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978-1-107-01524-1 - The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music

Edited by Anna Maria Busse Berger and Jesse Rodin

Excerpt

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Introduction

ANNA MARIA BUSSE BERGER AND JESSE RODIN

At one time or another most students of early music encounter a problem: there is a wide gap between introductory texts, which after a certain point are no longer enough, and the scholarly literature, which, owing to a sea of unfamiliar terms and concepts and an understandable tendency toward heightened specificity, can seem impenetrable. This book aims to fill that gap – not by dumbing down a vibrant and long-standing scholarly tradition, but through creative and wide-ranging essays by leading scholars that treat a variety of topics in compact form. Our authors – thirty-eight in all, represented in no fewer than forty-five essays – have endeavored to reflect the most recent research while framing their contributions so as to invite specialist and non-specialist readers alike.

Histories of music typically address music students and music scholars. This volume is certainly intended for these audiences, but from the beginning we have also sought to engage the disciplines of art history, literature, social history, the history of ideas, and cultural studies. We have thought too of the general reader. This might be someone who has listened to a motet by Josquin des Prez or spent time in Florence's museums and is wondering how humanism might have manifested itself in music. Or it might be someone who, having heard echoes of "early music" in Stravinsky's *Mass*, is curious about where the composer got his ideas. Fifty years ago it would have been unthinkable to address a book of this kind to such a wide readership; fifteenth-century music was known only to specialists, and few pieces were recorded. Now for the first time we find ourselves in a historical moment when music from all periods is available online. If a reader wants to listen to one of the works discussed in this volume, chances are good that she can do so in a matter of seconds.

There are many other reasons a book such as this could not have been written fifty years ago. In the past few decades, the widespread availability of modern editions and recordings has facilitated an unprecedented depth of scholarly engagement with the repertory and theoretical literature; this change is reflected above all in Part II, which offers striking insights into improvisation and compositional process, and Part VII, which evinces a sophisticated

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understanding of music theory, in particular the discourses around and uses of musical notation. New work on humanism (Part III) has enriched our understanding of this important intellectual “movement,” thanks in no small measure to contributions by scholars outside musicology (Hankins, Frazier). A multidisciplinary perspective also characterizes Part IV, which showcases the ever wider intellectual and aesthetic contexts scholars have discerned for fifteenth-century music. Our field is more attuned to questions of historiography and reception than ever before; it is not for nothing that we have chosen Part I and Part X, which explore how we confront the past, as bookends. Even those portions of the book that may at first blush seem commensurate with older writings reflect fundamentally new ways of thinking – about the central role played by genres in defining the musical landscape (Part IX), the complex interplay between institutions, urban environments, gender, and politics in shaping musical practices (Part V), relationships between music and sacred themes (Part VI), and the materiality and intellectual background of the musical sources upon which so much of our field depends (Part VIII).

Other changes are more explicitly historiographical. Take as one example the shifting fortunes of fifteenth-century composers. Whereas half a century ago the period was defined mainly by the trio Du Fay (then “Dufay”), Ockeghem, and Josquin, with a few others waiting in the wings, we now embrace a more pluralistic view that has benefited from work on Agricola, Bedyngham, Binchois, Busnoys, Compère, Dunstaple, Gaspar, Isaac, Morton, Obrecht, de Orto, Regis, and La Rue, among others.¹ In a similar vein, for our views of individual musicians we are no longer as reliant as we once were on the pronouncements of theorists. (Petrus de Domarto, whom Richard Taruskin aptly dubbed “Tinctoris’s perennial whipping boy,” is no longer considered a third-rate composer² – nor, for that matter, is Tinctoris himself.) If the handful of composer studies included here (Part I) continues to center upon the “big three,” that is in part because their best works number among the most extraordinary aesthetic and intellectual achievements of the age. It is also because these composers have loomed so large in the scholarship and because the methodological questions that arise from their music are unusually rich.

