CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521473772 - The Motet in the Age of Du Fay
Julie E. Cumming
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

The age of Du Fay (*c.* 1400–1474) was a time of transition. Viewed both as the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, the fifteenth century saw the continuation of the fourteenth-century chanson in the *formes fixes* and the birth of the new genre of the Mass Ordinary cycle. In the motet – the genre that occupies a middle position between the chanson and the Mass both in terms of size and place in the genre hierarchy – we see both continuity and change: while the fifteenth-century motet had strong roots in the fourteenth-century motet, it also underwent a radical transformation of style, text types, and texture over the course of the century. Study of the motet provides a unique view into the musical world of the fifteenth century.

Two related problems make study of the fifteenth-century motet difficult. The first is the radical transformation of the genre: from the late medieval motet to the motet of the Josquin generation – from a motet in which several new texts are sung simultaneously over a slow-moving tenor, to a motet in which a single pre-existent liturgical text is sung by all voices in a homogeneous contrapuntal texture.[1] This transformation is not well understood. For the crucial decades around the middle of the century most of the surviving motets are anonymous, and many are not yet available in modern edition. Du Fay seems to have focused his compositional energies in this period on liturgical chant settings, especially Mass Proper cycles, and then on the new four-voice tenor Mass. There is thus a gaping hole in our history of the genre: the question of how we got from early Du Fay to Josquin has gone unanswered.[2]

The second problem is one of definition. How do we decide which fifteenth-century compositions are motets? Contemporary definitions of the term are extremely vague and there is little scholarly consensus in the twentieth century on the nature and function of the fifteenth-century motet: the boundary with

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521473772 - The Motet in the Age of Du Fay
Julie E. Cumming
Excerpt
More information

liturgical music is especially problematic.[3] At one end of the spectrum are the scholars who use "motet" loosely as a catch-all term for the many kinds of Latin-texted polyphonic music other than the Mass; on the other end are the scholars who treat the "motet" as a residual category, containing only pieces without pre-existent liturgical texts (i.e. with new texts, or pre-existent texts whose original genre or function is difficult to identify).[4] The closest thing to a definition of the motet in terms of shared characteristics – a through-composed composition with a sacred Latin text – is both too broad and too narrow: many pieces answering to this definition are not motets (such as Mass movements or Vespers antiphon settings), while some fifteenth-century motets have secular or vernacular texts. Even when we limit ourselves to pieces in motet sections of generically organized manuscripts such as Bologna Q15 we find a bewildering variety of styles, textures, and text types. The problem is compounded by the transformation of the genre: a definition that applies to one decade may not apply to the next.

If we try to define the motet in terms of function the problems are just as great.[5] The little evidence we have suggests that motets were used in numerous contexts, almost none of them liturgically prescribed: as filler during Mass or at Vespers; for special devotional services for the Virgin Mary; during processions or while welcoming visiting dignitaries; or as recreational music for voices and instruments to be performed in the home. In the sixteenth century, and surely before, motets were performed during dinner in the papal chambers.[6] Part of the genre's *raison d'être* seems to have been a kind of functional indeterminism which makes clear definition almost impossible.

The transformation of the motet and the difficulty of defining it lead to other problems. The failure to understand the changes in the motet is a failure to understand central issues of music history in the fifteenth century such as the role of English music, the development of homogeneous four-voice textures, and the expanding role of polyphony. The lack of a coherent definition of the genre makes it almost impossible to interpret individual works: without a basis for comparison, extensive knowledge of repertory, and a set of generic expectations we cannot tell if a work is normal or unusual, innovative or traditional, central or peripheral. Nor can we identify its field of reference – to the history of the genre, to other genres and to specific compositions.

In attempting to solve these problems I have drawn on ideas from a variety of disciplines; my basic methodology is laid out in Part I (chapters 1–3). In thinking about problems of definition I have turned to category theory in the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521473772 - The Motet in the Age of Du Fay
Julie E. Cumming
Excerpt
More information

fields of cognitive psychology and linguistics (chapter 1). In thinking about change and transformation over time I have turned to concepts deriving from Darwinian evolution, especially the ideas of descent with modification and of selection pressures (chapter 1). In thinking about genre and interpretation I have turned to literary criticism (chapters 1 and 2). I have also considered evidence about the motet from fifteenth-century sources: treatises, archival documents, and music manuscripts (chapter 3). My approach centers on the idea of the subgenre. While a coherent definition of the genre as a whole is impossible, it is possible to sort the genre into identifiable subgenres (see Table C.1 and "Notes on the index of works" for a complete list). The subgenres are categories that can be structured in different ways. Tracing the origins, extinctions, and evolution of the subgenres allows us to track the transformation of the genre as a whole over the course of the century. At the same time, the subgenre provides a set of generic expectations and a field of reference for the individual work, allowing us to identify its generic references, interpret its meaning and tone, and position it in the genre hierarchy.

