

Introduction

As a dynamic force in the musical development of the fifteenth century, the motet has long been studied for the beauty of its polyphony and its prominent place in the manuscripts of the period. The genre has been associated with important churches, cathedrals, and princely courts across Western Europe. Motets rank among the most celebrated works of John Dunstaple, Guillaume Du Fay, Jacob Obrecht, and a host of other brilliant composers. Yet the motet also appears as a mysterious genre, both because of the multiplicity of forms it takes and because of the intractability of several related, unanswered questions. The investigation that follows addresses one central question: why did people write motets?

In the last two decades, scholarly explications of individual motets have aimed to elucidate their potential significance for the late medieval period. Working from the texts and music outward has yielded new insights into the relationships between motets and fifteenth-century culture.¹ Scholars inevitably have focused their attention on the few motets with overt ceremonial associations, the *Staatsmotetten*. At the same time, the ability to ground interpretive or theoretical approaches in a concrete understanding of how motets were used in performance has proven elusive. Chroniclers of the fifteenth century, despite their keen interest in matters of ritual, did not consider it important enough to describe in detail the music at events of high state, or at imposing ecclesiastical ceremonies. They rarely mention the performance of motets, expressing more interest in the personages who

¹ Among such studies for the first three quarters of the fifteenth century are J. E. Cumming, "Music for the Doge in Early Renaissance Venice," *Speculum* 67 (1992): 324–64; C. Wright, "Dufay's *Nuper rosarum flores*, King Solomon's Temple, and the Veneration of the Virgin," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 47 (1994): 395–441; R. C. Wegman, "From Maker to Composer: Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450–1500," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 49 (1996): 471–77, on Loyset Compère's *Omnium bonorum plenum*; R. Nosow, "Du Fay and the Cultures of Renaissance Florence," in *Hearing the Motet*, ed. D. Pesce (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 104–21; R. C. Wegman, "For Whom the Bell Tolls: Reading and Hearing in Busnoy's *Anthoni usque limina*," in *Hearing the Motet*, 122–41; P. Weller, "Rites of Passage: *Nove cantum melodie*, the Burgundian Court, and Binchois's Early Career," in *Binchois Studies*, ed. A. Kirkman and D. Slavin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 49–83; and C. Saucier, "Acclaiming Advent and *Adventus* in Johannes Brassart's Motet for Frederick III," *Early Music History* 27 (2008): 137–80.

attended and the number of horsemen they brought with them. Pay records, charters, and liturgical books that offer specific evidence concerning motets are few and far between. Moreover, the types of record that yield information vary broadly across geographies. These circumstances have made the social aspects of motet performance difficult to study and characterize.² Given the thick ties of community that were normal in the fifteenth century, however, an assessment of the social environment of the motet becomes crucial to realizing its latent meanings. Indeed, all motets of the fifteenth century originated as ceremonial vehicles, and cannot easily be separated from the rituals of which they formed part.

The present volume is organized in four double chapters. Each double chapter comprises one chapter devoted to historical evidence for motet performance, followed by a theoretical discussion based on the same material. The odd-numbered chapters offer case studies from four different geographical areas: England, the Veneto, Bruges, and Cambrai. They focus on the basic context for motets, addressing journalistic questions of who, when, where, and for what audience. In many instances, the use of a motet can be securely documented, but the work itself does not survive. In other cases, a specific work fits clearly within a given context, but not all the details of performance are known. The discussion of individual motets necessarily makes connections of varying strength between music and the larger ceremony. But in most instances, the ceremony itself can be reconstructed in considerable detail. To the extent possible, the documentary chapters also address questions of performance practice, particularly the specific forces denoted in the records and their physical placement within ritual space.

Each of the even-numbered chapters takes up a different interpretive point of view. “The motet as ritual” draws on anthropological and sociological definitions of ritual actions, which set a foundation for the rest of the volume. “The motet as ritual embassy” treats motets with newly composed texts that display ambassadorial language or rhetorical organization. “Contemplation,” on the other hand, primarily treats motets with pre-existent texts that lend themselves to meditative purposes. “Choir and community” addresses the heterogeneous nature of the genre and the dynamics of style transference and change in response to complex social environments,

² L. Lütken, *Guillaume Dufay und die isorhythmische Motette: Gattungstradition und Werkcharakter an der Schwelle zur Neuzeit*, Schriften zur Musikwissenschaft aus Münster 4 (Hamburg and Eisenach: K. D. Wagner, 1993), 306, concludes “dafür ist der historische Beweggrund ihrer Entstehung nur äußerst selten faßbar.”

together with questions of reception and audience. The study as a whole does not attempt to explain the broader changes in motet style during the fifteenth century, but rather to relate individual motets to these larger currents. Each of the double chapters rests on the interdependence of contrasting methodologies, which approach the central question of the study from different directions. The final chapter serves as a coda to the whole.