1 See the relevant bibliographies in *NG2*. Further examples, with a focus on the most recent literature, include: Gallagher, *Johannes Regis*; special issues of the *Journal of the Alamire Foundation* (on Jacob Obrecht: vols. 2–3, 2010–11) and the *Journal of Musicology* (on Henricus Isaac: vol. 27, 2011); Rodin, *Josquin’s Rome* (on Gaspar and de Orto); and Fitch, “‘Virtual’ Ascriptions in Ms. AugsS 142a.”

2 See Taruskin, “Antoine Busnoys and the *L’homme armé* Tradition,” 284, and Wegman, “Petrus de Domarto’s *Missa Spiritus almus*.”

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Still another change is geographical. It has long been known that a staggering percentage of fifteenth-century musicians originated in a tiny geographic area, a portion of the Burgundian territories bounded by Cambrai, Namur, Leuven, and Bruges (now northwestern Belgium and northernmost France). Trained in local schools (*maîtrises*) evidently characterized by overachievement, many of these musicians moved from place to place with dizzying frequency, traipsing not only across the Alps, to Italy, but also to and from England, Spain, Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia. In the fifteenth century such travel was by no means unique to musicians: one finds movement by merchants and bankers between the financial centers of Bruges, Florence, and Lübeck; a tendency of Italian courts to import from the North not only musicians, but also tapestries and oil paintings; and increasingly close political ties between East and West that owe in part to the Councils of Constance and Basel. The upshot, as concerns the history of music, was the development of an international musical style, with “international” now defined more broadly than ever before. As several essays in this volume attest, many so-called peripheral areas are turning out to have been important centers in their own right.³

The fifteenth century – and periodization

There is a certain freedom in writing a history of Western music bound only by the chronological range 1400–1500. The ostensibly neutral dates, imposed benevolently by the organizers of this series, obviate the usual requirement to embrace (or repudiate) one or another received periodization. There need be no “Middle Ages,” no “Renaissance” here – and indeed these terms, particularly the latter, will make few appearances in these pages.⁴ Their absence is salutary in several respects. To give just one example: by concluding in the middle of the so-called “Josquin generation” we are able to avoid an unfortunate tendency to cast that era merely as the progenitor of sixteenth-century contrapuntal practice and the precursor of new, proto-madrigalistic ideals of word–tone relations. More generally, the lack of an assigned “thesis” has freed our authors to tell complex, nuanced, sometimes even contradictory stories. To our ears, this cacophony is all to the good.

³ See the contributions by Strohm, Pietschmann (“Institutions”), Berger (“Oswald”), Bent, Schmidt-Beste, and Schwindt. On the “international” style more generally, see above all Strohm, *The Rise of European Music*.

⁴ One caveat is that of all the volumes in this series organized by century, ours is the earliest. The *ars antiqua* and *ars nova*, not to mention the four or so centuries before them, have been herded into a single, “medieval” volume – which in turn puts pressure on our volume to be “non-medieval.”

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Still, escaping a monolithic title is not the same as escaping its resonances. Whether we speak of “late medieval,” “Renaissance,” or “early modern,” these terms – Cellarian, Burckhardtian, Johnsonian – linger in our imaginations.⁵ This remains true even when we reject such terms outright; doing so merely catches us in a reactive pose, as we define our subject *against* rather than *through* them. Put differently, we are more or less stuck.⁶ But whereas some would lament this situation, we prefer to think that it is not so very dire. On the contrary, periodization can help us see patterns, which after all is a main task of the historian. Indeed the period designations we are in one sense so grateful to have avoided are in another sense useful for organizing our thinking. And the problems thrown up by the collision of periods and the values that attend them can guide us toward greater subtlety and away from the oversimplified views such labels are often said to impose.

