

## John Dunstable

c.1390-1453

John Dunstable, sometimes called John of Dunstable, was an English composer, astronomer and mathematician. Variations on the name include Dunstaple, Dunstapell and Dumstable. He is the earliest known English composer. All earlier English music is either 'Anon' or 'Traditional'. For historical reasons, he is better known on the Continent than in his own country. He is credited with numerous musical innovations and was a major influence on later composers. Many subsequent Continental composers cited Dunstable's influence on their works. John Klein's book on early European music is titled 'From Dunstable to Bach.' He was clearly a well-educated man but there is no record of his attending either Oxford or Cambridge Universities. He has links with St. Albans Abbey, during the abbacy of John de Whethamstede who was probably his first patron.

St. John's College, Cambridge, owns an astronomy book with a Latin inscription – This little book belonged to John Dunstable, musician to the Duke of Bedford. This duke, John, was a younger brother of Henry V and was Regent of France, 1422-1429, during the minority of Henry VI. The Duke married the sister of the Duke of Burgundy and later became Governor of Normandy, until he died in 1435. This gave John Dunstable many years of service in France, with opportunities to visit and work in other European countries. His manuscripts are found all over France, Germany and Italy and explains why he is better known in these countries than he is here. The spread of his music indicates England's political diplomatic, intellectual and cultural exchanges with continental Europe during the Hundred Year's War. A French poem in praise of Dunstable – *Le champion des dames* – implies he was at his most prolific as a composer around 1440. After Bedford's death he was in the service of the Dowager Queen Joan, widow of Henry IV and then Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, the youngest brother of Henry V. It is possible that the last ten years of his life were more dedicated to astronomy and mathematics than to music as two of his astrological treatises are traced to around 1438.

A musical treatise dated 1477 praises Dunstable as having been first among equals and that French composers of the following generations studied and imitated Dunstable's style. He was a great influence on the early stages of Renaissance music. The *New Grove* credits Dunstable with 64 works, of which 41 are ecclesiastical, 18 are simple motets and 5 are secular. Only 20 of his works are found in English sources as many music manuscripts were destroyed during the Reformation. His style is called 'English Countenance', of which he is the 'wellspring and origin'. It is the basis of today's western musical theory. Most of his music is for voices only. It is polyphonic with three lines of music that form slow rhythmic harmonies with rising and falling patterns of sound. Some of his ecclesiastical music has instrumental accompaniment, an innovation for his time. His motets are in four parts, allowing dissonances between the middle two lines.

One of the few known biographical details is the date of his death, 24<sup>th</sup> December 1453. He is buried in St. Stephen's Wallbrook, which was one of the Duke of Bedford's churches and is commemorated there by a tablet on the wall which records

the words from his tomb, which was destroyed in the great Fire of London. It translates as: -

‘He is closed within this tomb who closed the heavens in his breast, John Dunstable. He, privy to the stars, with Urania his mentor, knew how to reveal the secrets of the sky. This man was your glory, O Music, your light, a prince for you; throughout the world he has spread your five sweet modes. Join to the year one thousand four hundred and fifty and three, on the day before the birth of Christ, his star was translated to the constellations; let the inhabitants of the sky receive to themselves a fitting fellow-citizen.’

John de Whethamstede also wrote an epitaph, which translates as: -

‘Upon John Dunstable, an Astrologian, a Mathematician, a Musitian and What Not. In this place a musician, a second Michael, another Ptolomy, a new Atlas upholds the heavens with his might, now comes to sleep in his ashes. A better man was never born of woman; for he lacked all stain of vice and in his single self possessed all the manifold riches of virtue. Wherefore let us yearn for him, and through our very longing pray; that the fame of John Dunstable be celebrated for everlasting years and that he rest in this place in peace without end.’

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians

Dunstable, Margaret Bent, Oxford Studies of Composers, OUP 1981.

From Dunstable to Bach, John Klein 1848.

Complete Works of Dunstable, ed Manfred Bukofzer 1953

An Astrologian, a Mathematician, a Musitian, and What Not. By Hilary Corke.