CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-89933-8 — Renaissance Polyphony
Fabrice Fitch
Excerpt
More Information

Chapter 1 Introducing Renaissance polyphony

In tackling such a vast topic in so concise a format, my aim is not so much to supersede existing studies as to complement them. Since Gustave Reese's magisterial *Music of the Renaissance* (1954), approachable surveys of the principal genres and composers have been increasingly accessible, to say nothing of more specialized, culturally or socially oriented readings.[1] More recently, the wealth of online resources (from search engines and encyclopedias like *Grove Music Online* and its German equivalent, *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, to editions and digital archives such as the Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music or CESR Programme Ricercar) presents both an opportunity and a challenge to re-imagine what a book like this can offer.

First, the title signals a difference from anthologies with names like 'Music in the Renaissance', which locate the subject within broader social, intellectual, or artistic contexts. These all have a place, but the focus of this book is squarely on the music, and specifically, polyphony. This is not a matter of exclusion but of emphasis: a study of Renaissance music more broadly would take in entirely unwritten practices, dance music, solo instrumental music, sacred and secular forms of monody – all of which pose very different questions. The fact that so much polyphony survives in notation marks it out from most of these other forms of music making, but in recent years the prevalence of extemporized polyphony within the Renaissance has become increasingly apparent. The recovery of these practices has only just begun, but already it has opened up fascinating new perspectives. It confirms the view of polyphony as a specialized activity, meriting investigation on its own terms.

There is another reason to focus so specifically on polyphony as musical practice. The popularity of Renaissance polyphony with modern audiences is due – at least in part – to its sonic appeal, added to its relative proximity to tonal music (particularly with later Renaissance figures such as Palestrina, Lassus, Byrd, and Victoria). That seeming familiarity masks all sorts of features that may be quite unfamiliar: genres, formal expectations, and habits concerning performance. The further removed in time, the greater the sense of unfamiliarity, extending to ever more basic features

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-89933-8 — Renaissance Polyphony
Fabrice Fitch
Excerpt
More Information

of musical language (the relationship between the voices, the disposition of cadences, the sense of pacing, and so on). Perhaps because the music easily lends itself to being enjoyed at a surface level, an appreciation of its more distinctive qualities can prove elusive. Yet there is a world of difference between Masses by Palestrina and Du Fay; between chansons by Lassus and Busnoys, and between two motets written by the same composer in different circumstances. What, then, makes a given piece tick; what makes it exceptional, or, on the contrary, typical? How does it relate to other pieces it resembles? How might the composer or musicians have approached the task of composing or performing it? In this book I seek to give interested listeners and students (in the broadest sense) the means to address these questions for themselves.

The distinction between performance and composition is crucial, for there is a dimension of polyphony that is expressed in the musical notation, an aspect by definition hidden from view of modern audiences, both figuratively and literally. The heart-shaped and circular notation of songs by Baude Cordier (*fl.* 1400) are earlier examples of this idea, but the phenomenon truly takes off during the Renaissance and is expressed in all sorts of ways. Often it takes the shape of riddles and codes in which the musical notation does not directly express the intended sounding result. Historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were suspicious of such features, sometimes because they misunderstood the notation and transcribed the music incorrectly, but also because the idea of notation as anything other than a transparent signifier was alien to them. Yet it is one of the most fascinating aspects of Renaissance polyphony. Far from being abstract or forbidding, it can be a source of delight, even humour.

In short, there is more to Renaissance polyphony than meets the ear.

A musical Renaissance?

So far, I have used the term 'Renaissance' without qualification. First used by the artist and writer Giorgio Vasari (d.1574), it was subsequently adopted for the historical period in Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). But its application to music is problematic. Many of the practices with which this book is concerned – including some of the most fundamental – trace their origins back decades and even centuries, in some cases back to the origins of documented polyphony. As a consequence, assigning a point of division between 'medieval' and 'Renaissance' music is an even more artificial exercise than usual.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-89933-8 — Renaissance Polyphony
Fabrice Fitch
Excerpt
More Information

Following Vasari, the classic art-historical definition of the Renaissance begins with the maturity of the painter Giotto di Bondone (d.1337), but no writers on music nowadays would advocate so early a date. After 1500, changes in musical style, forms, and notation are easier to describe and perceive, but a cut-off date at that point leaves several generations of composers stranded in a periodic no-man's-land, since few commentators, conversely, would extend the medieval period so late. Ironically, the idea of a musical 're-birth' was invoked not long after Vasari coined the term, but it was used to designate a very different phenomenon from what we mean by 'Renaissance'. The so-called 'academies' consisting of intellectuals, literary figures, and musicians in Italy and France sought to recover the supposed perfection of ancient Greece (specifically its synthesis of text and music in the domain of theatre). Their debates eventually found expression in accompanied monody, which led to opera. By their reckoning, there had been no musical Renaissance to speak of before the 're-birth' of Greek drama: in other words, 'our' Renaissance more or less collapses into the Baroque. In fact, the term's applicability to music history has divided writers on music from the nineteenth century onwards.[2]

