

The Motet in the Age of Du Fay

Julie E. Cumming



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Contents

<i>List of tables</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of musical examples</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Notes to the reader</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
Part I Models and methods	5
1 Approaches and analogies	7
2 Subgenre, interpretation, and the generic repertory	24
3 Fifteenth-century uses of the term “motet”	41
Part II Motets in the early fifteenth century: the case of Bologna Q15	63
4 The motet section of Bologna Q15 and its ramifying roots	65
5 A new hybrid subgenre: the cut-circle motet	99
6 Other new hybrid subgenres	125
7 The motet in the early fifteenth century: evolution and interpretation	147
Part III Motets in the mid-fifteenth century: the case of the Trent Codices	165
8 Motets in the Trent Codices: establishing the boundaries	167

<i>Contents</i>	
9	English and continental cantilena-style motets 185
10	Motets with a tenor cantus firmus <i>c.</i> 1430–1450 206
11	Freely composed four-voice writing in transition 228
12	The four-voice motet <i>c.</i> 1450–1475 254
	Conclusion 288
	<i>Appendix: Widely disseminated motets</i> 304
	<i>Notes</i> 306
	<i>Bibliography of books and articles</i> 357
	<i>Modern editions of music</i> 374
	<i>Sources and sigla</i> 379
	<i>Notes on the index of works</i> 382
	<i>Abbreviations for subgenre identifications</i> 382
	<i>Index of works</i> 384
	<i>General index</i> 400

Tables

2.1 Relative voice ranges for the motet and their generic associations	<i>pages</i> 30
3.1 Settings of antiphon texts in Modena X.1.11	50
3.2 Fifteenth-century manuscripts containing more than five motets	56–7
4.1 Subgenres of the motet in Bologna Q15	69
4.2 Italian motets in Q15	72–3
4.3 Subjects of motet texts from fourteenth-century Italy (before Ciconia)	81
4.4 French isorhythmic motets in Q15	83–4
4.5 Subjects of Latin-texted motets from fourteenth-century France	85
4.6 English cantilenas in Q15	86
4.7 Motets and cantilenas in the Old Hall Manuscript	89
5.1 Cut-circle motets in Q15	110–11
5.2 Three related works by Du Fay	120
6.1 Declamation motets in Q15	126
6.2 Continental cantilenas in Q15	131
6.3 Unus–chorus motets in Q15	133
6.4 Retrospective double-discantus motets in Q15	135
6.5 Devotional double-discantus motets in Q15	139
6.6 Other double-discantus motets in Q15	142
6.7 Borderline motets in Q15	143
6.8 <i>Song of Songs</i> settings in Q15	145
7.1 Representation of the Q15 subgenres in other contemporary manuscripts	149
8.1 Dates and provenance for the Trent Codices	168

List of tables

8.2 Liturgical genres in the Trent Codices	173
8.3 Cantiones and Leisen in the Trent Codices	175
8.4 Secular contrafacta in the Trent Codices	178–9
8.5 Sacred contrafacta in the Trent Codices	180
8.6 Subgenres of the motet in the Trent Codices and Modena X.1.11	182
9.1 English cantilenas in the Trent Codices and Modena X.1.11	187–9
9.2 Three-voice continental cantilena-style motets in the Trent Codices and Modena X.1.11	196–7
10.1 Four-voice isorhythmic motets in the Trent Codices and Modena X.1.11 with triplum and motetus voices in the same range	207
10.2 Four-voice isorhythmic motets with unequal triplum and motetus	209
10.3 Three-voice tenor motets	216
11.1 Double-discantus motets copied in mid-century	229
11.2 Transitional four-voice non-isorhythmic motets with a single discantus	232
11.3 Constructing a four-voice texture	247
12.1 Four-voice song motets	255
12.2 Tenor motets	258–9
12.3 Chant-paraphrase motets	267
12.4 Hybrids of the tenor and chant-paraphrase motets	271
12.5 Freely composed motets	279
C.1 Subgenres, with their antecedents and descendants	298–301
C.2 Genres outside the motet that influenced the motet	302
C.3 Map of motet subgenres and other related genres over time	303

Musical examples

4.1	Cristoforus de Monte, <i>Dominicus a dono</i>	pages 74–5
4.2	Cadence types in three and four voices	76
4.3	John Forest, <i>Alma redemptoris mater</i>	92–3
5.1	Johannes de Sarto, <i>Ave mater; O Maria</i>	106–7
5.2	Characteristic opening for cut-circle motets with F and C finals	112–13
5.3	Florid melismas in cut-circle motets	114
5.4	Repeated-note figure in imitation in cut-circle motets	116
5.5	Power, <i>Salve regina</i> , opening, mm. 1–21	123
6.1	Arnold de Lantins, <i>Tota pulchra es</i>	128–9
6.2	Salinis, <i>Ihesu salvator seculi</i>	137
6.3	Lymburgia, cadences from <i>Tota pulchra es</i>	140
9.1	Du Fay, <i>Alma redemptoris II</i> , mm. 18–26	198
9.2	Du Fay, <i>Ave regina celorum II</i> , mm. 62–81	199
9.3	Touront, <i>Compangant omnes</i>	203–4
10.1	Contrasting introitus sections	210
10.2	Dunstaple, <i>Veni/Veni</i> , mm. 121–35	211
10.3	Sarto, <i>Romanorum rex</i> , mm. 25–35	214
10.4	Anon., <i>Regali ex progenie/T: Sancta Maria</i>	218–19
11.1	Du Fay, <i>O proles/O sidus</i> , mm. 79–83	234
11.2	Du Fay, <i>O proles/O sidus</i> , mm. 14–26	235
11.3	Anon., <i>O pulcherrima</i> , mm. 1–24, three- and four-voice versions	238
11.4	Anon., <i>Anima mea</i> , mm. 7–21, three- and four-voice versions	240
11.5	Puylois, <i>Flos de spina</i>	241–3
11.6	Du Fay, <i>Ave regina celorum III</i> , mm. 138–49	246
11.7	Anon., <i>Missa Caput</i> , Kyrie, mm. 117–33	250