The study covers the first three quarters of the fifteenth century, 1400–75. The oldest document discussed here dates to 1367 in Cambrai, and the latest to 1489 in Bruges. The first two decades of the fifteenth century saw an increase in the numbers of motets that were composed and copied into manuscripts. The earliest motet treated here, *Albane misse celitus/Albane doctor maxime* by Johannes Ciconia, dates from 1406. All but one of Ciconia's motets were composed in Padua between 1401 and 1412; in some ways they mark the end of an era in Italy. New motet styles, including the song motet, began to appear in the 1420s, leading to the wide variety of styles, or subgenres, characteristic of the period. The terminus of the study coincides with the death of Guillaume Du Fay in 1474, marked by the performance of his last motet, *Ave regina celorum III*. The musical scene began to change rapidly just at this time, as a new generation of composers from northern France and the Low Countries – Loyset Compère, Gaspar van Weerbeke, Josquin des Prez, Jacob Obrecht, Heinrich Isaac – came into maturity. They brought Latin vocal polyphony to an unprecedented level of intensity. Around 1475, the motet began to take on forms typical of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, heralded by Du Fay's late motet. The social background of the motet changed, as well, as witnessed by the increasing number and similarity of foundations in the churches of Bruges.³ As polyphonic music became more widespread, so did attacks on it increase.⁴ Rather than extending the investigation to the late fifteenth century, clarity and concision call for a natural terminus coinciding with these historical trends.

Theoretical definitions of the motet from the fifteenth century tend to be relatively sparse and unhelpful, occasioning considerable debate with respect to the boundaries of the genre. Scholars have sought guidance from

³ D. Salokar, "Ad augmentationem divini cultus: Pious Foundations and Vespers Motets in the Church of Our Lady in Bruges," in *Musicologie en Archiefondertzoek*, ed. B. Haggh (Brussels: Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique, 1994), 316–17.

⁴ R. C. Wegman, *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe 1470–1530*, chapter 2, "Polyphony and Its Enemies: Before and After the 1470s." Wegman, *ibid.*, 39, also points out that, in some cases, war and famine led to a decrease in support during the last two decades of the century.

manuscript sources, which often group motets together in distinct sections.⁵ It will not be necessary to rehearse the dimensions of the problem here, since it has been treated at length elsewhere.⁶ One theoretical definition that has been largely overlooked, however, is that of Paulus Paulirinus de Praga, in the *Liber viginti artium*, a treatise devoted to the twenty liberal arts. Paulus is an original thinker and observer when it comes to music, as witness his elegant description of the motet:⁷

Mutetus est cantus mensuralis per triplum vadens, in quo discantus habet textum proprium et medium eciam (non) habet textum proprium diversificatum a discanto, sed tamen uterque textus una cum suis notis ita bene concordat, quod haec difformitas uniformitatem videtur parere; tenor autem nullum textum habet, sed occurrit utrique suaviter se inmiscendo.

A motet is a mensural song proceeding in three voices, in which the discant has its own text and the middle voice even has a characteristic text differentiated from the discant. But nevertheless, the text of each concords so well together with its own notes, that this lack of conformity seems to appear as uniformity. The tenor, however, has no text, but it replies to both, sweetly intertwined with each.

Paulus describes a double-texted motet in which each of the three voices occupies a different vocal range – high, middle, low. He further conveys an image in which text and melody are closely united. The word *difformitas* could also be translated as “double form,” in contrast to *uniformitatem*. Paulus wrote the *Liber viginti artium* in Bohemia circa 1459–63, but his definition appears to be older;⁸ the word *non* added to the sentence, either by Paulus himself or by the scribe, changes the entire meaning. It disrupts

⁵ Among the manuscripts with significant motet sections are: Turin, Biblioteca nazionale universitaria, MS J.II.9; Bologna, Museo internazionale e biblioteca della musica, MS Q15; Cambridge, University Library, MS Add. 4435 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Don b. 32, “Royal English Choirbook”; Bologna, Biblioteca universitaria, MS 2216; Modena, Biblioteca Estense universitaria, MS α.X.1.11; Lucca, Archivio di Stato, MS 238, Pisa, Biblioteca arcivescovile “Cardinale Pietro Maffi,” Cartella 11/III, and Lucca, Archivio arcivescovile, MS 97, “Lucca Choirbook”; Prague, Památník Národního Pisemnictví, Strahovská Knihovna, D.G.IV.47, “Strahov Codex.”