A number of recent anthologies situate the start of the Renaissance in music with the early career of Guillaume Du Fay (*c.*1397–1474) and his first stay in Italy in the early 1420s, culminating in the composition of his motet *Nuper rosarum flores* (1436) for the consecration of the *duomo* (cathedral) of Florence and its newly completed dome, designed by Filippo Brunelleschi (d.1447).[3] This view runs the risk just mentioned of aligning the musical Renaissance too closely with its Italian art-historical origins. Brunelleschi's dome is so central to the narrative of Florence as the 'cradle of the Renaissance' that we ought to be wary of interpreting *Nuper rosarum* too strongly in terms of the circumstances of its composition. Put another way, it may be asked whether we would interpret its musical features quite so strongly in the absence of the connection with Brunelleschi and Florence.[4] After all, the piece's form (the tenor or 'isorhythmic' motet) was inherited from previous generations, and its style is not so different from his other pieces of this type; besides, attempts to link aspects of Du Fay's style with contemporary Italian music are too general to be fully convincing.

Another possible starting point takes its cue not from art history but from contemporary writings about music (historiography). Two statements are involved: in his lengthy poem *Le Champion des dames* (*c.*1440), the poet Martin le Franc (d.1461) credits Du Fay and his contemporary Gilles Binchois (*c.*1400–60) with reinventing their musical language in response to the 'frisque concordance' (lively sonority) and

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-89933-8 — Renaissance Polyphony
Fabrice Fitch
Excerpt
More Information

other innovative stylistic features of contemporary English music, notably that of John Dunstaple (*c.*1390–1453). A generation later, in his *Book on the Art of Counterpoint* (*c.*1477), the great music theorist and composer Johannes Tinctoris (*c.*1430–1511) names Dunstaple as the 'fons et origo' ('wellspring') of a new style, which Du Fay's generation and those after him adopted.[5] Among the most discussed in all Renaissance music, these two passages constitute another 'foundation myth' of Renaissance music: Dunstaple and his English contemporaries (notably Leonel Power, *c.*1380–1446) also feature prominently in the early sections of several anthologies.[6] But Le Franc's memorable term for this new English style ('contenance angloise') is difficult to interpret, since any poetic description is strongly conditioned by the demands of rhyme and scansion; for his part, Tinctoris does not say exactly which aspects made such a vivid impression on continental composers. In some ways, the known works of Power and Dunstaple are as deeply rooted in medieval models as those of their continental colleagues.

A starting point: the *Missa Caput*

My solution to the problem 'where to begin' is framed not in terms of contemporary developments in other spheres but of a concretely musical one.

Sometime around 1440, a clutch of anonymous English Mass cycles began circulating in mainland Europe.[7] They had several features in common, which marked them out from what continental composers were doing: the five movements of these Masses were in the same mode and based on the same plainchant (called 'cantus firmus', henceforth c.f.), which was treated similarly or even identically in each movement; all five movements began with a recognizable melodic tag (known as 'head-motif'), audibly linking them from the start. These were not the first c.f. Masses to find their way to the continent, where composers had been experimenting with similar unifying devices for some years, though less consistently. Two of them stood out because of their scoring: they were for four voices, the lowest of which was in a range of its own, below the tenor (the voice that 'held' the c.f.). This new voice-type was labelled 'contratenor bassus' (soon shortened to 'bassus'). Exactly why this novel feature so caught the attention of continental composers can only be guessed at, but soon it became standard in written polyphony.

Why does this matter? It is a question of style. In earlier music the tenor, with its slow-moving pitches pre-determined by the plainchant,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-89933-8 — Renaissance Polyphony
Fabrice Fitch
Excerpt
More Information

was often the lowest-sounding voice, limiting the pitches the composer could place above it. A lower voice whose pitches were chosen by the composer meant a greater number of possible sonorities to choose from. All this will be explained in more detail in Chapter 5; but while this was not the functional bass of tonality, it is possible to draw a stylistic line from these English Masses to the music of Palestrina, Lassus, and their contemporaries; beyond that, the establishment of a free-standing bass line is a point of rupture signalling the new aesthetic priorities of the Baroque. The turn of the seventeenth century, just after the deaths of Palestrina and Lassus in 1594, is a much less contested end point for our period, and for this book; that said, the 'old' polyphonic style continued to be cultivated well into the new century, particularly on the Iberian peninsula, where the innovations from Italy were slower to take hold, and in England, notably due to the exceptional longevity and influence of William Byrd (*c.*1539/40–1623).

