

ART AND MUSIC IN THE RENAISSANCE

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Introduction—Irving Lavin

The relationship between music and art in the Renaissance received what remains its most penetrating and compelling treatment in Rudolph Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, first published in 1949, and in a definitive edition in 1962. This classic work in many ways epitomized the view of Renaissance thought that had developed over at least a century of enlightened humanistic historical scholarship since the foundation of the modern discipline of art history, a view that continues to have strong appeal and wide resonance. Wittkower's fundamental thesis was that the Renaissance artist sought to create a rational and demonstrably valid order, inspired above all by the model of classical antiquity and the desire to translate into modern terms its legacy, as derived from canonical texts, notably Vitruvius' treatise on architecture and Plato's *Timaeus*, and the remnants of ancient monuments that were everywhere to be seen in Italy. The very cosmos was imbued with harmonic proportions and the artist's task was to recreate these ideal relationships in his work so as to reflect and thereby glorify the perfection of divine creation. Wittkower's conception of the Renaissance was as ideal, perfect and harmonious as were the subjects he treated, and few works of modern scholarship have so well stood the test of time; indeed, no serious student of the period can fail to be moved by the power and breadth of his arguments, and the attractiveness of the picture he paints. Yet, I doubt if such a work could or would be written today. The Renaissance now seems to be a much more complex phenomenon than Wittkower's study would suggest, and not least in the two main constituents of his own definition of the period. Renaissance art in fact is full of expressive dissonances and syncopations that the classical theory of harmonic proportions cannot condone or explain, and the classical legacy was not the only tradition that contributed to the new world view that emerged in the fifteenth century. A prime example of both points is

provided by the thumbnail sketch of the history of art from antiquity to modern times—the very first of its kind—composed toward the middle of the century by Lorenzo Ghiberti, a rival of Brunelleschi in the competition for the Dome of Florence cathedral, which he lost, and in that for the doors of the Florentine Baptistery, which he won. Ghiberti laid the groundwork for our view of the Renaissance as a passionate and thoroughgoing Italian revival of antiquity, whose achievements were emulated and even surpassed by those of his predecessors and himself. However, there is a fundamental qualification, not to say irony, in Ghiberti's account, because he reserves his highest and most lavish praise not for an Italian but for a certain Master Gusmin of Cologne. We know nothing of this Master Gusmin, and so cannot judge precisely what Ghiberti owed to him. But there can be no doubt that he was a practitioner of the late medieval stylistic florescence known as International Gothic, and so brought a distinctive non-classical and non-Italian ingredient to the cultural matrix from which Ghiberti emerged.

The works we shall examine this afternoon represent another such convergence of North and South, when the greatest composer of the period, from the farthest extreme of uppermost France met two of the founding fathers of the Renaissance in the heart of Italy—seminal encounters on the crossroads of history that produced some of the most glorious achievements of the human spirit.