⁶ See R. M. Nosow, “The Florid and Equal-Discant Motet Styles of Fifteenth-Century Italy” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1992), chapter 2, “Genre and Style”; Lütken, *Guillaume Dufay und die isorhythmische Motette*; J. E. Cumming, *The Motet in the Age of Du Fay* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7–62; A. Kirkman, “The Invention of the Cyclic Mass,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54 (2001): 5–12.

⁷ Ed. and trans. in C. E. Brewer, “The Introduction of the Ars Nova into East Central Europe: A Study of Late Medieval Polish Sources” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1984), 431–37, at 435.

⁸ Ibid., 218–19.

the parallel phrases, “discantus habet textum proprium et medium eciam habet textum proprium.” The definition now refers to a single-texted work in which the discantus and *medius*, but not the tenor, carry the same words. The text of each “concorde . . . well together with its own notes.” With the addition of a single word, the description of the motet is brought up to date with respect to the stylistic currents of the mid-fifteenth century. It matches in many respects the widely distributed song motets of Johannes Touront, who was active in Bohemia at just this time.

The four case studies take an inclusive approach toward motet performance. For periods of weak – and evolving – genre definition, it proves helpful not to become too doctrinaire. Motet composers deliberately borrowed from other genres or blurred the divisions between them, for both social and artistic reasons (see Chapter 8). As a result, some of the most interesting works occur on the peripheries of the genre. The English motet was an exception, for it maintained its traditional identity through the first four decades of the century. It featured two or more texts sung simultaneously, a *cantus firmus* tenor fashioned from plainchant, and organization in proportions, or ratios of time. English antiphon settings, or cantilenas, constituted a separate genre, typically in three voices with a single text. They often carried the *cantus firmus* in a single voice, but ornamented in such a way as to create a flowing melody. English scribes copied motets and antiphons separately, confirming their generic distinction.⁹ But in continental manuscripts, English antiphons appear side by side with motets, denoting a different reception history, one that allies them with the new types of motet that were created in the early and mid-fifteenth century.

Motets were performed for a fascinating array of ceremonies during the fifteenth century, ceremonies that place them at the enactments of royal and ducal power, civic identity, or ecclesiastical rites. These works speak of an age in which church and polity were inextricably intertwined, for both were subject to divine favor. As Paulus Paulirinus de Praga writes, “with praises of God, the cantilena connects the earth-born with the heaven dwellers, gladdens the mournful, and . . . calls forth with harmonious sweetness to the heaven, earth, seas, and turning stars.”¹⁰ Our hearing and understanding of

⁹ G. Curtis and A. Wathey, “Fifteenth-Century English Liturgical Music: A List of the Surviving Repertory,” *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle* 27 (1994): 1–69.

¹⁰ Brewer, “The Introduction of the Ars Nova,” 431: “Deum tum protunc laudibus terrigenas nectit celicolis, tristes exhilarat et celum, terram, mara et sidera volventes . . . armoniata provocat suavitate.”

these splendid sonic remnants of the past can only be enriched by a stronger knowledge of their actual use, whether at a baptismal font, in the streets of a town, or at the high altar of a cathedral. We then place ourselves in a position to ask the questions that puzzle us most, and to ponder their possible answers.

1 | Motets in the chronicles of Henry V

When Henry V of England was crowned at the age of twenty-five, on March 21, 1413, he had already taken an active part in consolidating royal power against rebels in Wales. A shrewd, capable ruler and military commander, he quickly undertook to strengthen the crown and to plan a military campaign in defense of his hereditary rights in France. The overwhelming English victory over a superior French force at the Battle of Agincourt in October 1415, with Henry V at the head of the army, ranks as the most heralded British victory prior to the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. As part of his overall policy, he worked internally with Parliament to secure his position vis-à-vis opposition forces, and externally via foreign diplomacy. Most notably, he collaborated with Sigismund, King of the Romans, both in negotiating with the French and in efforts to end the Great Schism at the Council of Constance (1414–18).

The historical chronicles characteristic of the period relate directly or indirectly to these diplomatic efforts. The central historical source, the *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, written by an unknown chaplain of the Chapel Royal, follows in remarkable detail the first years of Henry V’s reign, from March 1413 to July 1417. It was composed with the clear intent to persuade other authorities, both domestic and foreign, of the righteousness of the king’s cause. It pays particular attention to the liturgy, including chant, and its role in the life of the king. Henry V himself knew how to sing and how to compose, leaving Mass movements in the royal choir-book, Old Hall, attributed to “Roy Henry.”¹ Other chronicles, in Latin or English, similarly extol the virtues and exploits of the young king. The most important of these, the *Liber metricus de Henrico Quinto*, written by Thomas of Elmham, is particularly helpful for understanding the liturgy of the Chapel Royal. Through them, we gain an unusually strong view of the role that polyphonic music played within the overall policy of Henry V.

