

20. Lamentatio Sanctae Matris Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae (1455)

Guillaume Dufay
(ca. 1397-1474)
arr. William Melton

Dufay, Guillaume

(born 5 August 1397(?) in Bersele near Brussels; died 27 November 1474 in Cambrai)

Dufay, widely regarded as the greatest composer of his day, began less loftily as the offspring of the unmarried Marie Dufay and an unknown priest. His mother relocated to the cathedral city of Cambrai, where Guillaume studied and sang as a choirboy before receiving minor holy orders. He was a nomad from 1419 until settling for good in Cambrai in 1445, rewarded with the office of canon. In the interim he made his reputation with posts in Savoy and Italy (Rome, Florence, and Bologna) along the way becoming a priest and collecting a law degree. He was a prolific composer in all of the musical genres of his time, and the leading light of what came to be known as the Burgundian School.

A defining event of Dufay's era occurred when Byzantine capitol of Constantinople fell to Sultan Mehmed II and the Ottoman Turks in 1453. The defeat sent shock waves through Europe — a hypocritical reaction, as Crusaders had helped speed the demise of the eastern empire by sacking Constantinople themselves two centuries earlier. Yet the realisation that the Orthodox could no longer act as a buffer between Catholic and Islamic worlds inspired many to mourn the city's loss. Ottoman armies would advance as far as the gates of Vienna in 1529 and dominate the lands of the eastern Mediterranean for the next four hundred years.

'Lamentatio Sanctae Matris Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae' is one of four laments that Dufay composed on the subject (the other three are lost). The motet's Old French text is couched as a mother's (the Virgin Mary as symbol of the western church) divine appeal for relief of the sufferings of her son (Christ, or the eastern church). Adding to the depth of the message, the cantus firmus intones a poignant verse from the book of Lamentations about the fall of Jerusalem: 'Omnes amici ejus spreverunt eam, non est qui consoletur eam ex omnibus caris ejus' ('All her friends have scorned her; of all her beloved ones there is not one to comfort her').

Text by William Melton