The bulk of the book, therefore, is devoted to establishing and discussing the various subgenres of the motet. I discuss many individual works in some detail, both as examples of their subgenres and as subjects for interpretation. Many of these works are little known, and some have never before been published in reliable modern editions; when space allows, I include complete transcriptions. In Part II (chapters 4–7) I deal with the first third of the fifteenth century, and focus on the contents of the motet section of Bologna Q15 (*c.* 1420–1435). In Part III (chapters 8–12) I treat the second and third quarters of the century, and focus on the major mid-century sources for the motet: the Trent Codices (*c.* 1429–1477) and Modena X.1.11 (*c.* 1448). I have compared these repertories with the motets in the other major contemporary manuscripts. I have therefore considered virtually the complete surviving repertory of motets copied during the first three-quarters of the fifteenth century, for a total of over four hundred compositions (those mentioned by name in the book are listed in the "Index of Works").[7] The result is a detailed portrait of the evolution and transformation of the motet over Du Fay's lifetime. The portrait includes an account of some of the internal and external forces that may have influenced the transformation of the motet and of fifteenth-century music more generally. At the same time, the book provides a method for the interpretation of individual works and some of the background knowledge required to apply it.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521473772 - The Motet in the Age of Du Fay
Julie E. Cumming
Excerpt
More information

Part I:

Models and methods

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521473772 - The Motet in the Age of Du Fay
Julie E. Cumming
Excerpt
More information

1 Approaches and analogies

The motet in the fifteenth century poses problems of categorization, genre and history. What kind of a category is the motet in the fifteenth century? How can a genre have any communicative function when it is so amorphous? How can we explain its transformation over the course of the century? While searching for an approach or methodology that would allow me to deal with these problems, I read Alastair Fowler's useful discussion of literary genre theory, *Kinds of Literature* (1982). I was struck in particular by one passage:

> Just as "lyric" has assimilated other short poetic kinds, making them all subgenres of lyric, so "the novel" has assimilated other kinds of prose fiction. A genre so comprehensive can have but a weak unitary force. Indeed the novel has largely ceased to function as a kind [genre] in the ordinary way.[1]

"Yes!" I said – "that's just like the motet" – and I immediately adapted Fowler's passage to make it apply:

> The motet in the fifteenth century assimilated many of the kinds of Latin-texted polyphony. A genre so comprehensive can have but a weak unitary force. Indeed the motet largely ceased to function as a genre in the ordinary way.

Fowler's quotation continues:

> Its minimal specification has even been stated as "an extended piece of prose fiction" – a specification in which external form appears, but only as "extended" and "prose." Within this enormous field, the novel in a stronger sense – the verisimilar novel of Austen and Thackeray, which many would consider the central tradition – is now only one of several equipollent forms.

This could be adapted as well:

> In its minimal specification, as stated by Tinctoris – "a composition of moderate length, to which words of any kind are set, but more often those of a sacred nature" – external form

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521473772 - The Motet in the Age of Du Fay
Julie E. Cumming
Excerpt
More information

appears, but only as "moderate length" and "often sacred." Within this enormous field, the motet in a stronger sense – the motet with long-note cantus firmus, as in Vitry, Du Fay, and even Josquin, which many would consider the central tradition – became only one of several equipollent forms.

In such a situation, says Fowler, "we find the status of subgenres . . . enhanced."[2] He goes on to discuss the origins of the novel:

> For the novel has ramifying roots in earlier fiction and nonfiction: epic, romance, picaresque, biography, history, journal, letter, exemplary tale, novella, to name only the most obvious. These filiations have persisted in the developed novel, giving rise in some instances to distinct subgenres. But the subgenres have only very gradually been acknowledged by critical thought.[3]

Once again this can be transformed into a description of the fifteenth-century motet:

> It has ramifying roots in earlier motet types and in other genres: in the French isorhythmic motet, in English and Italian motet types, in liturgical chant settings, Mass Ordinary movements, the English cantilena, even the chanson. These filiations persisted in the later fifteenth-century motet, giving rise in some instances to distinct subgenres. But the subgenres have barely been acknowledged by critical thought.