Of these English Mass cycles, one was especially popular: in fact, the *Missa Caput* is transmitted in more sources than any other Mass composed before 1480 (with the lone exception of the considerably later *Missa L'Homme armé* by Antoine Busnoys (*c.*1430–92)). Though little known today, choosing it as a notional starting point seems appropriate for a number of reasons. In common with the vast majority of music written before 1600, we do not know when it was written, and as with most of the music before the age of print, it is anonymous. Nor is it the only work of its kind: another English cycle, the *Missa Veterem hominem*, reached the continent at the same time, and is its twin in stylistic terms. All these things usefully suggest a gradual emergence of Renaissance polyphony, rather than a grand creation myth. (That said, its presumed date of composition tallies with another judgement in Tinctoris' *Book of the Art of Counterpoint* that only the music composed in the last forty years was worth hearing.) Fittingly, also, the *Missa Caput* set the seal on a new phenomenon, the cyclic Mass, which engaged composers throughout the Renaissance and stands today as one of its iconic artistic statements. Furthermore, the *Missa Caput* was significant not merely as an example of a new style but also in its own right: two leading fifteenth-century composers, Johannes Ockeghem (*c.*1425–97) and Jacob Obrecht (*c.*1457/8–1505), wrote Masses that not only used the same plainchant but whose structure is closely modelled on their English predecessor. When Obrecht wrote his response, it would have been about fifty years old. The re-working of pre-existing polyphony is a mainstay of Renaissance music, and the *Missa Caput* was one of the earliest pieces to be used in that way.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-89933-8 — Renaissance Polyphony
Fabrice Fitch
Excerpt
More Information

Most importantly, the significance of the *Missa Caput* is due to its intrinsic musical qualities. By the standards of previous music with a c.f., it is faster moving. The greater mobility of the lowest voice gives the musical texture a dynamism that is immediately audible. The music alternates sections where the long notes of the c.f. are present and others where the tenor pauses: sections without the tenor ('reduced texture') tend to be more active than those where it is present. The principle is inherited from the isorhythmic motet,[8] but in the *Missa Caput* reduced sections are typically longer, the number of shifts from full to reduced texture is greater, and the combination of voices sounding at any one time is more varied. This alternation audibly parses the music, like breaths inhaling and exhaling, or like structural upbeats (in reduced texture) and downbeats (when the tenor enters or re-enters). This formal clarity focuses the dynamism made possible by the new scoring and is further reinforced across the cycle by the recurrent features just mentioned. The very first entry of the tenor in the opening Kyrie (Example. 1.1b) gives rise to a startling sonority. It is not

Example 1.1 Anon., *Missa Caput*, Kyrie (beginning), (a) bb. 1–13; (b) bb. 20–27.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-89933-8 — Renaissance Polyphony
Fabrice Fitch
Excerpt
More Information

so much the tenor's pitch b as the e beneath it that is unusual (a sonority on g would have been the more obvious choice: see Example 5.2, p. 72 below). This bold gesture follows on the heels of an introductory duo that is far more extended than was typical in continental music. The calculated impact of this initial burst of full scoring strikes the listener even today.

Just as the novelty of its scoring was quickly adopted by continental composers, so the formal plan of these new English Masses was widely imitated. Within a few years, the implications of both were being explored and extended in all sorts of directions – not just in the nascent phenomenon of the Mass cycle but in motets and secular music as well.

Overview

This first look at the *Missa Caput* introduces several of the issues that inform this book. Unlike most historical surveys, which offer detailed information on composers' biographies, evaluations of their outputs, and histories of the most significant genres, my approach is not strictly chronological but thematic. (Given the breadth of resources now available, Reese's exhaustive coverage is neither possible today nor perhaps even necessary.) The main concern here is not with composers and works but with aspects of musical style and technique that shape the listening experience, and with issues that lie just beneath or beyond it, whose appreciation returns the listener to a deepened sense of that experience. The choice of chapter headings inevitably reflects my own preferences; it goes without saying that a survey with a different focus would have resulted in very different ones. (Space prevents me from discussing the migration of polyphony into the New World, for example.) A secondary aim is to make readers aware of some underlying issues and recent debates within research so that they can engage with and critique them for themselves. The most far-reaching is the distinction between what ethnomusicologists call 'emic' and 'etic' approaches to musical culture – that is, the attitudes shared by those within the culture being observed ('emic') and of those observing it from the outside ('etic'). A simple example: my use of the word 'sonority' in preference to 'chord' reflects the fact that modern notions of functional harmony were not pertinent to Renaissance musicians. Historical research into music now embraces the distinction, whose usefulness is evident throughout this book. Beyond these broad aims, each chapter draws on a substantial literature (in some cases a vast one). The bibliography cannot be exhaustive either but is primarily intended as a guide to further reading.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-89933-8 — Renaissance Polyphony
Fabrice Fitch
Excerpt
More Information

The individual chapters of *The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music* and *The Cambridge History of Sixteenth-Century Music* offer alternative insights on many of the topics explored here, along with up-to-date and detailed bibliographies.

This book reflects twenty-five years of teaching, thinking about, and performing Renaissance polyphony. My purpose in writing it is to enhance the experience of those who encounter this music.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org