This volume therefore grapples – continues to grapple – with a swirl of historical developments that caused earlier writers to see new periods beginning in the years 1380, 1400, 1420, 1450, 1480, and 1500. Ours is a long fifteenth century, one that takes account of historicizing trends around 1400 that look back to the end of the trecento, and that peers just far enough into the sixteenth century to witness the first flowering of polyphonic music printing.⁷ Those who go in search of early modernity and “Renaissances” will find them: in the emergence of a strong work concept (Lütteken), in the new importance placed on the senses in experiencing music (Pietschmann), in stylistic ruptures with music of previous generations (Cumming/Schubert, Milsom, Rodin), and, perhaps above all, in unprecedentedly rich portraits of fifteenth-century humanism (Hankins, Strohm, Holford-Strevens, Wilson, Frazier). By contrast, anyone for whom the fifteenth century is “late medieval” will be drawn to essays that convey the ongoing importance of the memorial archive (Berger) and the manuscript tradition (Bent, Schmidt-Beste), continuities in notation and music theory (Stone, Zazulia, MacCarthy), and the enduring value placed on ritual, devotion, and ecclesiastical authority (Bloxam, Rothenberg, Robertson, Sherr, Starr) – though every one of these authors, we hasten to add, focuses on change at least as much as sameness, allowing the material, not an externally imposed label, to generate thematic coherence.

5 See Cellarius, *Historia universalis*; Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*; and Johnson, *Early Modern Europe*. With respect to the first of these terms the story is immensely complex; credit can by no means be given exclusively to Cellarius. See, for instance, Gordon, *Medium Aevum and the Middle Ages*; and Robinson, “Medieval, the Middle Ages.”

6 Cf. Strohm, “‘Medieval Music’ or ‘Early European Music’?” Our thanks to Professor Strohm for sharing an advance copy of his text.

7 On the latter see above all, and with references to further literature, Boorman, *Ottaviano Petrucci*.

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Book overview

Historiography is all. The way we write history – the values we bring to bear, the decisions we make about what to include and what to leave out, even the terms we use – conditions our thinking at the most basic level. In conceiving this volume we have done our utmost to reflect the state of the field while also pushing at its edges. On the one hand, we have not shied away from soliciting overviews – creative and thoughtfully organized overviews, but overviews nonetheless – of topics we believe are nowhere else covered adequately at a commensurate length. On the other, we have invited essays by scholars outside musicology and allocated extra space to areas that strike us as particularly vibrant or promising. And we have sought to showcase a variety of perspectives and methodologies by assembling a large and international team of authors. We pray that you, dear reader, will forgive us for failing to deliver complete coverage: for reasons both conceptual and practical, we have (sometimes inadvertently) skipped over major areas of inquiry. Our essays on music in churches, courts, and cities, for instance (Part V), include precious little on Ferrara, Naples, Milan, St. Peter’s in Rome, and Bruges, musical centers to which significant studies have been devoted;⁸ this is in part for reasons of space, in part because several essays on music in other civic and courtly contexts give at least a sense of the relevant issues. Similarly, we have included only three essays on the history of music theory (Part VII), in this case because the *Cambridge History* series devotes an entire volume to the subject.⁹

Other omissions are subtler. The relatively little space we give to issues of gender and sexuality, for example (cf. Blackburn), reflects the slow rate at which these topics have found their way into musicological studies of this period;¹⁰ this circumstance may, more than any ideologically driven aversion, reflect a perceived paucity of historical materials. We have also given relatively short shrift to performance practice (more on this below),¹¹ the institutions of music pedagogy,¹² and the practice of editing,¹³ all worthy topics for which a substantial literature exists. As editors we recognize that any choice is a choice

8 See Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara*; Atlas, *Music at the Aragonese Court of Naples*; Merkley and Merkley, *Music and Patronage in the Sforza Court*; Reynolds, *Papal Patronage and the Music of St. Peter’s*; and Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges*.

9 *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Christensen.

10 A notable exception is Higgins, “Parisian Nobles, a Scottish Princess, and the Woman’s Voice.”

11 Major studies include *Performance Practice*, ed. Brown and Sadie; and Leech-Wilkinson, *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music*.

12 On the *maîtrise* see Becker, “The *Maîtrise* in Northern France and Burgundy”; Wright, *Music and Ceremony at Notre Dame of Paris*, ch. 5; and Demouy, “Une source inédite de l’histoire des maîtrises.” For England see Mould, *The English Chorister*. See also *Music Education in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Murray *et al.*

13 The standard studies are Caldwell, *Editing Early Music* and Grier, *The Critical Editing of Music*.

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against – and though we did not frame our decisions about what to include in negative terms, we acknowledge that the contents and organization of this volume reflect our historiographical priorities.

