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Peter M. Lefferts
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, plefferts1@unl.edu

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Dunstable, John (ca. 1395–1453)

Composer, mathematician, and astronomer. He is the author of over 70 surviving works, including music for masses, offices, Marian devotions, isorhythmic motets, and secular songs. Dunstable (or Dunstaple) stands at the head of an influential group of English composers whose music, beginning in the later 1420s and 1430s, circulated on the Continent, where it had an immense stylistic impact. Fifteenth-century musical commentators recognized Dunstable's importance, and he held a high posthumous reputation for many subsequent generations.

Of Dunstable's biography we know little. The paucity of documentation seems to be due to a career that kept him out of the records of the court, and there is no evidence of a direct association with any cathedral or monastic establishment or the Chapel Royal. He seems to have begun composing around 1415, but he is not represented in the first layer of the Old Hall Manuscript, which was copied by 1421. A few long-known pieces of evidence, along with important recent archival discoveries, suggest that Dunstable was in service to John duke of Bedford before 1427; moved into the household of the duke's stepmother, the dowager Queen Joan, from 1427 until her death in 1437; and at that point entered the *familia* (household) of her stepson and John's brother, Humphrey duke of Gloucester. Dunstable's relationship with Gloucester is described as that of "serviteur et familier domestique," an appellation that probably can be extended to his previous relationships with John and Joan, suggesting a high-ranking role in administrative service while not, significantly, a member of the household chapel. Though Dunstable's music is preserved mainly in continental sources, it now appears that his personal presence in France was limited and intermittent. Thus he is not likely to be the central agent in the transmission of English music across the Channel that he was once thought to be.

The scale and nature of the rewards Dunstable received from his patrons indicate the high regard they held for him. He enjoyed lavish gifts, landed income at a high level, and a large annuity from Queen Joan; and he held a lordship, estates, and fiefs in Normandy under the patronage of Gloucester in the years 1437–41. In England Dunstable owned property in Cambridgeshire, Essex, and London. Documents style him esquire or armiger, suggesting he was a wealthy landholder of an order of society just below the knightly class. In London he held rents in the parish of St. Stephen

Walbroke, in which church he was buried, outlived by his wife and other descendants. The church and his monument do not survive, but his epitaph there was recorded. A second epitaph, by John of Wheathampstead, abbot of St. Albans, is also known. Dunstable's further ties to St. Albans include two motets, one on St. Alban (the text is possibly by Wheathampstead) and another on St. Germanus. The composer's link to the abbey undoubtedly came through two of his employers, Queen Joan and Gloucester, who were among its principal aristocratic benefactors (Gloucester was buried there).

Dunstable's music is the preeminent exemplification of the influential "nouvelle practique" that one continental observer of around 1440 called "la contenance Angloise." Chief features of this style include the predominance of triple meter in flowing rhythms of quarter notes and eighth notes with gentle syncopations and hemiola, smooth triadic melodies with distinctive cadential turns of phrase, and a uniformly consonant harmonic-contrapuntal language rich with the warm sound of imperfect consonances—thirds, sixths, and tenths.

Dunstable's eleven isorhythmic motets are among the last in an English and continental tradition stretching back to the middle of the 14th century. Polytextual, based on plainsong tenors, and written for three or four voices, they are almost all variations upon a "classical" pattern with tripartite proportional diminution. Sustaining a particularly English tradition, their texts are all sacred, with six dedicated to saints (John the Baptist, Catherine, Alban, Germanus, Michael, Anne), three to the Virgin Mary, and two for Whitsunday. Their origins are likely to have been ceremonial rather than strictly liturgical. From the testimony of a chronicler it appears that Dunstable's motet on John the Baptist, *Preco preheminencie* / *Precursor premittitur* with tenor *Inter natos* (perhaps one of his earliest compositions), was sung before Henry V and Emperor Sigismund in Canterbury Cathedral on 21 August 1416 to celebrate victory at the siege of Harfleur and the Battle of the Seine.

For settings of liturgical texts outside the mass Ordinary Dunstable principally draws upon processional and office antiphons for Mary, constructing compositions of roughly the same dimensions as an isorhythmic motet or mass movement that are destined for performance at Marian devotions. These pieces are nearly all for three voices, occasionally reducing to two, with a songlike top part over a supporting tenor and

contratenor; some are based on chant but the majority are freely composed. Though neither polytextual nor isorhythmic, they were apparently regarded as a species of motet by some continental scribes, and they are called motets by many modern authorities. It has been shown recently that careful mathematical planning governs their proportions.

Most of Dunstables compositions for the Ordinary of the mass (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus) are single isolated movements; all but three of these pieces are freely composed, without reference to plainsong. In the 1420s and 1430s, however, Dunstable and his English contemporaries, including Leonel Power and John Benet, pioneered the musical integration of a complete five-movement mass cycle, achieving unification by using the same "alien" *cantus firmus* as the tenor in all movements. These early English cyclic tenor masses were based on sacred plainsongs (antiphons and responds); Dunstables cycles include *Jesu Christi fili Dei, Da gaudiorum premia, Rex seculorum* (also ascribed to Leonel), and a *Missa "sine nomine"* (also ascribed to Leonel and Benet). It may be the case that a number of anonymous cycles of the 1440s are also of Dunstables authorship. Continental composers, such as Guillaume Dufay, began to imitate these English cycles around 1450.

Few secular songs survive by members of Dunstable's generation. Sources credit him with just three, two of which are plausibly attributed elsewhere to a younger contemporary, John Bedingham, leaving only a French-texted rondeau, *Puisque m'amour,* to represent the courtly side of his output. However, Dunstable's lifetime saw the great flowering of the polyphonic carol, and amid this anonymous repertoire are likely to be works by the great English master.

Peter M. Lefferts

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