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Belgium: History, Culture, and Geography of Music

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Belgium is a multicultural, polyethnic, and multilingual state in Western Europe. Due to its location at the Romance-Germanic language border, it hosts and officially recognizes different cultural communities divided by language. The Dutch-speaking community or Flanders in the north and the French-speaking community or Wallonia in the south are the two main communities. A small German-speaking community is located on the German border. The region of Brussels is Dutch–French bilingual. Furthermore, numerous migration flows from southern Europe, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, South America, and Asia have had a strong impact on—and still are complexifying—social customs, local cultures, and cultural production, both in the mainstream and nonmainstream. Music reflects such complexity by representing Belgium’s diverse sociocultural geography, by conveying the images and symbols of the different traditions, languages, and ideas present in the country. This entry focuses on the music of Belgium as a key for understanding Belgian society, its socioeconomic and cultural history and evolution, as well as the conflicts and compromises that have characterized the cohabitation of its heterogeneous components.

History

Belgium was created as an independent state in 1830, with the secession of its territory from the Low Countries. Before independence, composers and musicians reflected the large cultural tradition and the musical style of the Burgundian Netherlands, a territory including present-day Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and part of northern France. Economic prosperity and relative political stability allowed the area to become a main center of cultural innovation in Europe, particularly in music. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the Burgundian School and the succeeding Franco-Flemish School of polyphonic vocal music composition initiated the Renaissance in music. They had a strong influence on European musical production at the time, representing the only artistic domain in which innovation moved southward, together with the musicians themselves, instead of coming from Italy. With the introduction and spread of the printing press, Netherlandish early music formed the first true international musical style and the most important example of standardization since the unification of Gregorian chant in the 9th century. Belgium was the center of this cultural ferment and innovative musical activity since the education and early activity of the most important composers occurred in the main cathedrals and collegiate churches of present-day Wallonia (particularly in Liège, Tournai, and Mons) and Flanders (particularly in Antwerp, Bruges, and Gent). Belgian-born musicians, composers, and theorists such as Jacob Obrecht (1457–1505), Orlande de Lassus (1532–1594), and André Grétry (1741–1813) had significant influence and success in Italy and France.

Culture and Language

Cultural production, and music in particular, started to assume stronger social and political connotations with the creation of the Belgian unitary state in 1830 and the adoption of French as the only official language. At the time, French was not only a common language for the people in the south but also the language spoken by the economic and political elites throughout the country. This caused strong social polarization in the north, where the population mainly spoke Dutch–Flemish dialects. It is also important to remark that Belgium is the first country in continental Europe in which the industrial revolution occurred. Wallonia, in particular, experienced exponential industrial development after unification, while Flanders remained anchored to a mainly rural economy. Economic domination of Wallonia was reinforced by a strong French influence on Belgian cultural life, in which Flemish represented a low-grade culture. This led to the gradual mobilization of part of the Dutch-speaking population and the creation of the so-called *Vlaamse Beweging* (Flemish Movement) claiming the sociocultural emancipation of Flemings from the dominance of the French-speaking elite and seeking the recognition of Dutch as an official language.

The 19th-century Flemish Movement was initiated by a number of intellectuals for whom music had great importance. Text-based arts, in general, were the main means through which a Flemish cultural identity was

affirmed, and the mosaic of dispersed dialects spoken in Flanders started to be codified and transformed into one standard language. Representative members of the Movement among whom writers, composers, and poets such as Guido Gezelle (1830–1899) or Albrecht Rodenbach (1856–1880) contributed to the creation and enrichment of the Flemish repertoire of classical music and chants. Flemish musical and lyrical production at the time reflected the will to raise awareness of Flemish history and culture and to promote Flemish identity. The most descriptive example is *De Vlaamse Leeuw* (The Flemish Lion), a nationalist battle song written by playwright Hippoliet van Peene (1811–1864) and arranged by composer Karel Miry (1823–1889) in 1847. The song evokes the iconic Battle of the Golden Spurs of July 11, 1302, a central element in Flemish symbolism, adopted as community anthem in 1973.