Thus while this is not a book about the historiography of fifteenth-century music, it seems sensible to begin (Part I) with essays that address head-on some of the challenges posed by the study of this period. Michael Long asks what it means to “hear” and “listen to” music of the fifteenth century. In an analysis of the *hydraulis* (organ) mentioned at the outset of a famous motet by Antoine Busnoys and, arguably, echoed decades later in a mass by Josquin, he considers how, through cultural allusion and sheer sonic forcefulness, the sound of the cantus firmus might have created a “quasi-ritual cultural moment,” illuminating “experiential modes located outside the hierarchical apparatuses of ‘preparation’ that inform our understanding of historical aural reception.” Arguing from a very different perspective, Klaus Pietschmann approaches the practice of listening through an analysis of contemporary texts. Having identified several “essential modes of perception,” he examines the “doctrine of the internal senses and their effect on music comprehension . . . with a special focus on the spiritual efficacy of sacred polyphony” on the one hand, and the “justification of earthly sensual pleasure” on the other. Together these essays can help us hear fifteenth-century music with greater clarity, historical sensitivity, and self-awareness.

In recent decades scholars have struggled to reach consensus about the terms we use to describe pieces of music and the relationships between them. In this volume we have striven for some degree of terminological uniformity, but we have also chosen not to intervene in cases of substantive disagreement. Where one scholar speaks of “isorhythm” (Lütteken), others now avoid the term;¹⁴ and where one essay uses “*fuga*” to identify certain kinds of melodic repetition (Milsom), another prefers “imitation” (Cumming/Schubert).¹⁵ In some cases the choice of modern formulation carries especially significant implications. The terms “work” and “musical borrowing,” for instance, are in one sense purely pragmatic, but as the contributions by Laurenz Lütteken and Jesse Rodin in Part I reveal, they carry immense weight. In an innovative essay that reasserts the importance of the “work” while grounding the work concept in a robust theoretical context, Lütteken pinpoints five “theoretical and practical premises upon which the musical work of art depends . . . : notation and

14 See Bent, “What Is Isorhythm?,” which can be fruitfully read alongside Emily Zazulia’s essay in this volume.

15 Milsom lays out a proposed analytical terminology for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century music in “Crecquillon, Clemens, and Four-Voice *Fuga*.” See also Cumming, “Text Setting and Imitative Technique.”

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written tradition, authorship and professionalization, historicity and historical memory, the position of music in emerging generic classifications of the arts, reproducibility, and ‘aesthetics.’” Rodin reassesses the famous tradition of polyphonic masses on the *L’homme armé* melody as well as the emphasis scholars have placed on “musical borrowing.” Fifteenth-century polyphony is strikingly allusive: this was an age in which composers regularly based new works on older ones, choosing as models not only chant but also recent polyphonic compositions. Rodin begins by “propos[ing] a new way of parsing the musical connections that bind several [*L’homme armé* masses] together”; he then turns the “discussion on its head by questioning the terminological propriety and methodological value of musical borrowing all told.”

Each of the composer-based studies in this section offers insight into a particular figure while also confronting poignant historiographical questions. In an impressive précis of Du Fay’s life and works, Alejandro Planchart observes how, relative to other fifteenth-century composers, “the gaps in Du Fay’s biography are comparatively small, the succession of his patrons and employers comparatively clear. Thus it is possible not merely to establish many basic facts, but also to bring these facts into conversation with broader cultural and political developments.” Lawrence Bernstein focuses on questions that have beclouded the study of Jean d’Ockeghem. Using subtle analytical methods born of deep engagement with the music, Bernstein puts forward a new model for interpreting Ockeghem’s compositions, grappling along the way with a fraught historiography. In an essay on Josquin that takes as its point of departure a famous article by Joshua Rifkin, Rodin suggests that the study of this composer poses unparalleled historiographical and epistemological challenges.¹⁶ After identifying five central problems with which every student of Josquin must contend, Rodin makes an argument about how to move forward, asking us “to contextualize with respect to the evidence we have rather than the evidence we wish we had; to tell a richly textured story without falling into storytelling; and to maintain high evidentiary standards without neglecting our historical imaginations.”