¹ London, British Library, MS Add. 57950, “Old Hall”: Sanctus, fols. 12v–13r; Gloria, fol. 80v.

The daily procession in the Chapel Royal

Although the king's household chapel, or Chapel Royal, often accompanied English sovereigns in their travels and even their military campaigns, its normal seat was the private chapel of the king, St. Stephen's Chapel at Westminster Palace.² Each day, the royal chaplains were charged with observing High Mass and the four principal canonical offices – Matins, Lauds, Vespers, and Compline. Mass was preceded by a daily procession that began in the choir and circled the chapel before re-entering the choir at the west door. A three-voice motet in the Old Hall manuscript, *Alma proles/Christi miles/Ab inimicis nostris* by John Cooke, may have been composed for that procession.³ Cooke was a member of the Chapel Royal between mid-1413 and July 1419, and accompanied the king to Agincourt.⁴ He and Leonel Power are the only two composers to appear in both the first and second layers of Old Hall, which in its later stage was employed in the Chapel Royal.⁵ The first layer originated in the chapel of Henry V's brother Thomas, Duke of Clarence, but the book moved to the Chapel Royal at least by the time of Clarence's death in March 1421.

The indirect evidence for the performance of *Alma proles/Christi miles/Ab inimicis nostris* stems from the chapel of the king's son, Henry VI. In 1448–49, William Say, Dean of the Chapel Royal, wrote the *Liber regie capelle* for the benefit of a Portuguese knight of the Order of the Garter, Count Alvaro Vaz d'Almada.⁶ The resulting book is as much a description of royal ceremony as a manual for the Chapel Royal. According to the *Liber regie capelle*, a special procession and litany were made every Wednesday and Friday “for the state of the king and queen and the peace of the realm.”⁷ This parallels the daily procession and litany before Mass in the chapel of

² F. Ll. Harrison, *Music in Medieval Britain*, 4th edn. (Buren, the Netherlands: Frits Knuf, 1980), 19, cautions that St. Stephen's Chapel also had its own college, consisting of “a dean, twelve canons, thirteen priest-vicars, four clerks and six choristers.”

³ Fols. 90v–91r. See the inventory in A. Hughes and M. Bent, “The Old Hall Manuscript,” *Musica Disciplina* 21 (1967): 97–147.

⁴ M. Bent, “Cooke, John,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 2000).

⁵ M. Bent, “Old Hall Manuscript,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 2000).

⁶ *Liber regie capelle: A Manuscript in the Biblioteca Publica, Evora*, ed. W. Ullmann, Henry Bradshaw Society 92 (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1961), 9–11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59: “pro statu Regis ac Regine et pace Regni.” In the Sarum rite, Wednesdays and Fridays in Lent were the prescribed days for the procession and litany before Mass.

Henry V, which the *Gesta Henrici Quinti* calls “the customary procession and litany with which he had long been wont to invoke divine aid.”⁸

The twice-weekly procession described in the *Liber regie capelle*, led by a cross and two candlebearers, begins:

cum antiphona, precibus, genuflexionibus et psalmis precedentibus, ut in processionali continentur, ac cum communi letania subsequente, presente aliquando rege in processione, et raro deficiente Regina, magna parte domus regie comitante, sicque processione ad Capellam redeunte, ac percantata per Capellam solenniter antiphona *Ab inimicis*, et cetera, ut habetur in processionali, et dicta oracione de omnibus sanctis, statim per rectores chori incipitur missa de die, quam chorus prosequitur

in the first place with antiphon, prayers, genuflexions, and psalms, as are contained in the processional books, and with the common litany following. Sometimes the king is present in the procession, and rarely is the queen absent, the majority of the royal household taking part. Thus, with the procession returned to the chapel, the chapel also solemnly sings through the antiphon *Ab inimicis*, et cetera, as is found in the processional book, and a prayer is said of All Saints. Immediately the rulers of the choir begin the Mass of the day, which is continued by the choir.⁹

