

LE DON DES LARMES

Plaintes and larmoyant polyphony of the Franco-Flemish tradition (15th century)

Michelet – rightly - designated the latter part of the gothic period as ‘*larmoyant*’, not just because the abundant use of the *ajour* in gothic church window tracery gave it a tearstained look, but because it seems like the whole of the 15th century’s artistic production was devoted to the art of crying. From the 15th century on, image and sound no longer served to transmit content, or a message, as was the modest intention of all works of art in preceding centuries. A dramatic revolution in perception led to a generation of artists sensing a connection between impression and expression, the form of expression, the affect and the inner experience – and effectively forging this connection. The mystical and affective-religious tradition in the North undoubtedly inspired (mainly) artists from the Netherlands, who fashioned their artistic production to match this new perception. From the 15th century on, mystical notions such as ‘*imitatio*’, ‘*compassio*’ and ‘*affectio*’ formed the conceptual frame for their work, thus ensuring that perception was exalted. In Van Eyck’s oeuvre, ‘the gaze’ is central, immersing oneself in the intimate entanglement of the visible and the invisible world. Van der Weyden paints an image of affective, inward-looking dramatics. The great French rhetoricians seem to have only one concern: whipping language into a frenzy, letting it run wild, allowing it to stutter and neigh. Content and meaning fade into the background, while the material quality of language (sound, colour, rhythm) has an immediate, unfettered impact on the listener.

When the poet Molinet, in his *déploration* for defunct Johannes Ockeghem, tells his fellow musicians to wear mourning gowns familiar to us from Claus Sluters famous monumental tomb, with its sublime rendering of the dynamics of mourning, never revealing even a glimpse of the mourners’ faces or bodies, just letting the mourners’ dramatic postures, their cloaks and the folds in their draping speak for themselves – and calls upon them to shed bitter tears (*plourez grosses larmes d’oeil*) it is not the text, but the music by Josquin Desprez that lights up this work and has the power to move us to tears, even today. This piece is indubitably a summit of the French-Flemish art of moving audiences to tears by fitting affect, inner passion and expression to the frame of a complex polyphonic structure. Whereas *le don des larmes*, the art of eliciting tears, used to be the privilege of religions, saints or mystics, by this moment in time it had extended - almost been popularised – to not just encompass artistic practice but also to become its purpose. The combination of French and Latin text, its semi-religious style and bizarre amalgam of profane, anecdotic, mythological and liturgical references confer a decidedly ambiguous status on the *déploration*.

These artists manage to make notions such as *compassio* and *affectio* tangible and to shift the audience’s perception by means of a complex formal structure. What the spectator/listener expected from any work of art in the 15th century was that it would help him/her to *become* a man/woman of sorrows.

This mystical challenge to touch/be touched without any mediation, to perceive as directly as possible, paradoxically translates into being touched by a visual or musical image. Mystics have always strongly insisted on the necessity of such images to trigger image-less contemplation. What incites us to this kind of image-less contemplation is not the visual content or image, but something else, which Focillon, referring to Sluters mourning clothes, calls a *système de forces* and Warburg calls a symbol: a kind of maelstrom that entices us to give up purely visual perception in favour of a total experience, an experience we associate more readily with listening to polyphony. Yet at the same time Josquins *déploration* is

entirely notated in black ink – a phenomenon Germans refer to as *Augenmusik* – and each voice part of a composition by Matheus Pipelare for seven voices represents one of the Virgin Mary's sorrows. This results in an exciting musical configuration of interacting sorrows that explode the visual content of the symbol.

Tonight's concert illustrates how this repertoire has evolved, from Gilles Binchois over Ockeghem to the latter's pupils or followers: Agricola, Josquin, De la Rue, Champion, who, each in his own style, had the gift of turning sound into tears.

Björn Schmelzer