Composer-based discussions usually circle back, at one point or another, to that most traditional of musicological topics: the history of musical style. While out of fashion in certain quarters, style analysis is for this period a cutting-edge area of research, thanks both to our newfound intimacy with the music and the ever expanding range of techniques scholars are using to evaluate it. In recent years there has emerged an exciting literature on

¹⁶ See “Problems of Authorship in Josquin,” in conjunction with several other significant contributions (e.g., “Munich, Milan, and a Marian Motet”; “A Black Hole?”; and “Musste Josquin Josquin werden?”).

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improvisation, composition, and the intersection between the two (Part II). Central to both these practices is the musical memory. In an essay on the memorial archive, Anna Maria Busse Berger highlights the degree to which the *memoria* served as a foundation for all fifteenth-century musicians, who were trained to memorize interval progressions and visualize polyphonic structures in the mind.¹⁷ With this framework in place, readers can fruitfully approach Philippe Canguilhem's essay on the practice and intellectual context of improvisation. Canguilhem reframes the debate about the meaning of *cantare super librum* ("singing upon the book"), arguing that fifteenth-century thinkers understood "counterpoint" to embrace both written and improvised polyphony.¹⁸ In doing so he corrects the modern misconception that improvisation is characterized by an absence of compositional planning. In a similar vein, Berger's study of Oswald von Wolkenstein interrogates the borders between oral and literate culture through the example of an almost certainly illiterate musician. Drawing on the work of the anthropologist Jack Goody, Berger posits a "secondary orality" that distinguishes "between oral culture, on the one hand, and oral plus written and printed culture, on the other" – a distinction that can help us understand how "the written page permitted different ways of memorizing material and texts."

Moving into the realm of so-called art music, two further essays examine the preserved repertory from sophisticated analytical vantage points. In a discussion of Josquin's famous *Ave Maria . . . virgo serena*, John Milsom changes the state of play with respect to this hotly contested piece, using "forensic analysis" of Josquin's stretto *fuga* to distance the motet from Milan. In doing so he also asks what it means to approach polyphonic works of this period. Julie Cumming and Peter Schubert, by contrast, trace a single technique – imitation – across three successive generations of composers; their analysis lends unprecedented clarity to a procedure that developed in the fifteenth century and would come to dominate musical practice throughout much of the sixteenth.

This volume breaks ground in its treatment of the relationship between music and fifteenth-century humanism (Part III). As James Hankins explains, humanists "came to colonize a cultural space somewhere between theology . . . and the professional studies of law and medicine" – that is, the "liberal arts, the arts worthy of a free man or woman, of people who did not (in theory) have to earn a living." In a persuasive multidisciplinary study, Hankins reasserts the importance of the Italian humanists, who "championed a new way of judging

17 A wider discussion of these issues appears in Berger, *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*.

18 This argument resonates with one first made in Sachs, "Arten improvisierter Mehrstimmigkeit."

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[More information](#)

music according to its moral and civic purposes . . . and . . . created an audience of educated amateurs for ‘classic’ music.”

In spite of mounting evidence to the contrary, humanism is often said to be a uniquely Italian phenomenon – which makes Reinhard Strohm’s contribution particularly welcome. Tracing a common set of humanistic tendencies across a wide geographic area, Strohm argues that even if non-Italian humanists did not transform their local cultures, they viewed them through humanistic eyes. The impact of their ideas on musical composition can be seen in “the application of rhetorical figures (*colores rhetorici*) to the musical texture,” the setting of “a greater variety of Latin poetic forms,” their defense of “incorrect” (i.e., non-classical) Latin pronunciation, and the development of “the modern understanding of composed music as a ‘completed and independent work.’” Leofranc Holford-Strevens turns a spotlight on the second of these developments, examining the formal properties of Latin poetry set by fifteenth-century composers. Casting the fifteenth century as an era of possibility and change, Holford-Strevens expertly describes the “protracted process” by which Latin literature was remodeled “upon the grammar, style, and form of classical prose and poetry.”