Disagreement over language continued until the interwar period (1918–1939), when language equality was achieved, and the use of Dutch and French was decided on a territorial basis. While the Flemish Movement became increasingly politicized, animated by separatist sentiments and extreme-right ideals, the conflict between language communities softened. Due to deindustrialization, the center of the economic power was radically shifting from Wallonia to Flanders, transforming the cleavage between communities. Again, music reflected and influenced the sociocultural and political circumstances by epitomizing this spirit of détente that would have been brought to the federal reforms begun in the early 1970s. From the end of World War II onward, several artists emerged in the national and international music scene. They were pioneers of popular music such as Bobbejaan Schoepen (1925–2010), Italian-born Salvatore Adamo (b. 1943), and Jacques Brel (1929–1978), versatile entertainers, singers-songwriters, musicians, actors, and directors who embodied Belgium's language diversity by using both French and Dutch throughout their career. Brel, in particular, was born in Brussels into a Flemish family but became a world-renowned icon of the French *chanson*. As an artist, his influence in the popular music industry has continued long after his premature death in the late 1970s. Nevertheless, the production of music with strong ties to the community dimension has not ceased. In Flanders, in particular, a folk revival flourished in the same years and gave birth to a particular genre called *kleinkunst* (small art). Kleinkunst's main interpreters were identified by a strong local dimension since they were known for singing in dialect and for being connected to particular cities and areas in Flanders. Examples are Wannes Van de Velde (1937–2008) from Antwerp and Willem Vermandere (b. 1940) from the West Flemish province. Significantly, their lyrics were characterized by harsh criticism of the separatist Flemish Movement, seen as pushing Flemish society toward individualism, materialism, and ethnocentrism.

The transformation of Belgium into a federal state has had a great impact on music in terms of the structures of production, the system of support, the policies, and last but not least, the people involved, the artists, and the public. With respect to policies and structures, Flanders and Wallonia are two separated and independent political and economic entities. Cultural matters are managed by cultural communities having jurisdiction in their respective territory and sharing jurisdiction in the region of Brussels. This has led to a situation in which Flemish and Walloon public and private actors including institutions, organizations, and private businesses operate in parallel, but can often engage in competition and conflict, in Brussels in particular. On the other hand, federalization also framed Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels as three separate cultural/artistic environments, reinforcing differences in terms of artistic forms and audience taste. Generally speaking, Flanders is a heterogeneous environment characterized by a dichotomy between a conservative Flemish-centric and a highly international and innovative artistic scene. Wallonia is generally open to ethnocultural diversity in music style, although the French language prevails in the region. Brussels can be considered as a third space where Flemish and Walloon influences mix with great ethnocultural diversity, giving birth to a fusion of different genres and styles.

Popular Music

Different trends are particularly evident in popular music. In general terms, Flanders has two mainstream music scenes. On one side is a Dutch-speaking pop music scene that is shared with the Netherlands and widely

popularized on local media including radio and television. On the other side is a much more international scene characterized by a fusion of pop, rock, electronic, and dance music styles, and by the use of English as the main language. Some of the best-known artists are the alternative rock bands dEUS and Hooverphonic, which have enjoyed international success since the late 1990s. The French-speaking scene is much more focused on French as the only language for lyrics. This can be explained by the fact that French music has a strong stylistic tradition in Europe and a well-developed industry within and beyond Francophone countries. The popular music scene in Wallonia is also characterized by a slightly greater ethnic diversity than in Flanders, particularly in urban genres such as hip-hop. This difference, however, is much less evident in nonmainstream and grassroots production in which the influence of ethnic minorities and artists with an immigrant background is strong in urban settings nationwide. Similarly, the Brussels music scene is a crossroad of cultures and styles reflecting the great sociocultural diversity of the city and its neighborhoods. Brussels is home to music schools, production centers, and venues centered on music innovation and the participation of a multicultural and multiethnic audience.

See also [Belgium: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice](#)

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Further Readings

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