The analogy with the novel tells us that the status of the subgenre is enhanced in the motet, and takes on some of the normal characteristics of genre, such as recognizable external form and a complex of associations and expectations.[4] In order to make generic sense of the motet we must first identify its subgenres, and subgenre identification will be the center of this study. It is at the level of the subgenre that identification and interpretation of the "genre" become possible; as we learn to recognize the different types of motet, we will also develop associations and expectations to bring to individual works.

Fowler implies that one way to sort out subgenres is to trace their "ramifying roots" or "filiations." The roots of a subgenre can also be understood as its ancestors or forebears; this image in turn suggests analogies with a family, or, more generally, with biology and the "descent of species." In thinking about the historical processes that genres undergo, Fowler finds biological analogies illuminating, as do I. Many literary critics emphasize the role of generic mixture in generic change; we could compare this process to marriage and procreation, or to hybridization.[5]

Biological and evolutionary analogies for generic change have frequently been attacked in the field of literary criticism.[6] Fowler was almost alone in defending them until recently, when David Fishelov came out with a spirited

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521473772 - The Motet in the Age of Du Fay
Julie E. Cumming
Excerpt
More information

defense of both family and biological analogies for genre in his *Metaphors of Genre: The Role of Analogies in Genre Theory* (1993). Fishelov begins with a defense of analogy and metaphor in theoretical or scientific discourse in general; he stresses the fact that metaphor is fundamental to all cognitive activity.[7] He then treats four different metaphors for genre: biological, family, institutional, and speech-act. He advocates a "pluralistic approach" to genre studies, in which different metaphors or analogies are applied to different aspects of genre theory.[8] The family analogy can help in the recognition of "the plural nature" of categories and genres, and in the idea of a generic heritage passing from parents to children.[9] The biological analogy is particularly appropriate to "questions of generic evolution and interrelationship, the complex process of the emergence of new genres on the literary scene, and the decline of old ones."[10]

Categories have structure

Another path also leads us to biological or evolutionary analogies: new approaches to the problem of categorization. When we look at a mass of data (such as motets), and try to make sense of them by sorting them into subgenres, we tend to group them into traditional categories defined by a list of necessary and sufficient features. This classical or Aristotelian approach to categorization is deeply ingrained in our culture, not only as an essential feature of logical operations such as the syllogism, but also as a folk concept of what a category is. The classical category is like a box: it has a clear boundary, so objects belong either inside or outside, and there is no opportunity for gradation within the box. Features are binary: an entity either possesses the feature, or it does not. The classical category has no internal structure: there is no best example of the category, since every object satisfying the list of features is an equally good example.[11] For some kinds of things this kind of category works very well: even and odd numbers, for example, or chemical elements. But for many kinds of things it does not, including the motet and its subgenres.

Over the past few decades scholars in a variety of disciplines (including cognitive psychology, linguistics, and genre theory) have begun to search for a new approach to classification. They are concerned both with the structure of categories (such as words in a language) and the way categories are created, perceived, or processed by the human mind.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521473772 - The Motet in the Age of Du Fay
Julie E. Cumming
Excerpt
More information

For many terms or categories there is no list of necessary and sufficient features that covers all the objects understood by most people to be in that category. Take "tall" for example, or "boot": these are categories with fuzzy boundaries, that merge into other categories such as "medium sized" or "shoe."[12] Wittgenstein recognized this problem in his famous discussion of "games" and proposed a type of category characterized by "family resemblance":

> For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. . . . I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc., overlap and criss-cross in the same way.[13]

This passage has sometimes been treated rather uncritically, for if the concept is carried too far, then anything can be said to resemble anything.[14] If classical categories are too limiting, Wittgenstein's family resemblance categories are too loose. Nevertheless, the concept of a set of features, not all of which are required for category membership, is very stimulating. The term "family resemblance" also suggests a source for the similarities among the members of a category: actual genetic relationships.[15] This implies that one of the conditions of membership in a category would be relationship, and in particular common parents or ancestors. Works that appear quite different (with few attributes in common) could then be understood as members of the same genre (or subgenre) if one could demonstrate common parentage or ancestry.[16] A work could also be descended from two different "families" with features derived from both. This brings us back to what Fowler calls "ramifying roots": genre history usually consists of tracing the "lineage" or "ancestry" of a work, genre, or subgenre to earlier precedents and models. From now on my usage of the term "family resemblance category" (unlike Wittgenstein's) will involve this conception of relationship or descent.