Humanism fostered an environment that, to quote Blake Wilson, “promoted the virtues of an active life of civic engagement, and an attendant focus on oral discourse in the vernacular in conjunction with the newly exalted disciplines of rhetoric and poetry.” Wilson’s essay demonstrates how the *canterino* and *improvisatore* gave voice to the humanists’ ideals.

Like Strohm’s, Alison Frazier’s essay is in one sense a corrective, this time to the notion that humanism is a uniquely secular phenomenon. Presenting exciting new research on Offices created for women saints, Frazier shows how fifteenth-century humanists undertook bold experiments in ritual, “colonizing” the sacred genres of the saint’s Life, biblical exegesis, and the liturgical Office in an effort to enhance their impact on the faithful. Taken together these essays paint a dynamic, multifaceted image of humanism, one that serves as an invitation to further scholarly inquiry. They also draw seamlessly on recent work in other disciplines.

Nowhere is this multidisciplinary strategy more prevalent than in Part IV, which brings music into conversation with architecture, feasting, and poetry to convey the wide range of contexts in which it was experienced. In an insightful essay that unites acoustics, space, building practices, and institutional contexts, Deborah Howard describes “the intimate relationship between space and musical performance.” She “chart[s] colliding waves of interaction, in which,” for example, “northern polyphony attuned to flamboyant Gothic settings was grafted into Italian liturgy and ceremonial, to be framed within

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[More information](#)

architectural settings increasingly tinged by the inspiration of ancient Rome.” Anthony Cummings observes an important connection between music-making and dining: “both activities occur in ‘real time’ and are dynamic or kinetic in nature.” Drawing on contemporary accounts of often lavish banquets, Cummings shows how combining these practices generated multimedia and multi-sensory aesthetic experiences. Such feasts often included sung lyric poetry, the genre at the center of Yolanda Plumley’s rich account of New Year songs. Investigating a large corpus of poetic texts, Plumley discerns the generic and textual norms that bind this repertory, both musical and literary, together. She further illuminates how these songs participate in a culture of late medieval gift-giving, a “social transaction between author and patron, or lover and lady.”

The fifteenth-century institutions that supported musical pursuits – church, court, city – held sway over practically every aspect of musical production: the types of music that were cultivated, performance contexts, the extent and means of dissemination, the economic status and daily schedule of professional musicians, even who was allowed to perform and listen. While a volume such as this can scarcely address all the subtleties that shaped the institutional mediation of musical practices, Part V offers both a robust overview and a series of case studies that, taken together, give texture to the institutional politics of fifteenth-century music-making. Pietschmann’s overview chapter defines the musical institution as “a group of musicians attached to a courtly, ecclesiastical, or civic entity that provided a foothold or financial support for musical production.” Identifying the fifteenth century as a decisive period in the development of musical institutions, Pietschmann focuses on the court chapel, taking a comparative approach to the question of music’s function and arguing that chapels tended “to project exclusivity and cachet . . . and foster internal stability and identity.”

In the North, the most famous chapel of the period was that of the Valois dukes of Burgundy, who sought, in the words of David Fiala, “to immerse their courts in the most luxurious of sonic environments.” Notwithstanding a piteous survival rate of polyphonic sources, Fiala is able to offer a sophisticated account of music at the Burgundian court, thanks in part to the extensive archival holdings of the Burgundian state.

Richard Sherr takes us behind the veil of the Sistine Chapel, certainly the most important site of polyphonic music-making in late fifteenth-century Italy. His study, which critically evaluates the writings of papal master of ceremonies Johannes Burckard, offers fresh insights about institutional hierarchy, the responsibilities and changing status of the singers, and matters of performance practice. The Vatican remains at the center of Pamela Starr’s