



Samuel Blaser
Consort in Motion

A Mirror to Machaut

Samuel Blaser, trombone
Joachim Badenhorst, bass clarinet, clarinet, tenor saxophone
Drew Gress, double bass
Russ Lossing, piano, Rhodes, Wurlitzer
Gerry Hemingway, drums, percussion

1. Hymn (Blaser)	7:30
2. Douce dame jolie (Machaut)	1:39
3. Saltarello (Blaser)	5:50
4. Dame, se vous m'estes lointinne (Machaut arr. Blaser)	3:07
5. Color (Blaser)	6:11
6. Cantus planus (Blaser)	4:20
7. De fortune me doy pleindre et loer (Machaut)	2:11
8. Bohemia (Blaser)	8:16
9. Linea (Blaser)	5:21
10. Introit (Blaser)	6:09
11. Complainte: Tels rit au main qui au soir pleure (Machaut arr. Blaser)	5:36

Total time: 56:52

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In early 2011, Kind of Blue Records released the first album by Consort in Motion. It featured pianist Russ Lossing, bassist Thomas Morgan and the late Paul Motian on drums. The concept was to meld Baroque music with jazz improvisation, and we performed pieces inspired by compositions of Claudio Monteverdi, Biaggio Marini and Girolamo Frescobaldi.

For our second album, this time for Songlines Recordings, I decided to work with a similar concept and write music inspired by Guillaume de Machaut (c.1300-1377) and Guillaume Dufay (1397?-1474), two major French composers of the late medieval period. As before, my focus was on selecting pieces with melodies, harmonies and rhythms that could be easily modified. Some of the works here are so far removed from the originals that it is impossible to recognize the source material. For other works I sought to remain more faithful to the scores.

The lineup for this record includes the Belgian reeds player Joachim Badenhorst, Russ Lossing, bassist Drew Gress, and drummer Gerry Hemingway replacing Paul Motian. We had the good fortune of collaborating with producer, pianist and composer Benoît Delbecq, who helped me find my way through the music I was composing for the album and supervised the entire recording process.

Included on A Mirror to Machaut is a piece called Introit which was inspired by the first movement of Machaut's famous Messe de Notre Dame. To recreate the atmosphere of the Gregorian chant while maintaining the vibe of a modal jazz tune I composed a bass ostinato and a theme based on just part of the original melody.

I used a similar approach with Hymn and Color, both based on music by Dufay, and Bohemia and Linea based on Machaut. Hymn is a beautiful Gregorian melody that I completely reharmonized. For the improvisational section following the theme I composed a little isorhythmic repeating vamp that includes hemiolas, techniques that were common in the 14th and early 15th centuries. This rhythmic material gives us the opportunity to play at two different tempos simultaneously. Linea uses short portions of the melody of Liement me deport to create something like an Indian tihai (rhythmic-melodic cadence) for organizing rhythmic tensions and resolutions, a concept that was also utilized in medieval times. Color repeats, extends and elaborates one of Dufay's melodies. Bohemia simplifies the melody of Machaut's ballade Je ne cuit pas... into a more conventional jazz ballad.

Saltarello also penned by Machaut, completely deconstructs and reorchestrates the song's ostinato pattern within the rhythm section while preserving the original harmony. The melody, largely intact but rhythmically modified, has been transposed to a different key to produce a polytonal effect.

Cantus Planus is a solo piano piece that I wrote for Russ Lossing based on the structure of another Dufay plainchant. I worked here with a very limited amount of compositional material: the initial rhythmic ostinato remains the same throughout but the tempo is doubled and then tripled, creating an acceleration and a deceleration back to the starting tempo. Also, successively superposing the brief initial melody in three stages results in a much larger chord.

Machaut's *Complainte: Tels rit, Dame, se vous m'estes lointzine, De fortune and Douce dame jolie* stick pretty close to the originals. Still, they probably sound different from what you might have heard. For example, *Complainte: Tels rit* introduces the melody with certain rhythms in three different tempos (the isorhythmic concept again). But since current performances of medieval music are only imagined sounds anyway, why not interpret the material in a very personal way?

Combining early music with jazz improvisation has always been a central interest of mine, and I am grateful to Tony Reif of Songlines for the opportunity to deepen my research in that area. I hope you enjoy this record as much as I enjoyed composing and creating it.

Samuel Blaser
Berlin / April 2013

Multiple Modernities

Reconstructing the music of the medieval era has been a decades-long project, and as Samuel alludes in his discussion, there is much that goes into the sound beyond written notes. In my opinion, over the years, researchers and performers have gotten closer to how medieval music sounded at the time, based on an iterative process of making an interpretation, comparing it to more sources, revising, etc. This process has taken us past "the notes" into the worlds of tuning & timbre & articulation, and even to the setting. While the many fine practitioners in this field can reconstruct much of the sound with a degree of confidence, what we cannot reconstruct is the other side of the equation transforming sound into music: the listener.

Machaut and Dufay were writing modern music. It might not conform to our own sense of modernity,[1] but it was innovative for its time, and something listeners had not heard before.[2] It was new. So indeed, why not interpret this music in a personal way? A museum-style performance cannot accomplish that vitality, making it modern, creating a new sense of living authenticity. Here we have an interpretation concerned less with the medieval sound than with the modern listener, and somewhere in our maze of mirrors & reflections is the music – it's not sound alone, and it's certainly not writing alone.

