Centuries of Silence

Vicente Lusitano and Classical Music's Selective Memory

The following is excerpted from Garrett Schumann's article in VAN magazine (April 23, 2020). The entire article can be found at https://van-magazine.com/mag/vicente-lusitano/

"Only then can his creative genius begin redounding, as it should, to the glory of Black music history," writes the musicologist Robert Stevenson in his 1982 article, "The First Black Published Composer." Stevenson's subject was Vicente Lusitano (ca. 1520-ca. 1561), an African-Portuguese priest and musician who enjoyed an international career. Stevenson heralds works like the motet "Heu me domine" (1551), which exemplifies the composer's unusual embrace of chromatic counterpoint….

Of Lusitano's compositions, "Heu me domine" has received the most attention from modern scholars and performers, but it is not the only example of his remarkable creativity. In a 1962 essay, Stevenson reproduces a passage from Lusitano's motet "Regina coeli" (see https://van-magazine.com/mag/vicente-lusitano/**)** to highlight its adventurous chromatic writing, and notes that other works in Lusitano's 1551 motet collection feature extremely uncommon combinations of accidentals….

The alluring counterpoint and voice leading of "Heu me domine" connect to improvisation techniques which Lusitano outlines in his counterpoint studies…."Heu me domine" is one of just two pieces in Lusitano's output that 20th-century scholars have transcribed into modern notation—until last month, it was the only piece of his to be recorded….

Stevenson heralds the "modal daring" of Lusitano's sacred music…yet Lusitano is not remembered as an innovator of Renaissance musical style. Although the first edition of his motet book can be found on multiple online databases, no critical editions of Lusitano's works have been produced. In a 2017 interview with VAN, Melanie Zeck, a reference librarian at the Library of Congress' American Folklife Center and an expert in Black classical music, identified Lusitano as an important topic for future research, but she "never heard Lusitano's name in nine years of undergraduate and graduate music study in the United States." He also does not appear in recent editions of Donald Grout, James Burkholder, and Claude Palisca's iconic textbook *A History of Western Music*.

The enduring silence enveloping Lusitano's legacy is particularly poignant today, as 2020 is the possible 500th anniversary of his birth. Classical music institutions often use anniversaries as opportunities to highlight certain composers, but, so far, their appetite for history appears to have nothing to offer Vicente Lusitano and his music. Lusitano's story shows how composers' achievements—particularly those with underrepresented identities—can fall through the cracks of classical music's history-making mechanisms. His silenced legacy puts into relief the gulf that separates the richness of its past from the purported "truth" its institutions portray as history through their performances and scholarship.

Ironically, Lusitano's obscurity originates in the most famous episode of his career. In 1551, while in Rome, Lusitano was drawn into an aesthetic dispute by fellow composer Nicola Vicentino (1511–ca.1576), an argument which gained so much attention that a Vatican tribunal convened to issue a verdict. Lusitano won, and Vicentino paid a fine, but, for years afterward, Vicentino published egregiously disingenuous descriptions of the proceedings with the aim of damaging Lusitano's reputation. A 17th-century source in Rome attests that Lusitano's name was scratched off copies of the widely-published introduction to his counterpoint treatise, and it is plausible he faced other reprisals that went undocumented. These developments likely led to Lusitano's relocation to Germany sometime after 1553, where he converted to Protestantism, married, and continued his career until his death.

According to a 1551 memorandum, Vicentino specifically took issue with Lusitano's motet "Regina coeli." He argued that its writing demonstrated Lusitano did not know the *genera* he was using: essentially, Vicentino thought Lusitano's music was too chromatic. In 1555, Vicentino published an account of the debate that was so misleading that Ghiselin Danckerts—one of the judges from the original adjudication—publicly denounced Vicentino's inaccuracies and fabrications. The American musicologist Henry William Kaufmann revisited the primary sources surrounding this event in 1963, and deemed Vicentino's account unreliable.

Still, the misinformation campaign succeeded. The scholarship and compositions Vicentino published after his dispute with Lusitano influenced later generations of Italian composers, including Carlo Gesualdo; they also became a critical resource for future studies of Renaissance chromaticism and almost for every reference to Lusitano from the 1700s onward. For centuries, the most accessible and highly-regarded music histories have either omitted Lusitano altogether or only included the scant and biased details provided by Vicentino….

We know from the documented experiences of other composers with minority identities that generalized prejudice has pervaded the cultural space of classical music for centuries. For example, Lusitano's Italian contemporary Maddalena Casulana (ca. 1544-1590) used the dedication to her 1568 book of madrigals, which is considered the first composition published by a woman, to excoriate her male peers for sexism she endured. These and many other examples indicate a persistent pattern in the history of classical music wherein composers who are women, people of color, and members of other oppressed populations encounter prejudice and disenfranchisement, cannot access the same channels of power and resources as their more privileged peers, have their achievements minimized and existences denied, and are pushed to the margins of classical music's collective memory….

In a 2008 article in *Renaissance and Reformation*, Kate Lowe notes that Spain and Portugal had the largest populations of Africans in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. By the 1520s, Black Africans in Italy were able to achieve limited assimilation, but genuine acceptance, "as Catholics and Europeans," was yet to come. The language of 17th-century documents specifically indicate that Lusitano was part-African, part-European, and more recent theories suggest Lusitano's mother was from Africa. Considering the historical context Lowe provides with respect to the presence of Africans in Europe at this time, it seems probable Lusitano was only one or two generations removed from slavery….

Evidence asserting Lusitano's race, and countermanding Vicentino's portrayal of their famous dispute, has existed since the 16th century. The few persistent pieces of Lusitano's legacy speak to an enduring patchwork history serving generations of musicians with minority identities. Ranging in its forms from personal letters, to manuscripts, to published articles, this record has been routinely ignored by classical music's traditional artistic and academic enterprise. But this bricolage of informal documentation has been especially meaningful to our current knowledge of composers of African descent….

Very little has happened with Lusitano's compositions since 1982. A handful of recordings featuring "Heu me domine" are available commercially and on YouTube, and new research involving the manuscript of Lusitano's complete counterpoint treatise began in the last decade. Despite the quality of his music and his place in history, Lusitano's works remain very rarely performed, if at all, and no new editions of any of his compositions have been announced….

By denying, dismissing, or ignoring the classical music of women, people of color, and members of other oppressed populations, the field of classical music risks replacing documented history with myth and implies that privileged groups lose nothing by excising others from their traditions. These practices also signal the field's lack of concern for contemporary audiences who share identities with excluded composers. African-American pianist and social justice artist Anthony R. Green, the associate artistic director of Castle Of Our Skins, remembers the jolt of recognition he got when he first heard Lusitano's "Heu me domine." It was "a life-pausing moment," he says.