably draws us into another, much broader one: that concerning its relationships with the huge southern European compendia to which we owe the survival of most of his sacred music and indeed of most English sacred music of the period. While we have the scribes of the Trent and Aosta codices, in particular, to thank that most of this music survives at all, the particular ways in which they recorded it have created their own problems for us today. Among these problems is the inconsistency in their patterns of attribution, an issue highlighted in this volume by Marco Gozzi. As Gozzi notes, the likelihood is high that unknown works by Binchois are hidden among the largely anonymous repertories of the later Trent codices beginning with Tr 93, and he presents by way of illustration the (surely conclusive) case of one such piece, an anonymous *Agnus Dei* in Tr 93 whose musical substance reveals that it must originally have been paired with a Binchois *Sanctus* in Tr 92.

Attention to patterns of transmission also highlights notational inconsistencies which are rich in implications for performance practice and hence also for fifteenth-century conceptions of musical style. The age-old textual problems of text underlay and manuscript/editorial accidentals will continue to be debated as long as anyone remains interested in this repertory, and the essays presented here by Leeman Perkins and Thomas Brothers are the latest instalments in these ongoing dialogues. Many new insights and angles for enquiry in the area of notational detail have grown out of observations concerning the profound conceptual distinctions between a fifteenth-century written musical practice based on parts and a modern one based on scores. Margaret Bent's plea that we rethink possible early fifteenth-century meanings of the sign Φ , for example, is born of her long-standing concern with the late-medieval engagement with the written note; and the insights leading to proposed revisions in the performance of rondeaux by Binchois and others outlined in the study by John Bailey and Beth Anne Lee-De Amici are rooted firmly in a musical epistemology based on singing from parts. Similar notational considerations also have a role to play in Andrew Kirkman's explanation of peculiarities in the revised version of Binchois's setting of *Asperges me*.

While the arrival of a volume encompassing Binchois's complete sacred music sparked interest in a repertory long neglected, the scope of his secular oeuvre had already been clear for at least the thirty-five years that had intervened since Wolfgang Rehm's edition of the songs. Containing fifty-five songs securely attributable to the composer and five *opera dubia*, Rehm's edition has been a basic resource for scholars concerned with music of the fifteenth century since its publication in 1957.¹⁰ Many of the studies in the present volume use Rehm's editions of the chansons and rely on his critical notes. A landmark for its time, Rehm's work has been expanded significantly over the past forty years, not only in detail and shading, but also in the proposed addition of some twenty further songs which various scholars have suggested may be by Binchois. Proposed attributions by several scholars, most notably Walter Kemp,¹¹ have necessarily been speculative. Grounds for inclusion in the expanded corpus devolve upon the presence of stylistic characteristics closely associated with Binchois's music and/or patterns of manuscript transmission that link these works with others firmly ascribed to the composer. Given the necessarily tentative nature of suggesting attributions for fifteenth-century pieces surviving without them, these works can find their way into any new edition of Binchois's songs only, as was the case with Rehm's, as *dubia*. In the absence of such a complete collection, it is not surprising that few of the authors in the present volume discuss songs not included in the 1957 edition.

David Fallows has also argued for additions to the corpus, and in his essay he draws our attention to several aspects of this repertory that merit attention here. One such aspect is that the evidence of the surviving sources suggests that during the 1420s and 1430s Binchois seems to have been more highly valued as a composer of songs than Dufay. In view of the low survival rate of manuscripts from the fifteenth century, any such evidence must clearly be treated with circumspection; nevertheless, the relatively large number of chansons by Binchois copied in several manuscripts, some of them originating far from the court of Burgundy, reinforces the impression gained from use of his songs in later polyphony of a composer whose songs were highly valued by his contemporaries and by musicians of subsequent generations.¹² In the present volume Sean Gallagher explores some possible allusions to songs by Binchois in pieces by composers he must have known, and Robert Nosow draws our attention to their lingering influence as far away as Florence three decades after his death.

Viewed as a totality, Binchois's songs are distinctive in a number of respects. Fallows notes the relatively small range of styles and techniques they employ and

¹⁰ *Die Chansons von Gilles Binchois (1400–1460)*, ed. Wolfgang Rehm (Musikalische Denkmäler, 2; Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1957).

¹¹ *Burgundian Court Song in the Time of Binchois* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Others who have suggested additions to the corpus of Binchois's songs include David Fallows (in the *New Grove* article) and Gilbert Reaney in vol. iv of *Early Fifteenth-Century Music* (CMM 11; Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1969).

¹² For the reuse of Binchois's songs in pieces by a succession of composers ending with Senfl, see Fallows, 'Binchois', 711–12, 718–21.

reminds us that since the sacred works display a far wider range, the narrower approach must have been intentional. To what extent the more circumscribed style of the songs is due to demands of the court, preferences of patrons or singers, or simply the composer's own taste, remains obscure. Even within the more restricted boundaries of his secular style, however, there is of course a measure of diversity. Such diversity, for example, is implicit in the results of the investigation by John Bailey and Beth Anne Lee-De Amici into the possibility for a new approach to performing certain types of rondeaux. Although Binchois, they suggest, is a composer whose style lends itself particularly well to the approach they outline, the relatively large proportion (some 60%) of his rondeaux which seem to fit the pattern still leaves a large number which do not.

Fallows alludes also to Binchois's distinctive treatment of dissonance, evident in his sacred music as well as his songs. Simply put, we find a higher level of dissonance in the music of Binchois than in that of most of his contemporaries: either the scribes who copied it were more careless than with music by others (which seems unlikely, given the possibility of relative closeness between the composer and the copying of some manuscripts that transmit his songs),¹³ or Binchois intended these clashes to be heard.¹⁴ The latter explanation seems likely to be correct, a situation that is bewildering for us today, so far removed from the context of these works, but about which none of his contemporaries saw reason to comment; indeed, as Dennis Slavin notes, despite aspects of Binchois's style that contradict the views of theorists, the composer was not criticized for those divergences by Johannes Tinctoris, a theorist who demonstrated familiarity with music by the composers he praised.

The precepts of theorists are given great weight in Perkins's contribution, one of the few to explore both sacred and secular repertoires. Implicit in his argument—and in that of Brothers, who examines the use of manuscript accidentals in Binchois's songs—is the view that the composer's style falls within the range of contemporary convention. In this context it may be appropriate to note Slavin's observation that whereas in some respects Binchois's songs often do evince systematic, apparently predictable approaches, in others they appear far more elusive, as for example in the case of long-range projection of melodic goals (another marked contrast to the music of Dufay and others). Many of the quirkier aspects of Binchois's idiom—its dissonance treatment, tonal architecture, text/music relationships and so on—will doubtless figure in future work on the composer's music, both in the service of refining our sense of their style and, as a corollary, in better assessing proposed extensions of his oeuvre into the repertory that survives anonymously.

¹³ Dennis Slavin, 'Questions of Authority in Some Songs by Binchois', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 117 (1992), 22–61.

¹⁴ Most of these dissonances occur between the superius and contratenor and do not involve the tenor, but to a degree greater than in the work of his contemporaries, Binchois's tenors occasionally do clash with one of the other voices.

Perhaps inevitably, given the state of play, one of the most enduring impressions left by this book will be of how much could still be done; much within its pages is speculative, probing, and, in the end, inconclusive. But this, one hopes, is also its principal strength: in the shifting sands of the exploration of fifteenth-century music, dialogue—between recoverable facts, recoverable contexts, between ‘them’ and ‘us’—is the source of its endless fascination. That, in the end, is what, more than half a millennium on and in a world Binchois could never have imagined, keeps his music, and the world for which it was formed, alive.