The medieval era lasted for a long time, at least four centuries from which we have substantial written music surviving in Europe,[3] longer still in relative silence. There's a tendency, as we look back, to equate the entire era, but of course it included many different developments, many times and places, and in fact Machaut & Dufay were writing about 80 years apart.[4] They were not of the same generation, and they were not living in the same world.

Machaut began his career as personal secretary to John of Luxembourg, followed him to battles, and eventually served two kings of France. Although this recording uses material associated with one of his most public pieces, one of the few with a specific Church connection, an Introit chant to his Mass,[5] much of his surviving writing and music are very personal. Machaut lived in a period when the population of Europe was declining[6] because of disease and disasters, both human & environmental. In this setting, he was able to achieve a synthesis of what had been the academic (or "scholastic") *Ars Nova* style with the narrative lyric of the troubadours, mostly around the subjects of love & fate.[7] What had once seemed to be stiff technique, the isorhythm for instance, took on a natural suppleness with Machaut, a success that made him by far the best-known composer of his era.[8]

Although also born in the territory of modern France, about 150 km from Machaut, Dufay first comes to major prominence working at the Vatican. He was one of the principal composers charged with modernizing the Papal repertory after the return to Rome from Avignon,[9] and although he also wrote a substantial number of love songs, Dufay wrote far more liturgical music than did Machaut (two of the three pieces represented on this album). Subsequently, Dufay became a lawyer, a doctor of canon law, and one of the most influential jurists in Europe.[10] Musically, his era saw the creation of a more compact harmonic style, featuring what we would now think of as major & minor chords,[11] inspired by influences from Britain. Dufay was one of the innovators of this style, and wrote a variety of public pieces to commemorate the significant events of his day, as well as more personal music.

Samuel has employed this material more or less loosely on the different tracks, as he describes, and he and his colleagues perform with wonderful technique & passion. For someone like myself, wrapped up in medieval music for so long, the contrast of a rather "straight" entrance of the iconic De Fortune with the more contemporary styles of the extended tracks makes for an exhilarating moment, but it's the transformation of this material into new forms - beginning right off with the series of solos in Hymn, but especially as the album moves on to Linea and Introit - that makes A Mirror to Machaut such a creative statement. Historical art needs this kind of contemporary dialog in order to have vitality, and Samuel's treatments have the harmonic & rhythmic sophistication, plus such a richness of sonority, to foster a conversation among these multiple modernities.

Todd M. McComb
Silicon Valley / May 2013

[1] My title "Multiple Modernities" is taken from Lawrence Grossberg's big question in his recent book, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (2010).

[2] Nor had they heard the subsequent events of music history. "Listeners" here includes performers, who usually need to listen well, as they do on this album.

[3] Where one places the close of the medieval era varies widely, and is often conceived differently in different arts. I habitually place the beginning of the Renaissance (and so the close of the medieval) with the start of music publishing by Petrucci in the first years of the 1500s. It's typical of USA music history courses, however, to consider Dufay's generation to be the beginning of the musical Renaissance.

[4] Much of Dufay's music was written early in his life, in the 1420/30s, whereas Machaut wrote many of his best songs in the 1340s or 50s (it's difficult to date precisely), so although these composers were born about a century apart, their music is a little bit closer in time. There were intervening generations who also wrote memorable music, some of it called *Ars Subtilior*.

[5] Machaut's polyphonic setting of the Mass Ordinary, beginning with the Kyrie, was arguably the first integrated cycle. The context for such a Mass Ordinary would have included an Introit chant, but Machaut did not write one. The present material is taken from the Gregorian repertory, as it would have been at the time.

[6] This was not an unprecedented situation, but was a very atypical one, particularly from our current perspective of exponential growth.

[7] The historian Barbara Tuchman is known as a fine storyteller, and her influential book *A Distant Mirror* (1978) paints a picture of a 14th century so damaged by catastrophe, that people in Europe adopted an emotional distance to their lives. To the extent that this is true, Machaut illustrates some of the opposite pole, as his writing continued to be highly personal & emotional, including during his own extended illness.

[8] No European composer dominates the subsequent conceptions of his era as does Machaut. Beethoven would be the closest comparison, also because he transfigured the emotional content of his time.

[9] The return came originally in 1377, but the situation wasn't solidified until the Council of Constance (1414-18).

[10] This was a Europe and a Catholic Church not yet eviscerated by the Counter-Reformation or the stunning subjugation and genocide of the American population, a sequence that changed the way people thought about justice. There had been previous injustices, of course, events during the Council of Constance prominently among them, but the turn to instrumentalism and genocide in the sixteenth century was a major break.

[11] Thirds were considered dissonant in Machaut's day, and still technically were in Dufay's, even as they came to dominate the texture. It was expected that they would resolve to fourths & fifths.

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This album is dedicated to Paul Motian.

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Consort in Motion photo: Cees Van de Ven; left to right: Drew Gress, Gerry Hemingway, Russ Lossing, Samuel Blaser, Joachim Badenhorst

Video "making of" by Mathieu Mastin

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