

Fremin le Caron and the *L'homme armé* Tradition

Rob C. Wegman

To judge from the number and quality of his surviving works—not to mention the praise lavished on him by Johannes Tinctoris—Firminus Caron was one of the leading French composers in the 1450s and 60s. His extraordinary *Missa L'homme armé* alone (a work now known to have existed by 1463) suggests a figure of the artistic stature of a Dufay, or a Busnoys. Still, Caron is not as well known today as he deserves to be.

The reasons for this appear to be twofold. First, although there is a modern edition of his collected works, published by James Thomson in the early 1970s, this edition has proved virtually unusable due to the editor's bizarre policy of rendering all mensural polyphony as wildly and irregularly polymetric. Without a sensible performing edition, clearly, it must be idle to hope for a wider appreciation of Caron and his music.

Second, we know next to nothing about Caron as a historical individual. True, there is good reason to identify him with the Firminus le Caron who was *primus musicus* at Amiens Cathedral—perhaps in 1422, perhaps later. Unfortunately, however, the administrative records of this church have been especially hard-hit by war and destruction, and there is nothing left to tell us about his activities there. Nor, surprisingly, does Caron's name ever turn up in archives elsewhere. The lack of information has made it tempting to identify the composer with other musicians named Caron—even if they didn't share his first name—and indeed to go as far as to question whether he was called Firminus at all.

Still, although the cathedral records of Amiens are almost completely destroyed now, the town's municipal records, as fortune would have it, are exceptionally rich and informative. They contain numerous references to individuals named Le Caron, and among these, there are two by the name of Fremin. Of the latter, one can be firmly ruled out as a candidate for identification: he died too early and was active in commerce and public administration. The other, however, was not only a man of education (having obtained the degree of *magister in artibus* some time before 1472–3), but was in fact active as a teacher in music as early as 1459. This Fremin le Caron is almost certainly the same man as the *primus musicus* of Amiens Cathedral. Born probably around 1440, and still alive, apparently, by 1476, his dates fit convincingly with the chronology of the composer's music. In this paper, I will discuss the known career of this man, and explore what are perhaps the most tantalizing implications of his identification with the composer—those concerning the latter's involvement in the *L'homme armé* tradition.