Since the work of Manfred Bukofzer in 1950, the tenor of Cooke’s motet has been identified as a verse from the litany, said in time of war.¹⁰ *Ab inimicis nostris* is the first of eight verses, all with the same melody. An anonymous three-voice setting of the odd-numbered verses appears in Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 1236 (fols. 46v–47r). The contratenor ornaments, or paraphrases, the chant differently each time, most likely in alternation with the unadorned plainchant in the even-numbered verses. Since the manuscript dates to circa 1460–65, the setting shows that the conclusion of the litany could be elaborated as a separate musical item.¹¹ Moreover, that same chant, *Ab inimicis nostris*, also served as a processional antiphon in the Chapel Royal.¹² The *Liber regie capelle* demonstrates that *Ab inimicis nostris* was appropriate to accompany the procession on a regular basis, not just in time of war. The specific liturgical elements cited correspond,

⁸ *Gesta Henrici Quinti: The Deeds of Henry V*, ed. and trans. F. Taylor and J. S. Roskell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 150–51: “solitas processionem et letaniam quibus usus est diu ante pro invocando divino auxilio.”

⁹ *Liber regie capelle*, 59–60.

¹⁰ M. Bukofzer, *Studies in Medieval & Renaissance Music* (New York: Norton, 1950), 68.

¹¹ S. R. Charles, “The Provenance and Date of the Pepys Ms 1236,” *Musica Disciplina* 16 (1962): 57–71.

¹² M. Williamson, “Royal Image-Making and Textual Interplay in Gilbert Banaster’s *O Maria et Elizabeth*,” *Early Music History* 19 (2000): 247 n. 36.

in abbreviated form, to those prescribed for Rogation Days in the Sarum Processional.¹³ The litany is said as the procession moves through the nave of the church and re-enters the choir. The *Liber regie capelle* then adds the antiphon *Ab inimicis*, finishing with a versicle and the requisite prayer to All Saints, *Presta quesumus*, said by the priest at the choir steps.

Cooke's motet fulfills the same objects as those specified in the *Liber regie capelle*, namely to entreat divine protection for the sovereign and realm. Both motetus and triplum have ten rhymed stanzas, with twenty-one syllables per stanza in the motetus and twenty-six syllables per stanza in the triplum (Figure 1.1). Scholars have had difficulty in associating the work with a specific time or event because of the nature of the texts.¹⁴ The triplum, *Alma proles*, in the first place petitions the Virgin Mary for compassion, drawing on the iconography of the fountain of grace, centering on the phrase "Open the course of the font." The fountain of grace appears in the *Madonna of the Fountain* from the workshop of Jan van Eyck, where Virgin and Child are surrounded by a paradisiacal garden (see Illustration 6.2).¹⁵ In the last two stanzas, the triplum invokes Christ, with reference to the Father. The allusions to the Madonna's majesty and splendor make a fitting conclusion to a prayer on behalf of the Chapel Royal.

In contrast, the motetus incipit, *Christi miles*, hails St. George as the type of the warrior saint. A leaf from the Bedford Missal illustrates the devotion of the royal house (Illustration 1.1). The brother of the king, John, Duke of Bedford, kneels before St. George with his hands clasped in prayer. He wears a black tunic surrounded by a heavily embroidered silk cloak. A prayer book or psalter lies open before him, on a blue, white, and red banner with the ducal motto *A vous entier*. The saint is arrayed as a knight of the Order of

¹³ *Liber regie capelle*, 59. The Use of Sarum, prevalent across much of England, pertains to Salisbury Cathedral. In its normal position, *Ab inimicis nostris* represents an addition to the third litany in Rogationtide, for Wednesday on the eve of Ascension Day. See the *Processionale ad usum Sarum*, ed. R. Pynson (London, 1502; facsimile reprint, Clarabricken, Clifden, County Kilkenny: Boethius Press, 1980), fols. 108r–111r, with an illustration at fol. 95v. The texts are transcribed in *Processionale ad usum insignis ac praeclarae ecclesiae Sarum*, ed. W. G. Henderson (Leeds: M'Corquodale, 1882; facsimile reprint, Farnborough, Hants.: Gregg International, 1969).

¹⁴ R. Bowers, "Cooke, John," in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2nd edn. (Kassel and New York: Bärenreiter, 1998–), comments, "Offensichtlich entstand die Motette im Kontext des Wiederaufflammens des Krieges mit Frankreich in den Jahren 1414 bis 1415 und 1417 bis 1421, obgleich der Text in keinem notwendigen Zusammenhang mit bestimmten Ereignissen zu stehen scheint." Bent, "Sources of the Old Hall Music," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 94 (1967–68): 23, suggests that the motet could have been composed for "the rogation days in 1415, 6–8 May."

¹⁵ On the iconography of the fountain of grace, see G. Kipling, *Enter the King: Theatre, Liturgy, and Ritual in the Medieval Civic Triumph* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 163–67.