It also appears that there is a human tendency to structure categories into typical and less typical members. The pioneer in this area is the cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch, who showed that for many people a robin is a more typical bird than an ostrich is, or a chair is a better example of furniture than a magazine rack or a television.[17] The best examples of any particular category are known as prototypes. Rosch proved this with a series of different experiments on the structure of categories. She asked her subjects to rank to what extent entities were good examples of a category on a scale of one to

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521473772 - The Motet in the Age of Du Fay
Julie E. Cumming
Excerpt
More information

seven; she also gave a category, listed an object, and timed the response time; and she requested examples for certain categories. In every case there was clear correlation: prototypical examples of a category were ranked first, the response time was shortest for prototypical examples, and they were the first objects listed for the category. Even classical categories such as "even numbers" demonstrate this "prototype effect": the number 2 is perceived as "more even" than 10, 1,000 as "more even" than 1,008.[18] Rosch's work provides a new model of human cognition in which categories in the mind are internally structured, moving out from central prototypical members toward marginal and less typical members. She combines prototype theory with Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance as follows:

> Members of a category come to be viewed as prototypical of the category as a whole in proportion to the extent to which they bear a family resemblance to (have attributes which overlap those of) other members of the category. Conversely, items viewed as most prototypical of one category will be those with least family resemblance to or membership in other categories.[19]

Scholars concerned with category and genre theory have found this combination of family resemblance and prototype theory very powerful.[20] Fishelov points out that it leads to

> the perception of genres neither as rigid and unified categories, nor as conglomerations of texts, randomly collected, sharing merely a loose network of similarities. Rather, literary genres would be perceived as structured categories, with a "hard core" consisting of prototypical members, characterized by their relatively high degree of resemblance to each other.[21]

Marie-Laure Ryan uses another metaphor:

> This approach invites us to think of genres as clubs imposing a certain number of conditions for membership, but tolerating as quasi-members those individuals who can fulfill only some of the requirements, and who do not seem to fit into any other club. As these quasi-members become more numerous, the conditions for admission may be modified, so that they, too, will become full members. Once admitted to the club, however, a member remains a member, even if he cannot satisfy the new rules of admission.[22]

This is an especially appealing formation, because it allows us to talk about the history of a genre: admission of enough "quasi-members" can fundamentally change the rules for admission, and thus the basic characteristics of the genre. Some aspects of the transformation of the fifteenth-century motet can be described in exactly these terms: English cantilenas (such as the three-voice English antiphon settings in the motet section of Modena X.1.11) were first admitted as "quasi-members" to the "motet" club; as they became more and more numerous, they were admitted as full members, and some of their

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521473772 - The Motet in the Age of Du Fay
Julie E. Cumming
Excerpt
More information

characteristics (a single top voice, use of a single devotional text) became features of the genre as a whole.

Another kind of prototype/family resemblance category has one or more prestigious works (e.g. Virgil's *Aeneid*) that serve as exemplars or prototypes.[23] Additional members of the category may imitate different aspects of the prototype and thus bear little resemblance to each other; they will all be related, however, since they "descend" from the same exemplar.

Category theory thus tells us that we need not be limited to one kind of category: different genres can be structured in different ways.[24] Some genres will be classical categories; some will be organized on the basis of "family relationship"; prototype categories can have single or multiple prototypical members, clear or fuzzy boundaries, or any combination of the above. A single work may sit on the boundary between two categories with fuzzy boundaries, or combine features from two categories normally viewed as distinct.

So what is the status of these categories? Are they inherent in the data (the motets)? Are they simply imposed by category makers (composers, audiences, or modern scholars)? My answer is that categories function in the space between the data and the categorizers – creators and audience, then and now.[25] People are category makers: there is so much data out there that unless we classify things we will be drowned in detail. Categories help us decide what to attend to and what to ignore; they articulate the relationships among different things; they allow us to use our past experience of members of a category in dealing with any new member.[26] The features of an object leading a category maker to recognize or classify an object one way rather than another are real. Features might be observable physical properties, similarity to another object or objects, or facts about the history of the object or its function; but unless they have some real connection to the object, the category assignment will fail to be useful. In this sense, then, the category is inherent in the object, though this is not to say that the object could not be categorized differently by another person, or the same person under different circumstances.

Let us turn to a more concrete example of how this could work. A listener turns on the radio and hears a piece of music; immediately she recognizes it as being a Classical piano sonata that she has never heard before. This process of "recognition" is an act of classification. How might that classification take place? First of all she recognizes the sound of the piano. This is so obvious to

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org