

BOOK REVIEW

Alejandro Enrique Planchart. *Guillaume Du Fay: The Life and Works*

Cambridge: CUP, 2018

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E-book reviewed by Tim Daly

Guillaume Du Fay may be the most important figure in the history of fifteenth-century European music. As the last great master of the isorhythmic motet and one of the first continental masters of the *cantus firmus* mass, he stood at the centre of Western composition despite major changes of musical style for more than fifty years, prior to his death in 1474. Alejandro Planchart's two-volume assessment of Du Fay and his work represents the culmination of a similarly lengthy period of research, and was published barely six months before the author's death in April 2019.

At well over nine hundred pages, the size of the book reflects the scale of the task, which the author sensibly divided into biographical and analytical sections. The first volume reconstructs Du Fay's life and career, from his birth as the illegitimate son of a clergyman to the administration of his will. Planchart applied an extraordinary rigour to the description of Du Fay's life, reconstructing his travels between Cambrai, northern Italy, Rome and Geneva, his relationships with the great families of Italy and Savoy, and his careful response to the politics of schism from the archived records of the places the composer served. The records themselves would not provide this level of detail on their own. Instead, Planchart's ability to understand these records in context, extract every possible inference from them, and collate them in a way that creates a single coherent picture of Du Fay's career, provides the most thorough biographical account of a fifteenth-century composer currently available. At times, Planchart even enabled a hint of personality to peek through the centuries, whether of the precociously talented young singer or of the occasionally difficult old man.

Planchart's analysis of the works, organised by genre, also depends heavily on documentary sources. Here, however, they act as an outlining device, perhaps limiting the time and place of writing but rarely speaking to the reasons for or influences on composition. Planchart coloured in this outline with an analysis that is occasionally speculative but always plausible. At its

best, as in his discussion of the chanson 'Se la face ay pale' and the mass based on it, his web of inference is persuasive enough that his conclusions seem the only reasonable explanation. Elsewhere, such as in his hypothesis on the origins of the *L'homme armé* repertoire, the result is simply one more possible explanation among many, albeit one full of insight and subsidiary points of interest. Despite this, the discussion of the individual works and the relationships between them is enlightening, a product of Planchart's encyclopaedic knowledge of the compositions, many of which appear in his own edition available through DIAMM.¹

Organising the discussion of the composer's works by genre brings some disadvantages. The development of Du Fay's compositional style within each genre is elucidated at the cost of concealing his ability to remain at the forefront of musical fashion over decades, regardless of genre—part of what makes Du Fay so interesting. It is possible to develop an overview of Du Fay's response to new musical influences, but this must be assembled from the discussion of individual genres and relevant sections of the biography. Further, divisions between genres are pliable, and there is inevitably some intersection between the categories. In general, however, Planchart was surely right to assume that a reader was more likely to be tackling some particular aspect of Du Fay's output rather than his corpus as a whole.

This last point suggests the ideal use of this book, which is a starting point for serious research. Without this imperative, the forensic rigour that is the great strength of these volumes becomes something of a weakness. Where any detail is possible, all that detail is provided. As a result, the book is not one to pick up lightly. One example of this is the first appendix, which spends ninety-five pages providing a biographical note for every identifiable musician at Cambrai cathedral throughout the fifteenth century. This appendix is a breathtaking achievement in its way, but is likely of use only to those conducting the most fine-grained research. Readers familiar with Planchart's work will also have the sense that the individual sections are updated and condensed summaries of his earlier writings. There is a constant sense that more is to be inferred from the wealth of detail Planchart provided, an inevitable consequence of attempting to compress Du Fay's life and works into a thousand pages. The happy news is that this further analysis is available, much of it from Planchart's own pen, and can readily be traced thanks to the meticulous documentation throughout.

For the newcomer to Du Fay, David Fallows's now-venerable biography may be a better introduction.² For any other reader, however, *Guillaume Du Fay: The Life and Works* is an indispensable resource, even if it is never read from cover to cover. The book in some way resembles the popular companions for the Classical and Romantic composers, except that it gains coherence from having a single author. Planchart has summarised fifty years at the leading edge of Du Fay scholarship; the result is a fitting testament to his life's work, the likely starting place for research on Du Fay for the foreseeable future, and something to be cherished by all students of late-medieval music.

About the Author

Tim Daly is a doctoral student at the Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne, researching counterpoint and compositional process in fifteenth-century music.

¹ Alejandro Enrique Planchart, 'The new Guillame [sic] Du Fay Opera Omnia,' *Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music*, <https://www.diamm.ac.uk/resources/music-editions/du-fay-opera-omnia>.

² David Fallows, *Dufay*, The Master Musicians, rev. ed. (London: Dent, 1987).