List of music examples

12.1	Anon., <i>Perpulcra Sion filia</i> , tenor	266
12.2	Touront, <i>Recordare</i> , mm. 1–14	268
12.3	Touront, <i>Recordare</i> , mm. 30–53	269
12.4	Anon., <i>Regina celi</i> , mm. 44–50	270
12.5	Anon., <i>Ave beatissima</i> , mm. 55–152	272–3
12.6	Anon., <i>Vidi speciosam, secunda pars</i>	275
12.7	Anon., <i>Gaude regina</i> , mm. 50–4	283

I 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

Models and methods

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

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.

Models and methods

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

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

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

us that we don't really realize that it is an act of classification. Is "piano sound" represented in her mind by a single exemplar, a single piano? It might be, if she had only heard one piano before. But probably she has a more abstract construct of piano sound, one that can encompass the sounds of all the pianos (uprights, grands, in tune, out of tune) played by all the pianists (beginners, virtuosos, bangers, etc.) she has ever heard. If this piano sounds significantly different from any piano she has heard previously, then she might alter the abstract representation a bit to include this new sound possibility.

Having recognized the sound of the piano, and that she is hearing music (rather than, say, a piano being tuned), she has narrowed the field to the category "piano music." Features of the piece – Alberti bass, regularity of phrase lengths, and so forth – indicate to her that this is a Classical work. Again, if she rarely listened to classical music, or had never taken a music history class, she might have a single exemplar or prototype, and think "that sounds like that piece I heard on the radio last week." If our listener is knowledgeable about classical music, she will compare this piece in her mind to some kind of abstract representation of the category classical music, a representation that might be structured in a variety of different ways.²⁷ That representation might have been acquired unconsciously, and would probably be difficult to articulate (our ability to explain how we recognize things, even everyday things like faces, is poor). She might be a music student, or teacher, and be able to describe in part what about it sounds Classical. Still, even for professionals, it is often difficult to articulate exactly what it is that leads us to a particular identification or classification, even if we are absolutely certain we are correct.

On hearing an unfamiliar work the listener works her way down through a set of gradually more specific categories. A novice will stop near the top, a specialist will go on to determine that she is hearing (say) the development section from a first movement of a sonata by Clementi probably written in the 1790s. In either case, category membership is determined by comparison of the work to some kind of mental representation or representations: either the memory of individual work(s) or abstractions ("piano," "Classical") derived from numerous past experiences.

Now let us assume the work on the radio was peculiar in some way – a fantasy, not a sonata; or borderline Romantic; or an unusual slow movement. Then instead of "that sounds like" she could say "that sounds sort of like"; or she could say "that sounds like both x and y" (where x and y are different

categories: fantasy and sonata, Classical and Romantic). “Sort of like” is what is known in linguistics as a “hedge”: a word or phrase that is used to express a degree of category membership.²⁸ “Both x and y” indicates that a piece sits on the fuzzy boundary between two categories (Classical and Romantic) or that it has features characteristic of two different genres (fantasy and sonata).²⁹ She might then wait for the radio announcer to tell her what it is, and adjust and expand her set of categories accordingly;³⁰ or she might listen to the work with two sets of generic expectations in mind.

The act of classification is the first way the listener interacts with the piece. Having made a genre identification the listener now knows what to listen for: the transition and second theme, the repeat of the exposition, the drama of the development. The genre identification serves an important function, and guides the subsequent experience of the work. The category/genre “Classical piano sonata” is a real category that exists outside the mind of the listener (in part because composers intended the works to belong to the category); it has clear, even if fuzzy, boundaries, and more and less typical members. There are marginal cases that sometimes belong to more than one category: pieces composed at the boundaries of a time period (Galant? early Romantic?), or pieces that don’t fit the sonata mold very well. Thus it is a graded prototype category, in which some members are more central than others.

How does this work for the composer? Let us take Du Fay as an example, since he will figure largely below. Du Fay sits down to write a piece. He would have begun with several of the parameters in mind: an occasion, or a text, or a moment in a church service, or a particular group of performers. When he wrote *Ecclesie militantis* he was probably asked to write an especially grand piece in honor of Eugenius IV, to be performed by the papal chapel on a certain date.³¹ Under those circumstances Du Fay would think about grand occasional pieces he had heard (and written himself); most of them belonged to the subgenre of the motet now known as the isorhythmic motet. Some highly admired works might be central, or prototypical, leading him to say to himself “I want to write a piece sort of like X” or “like X & Y” where X & Y are other motets. Or he might have a more abstract internal representation of isorhythmic motet that included both specific features he could articulate to himself and some less-easily expressible qualities of melodic style, harmony, and counterpoint. Thus part of the process of composing is imitation, making sure that the piece meets the conditions for membership in the club. But in most cases there is also an opposing force: the drive to write a work that differs

in various ways from previous works. In this case Du Fay wanted to express Eugenius's claim to the tradition of papal power. He therefore wanted to write a bigger, grander piece than ever before; he also wanted to write a piece that referred to its own generic traditions. By writing a piece that looked backward towards its own history, Du Fay suggested that Eugenius had similar ties to the history and tradition of the papacy. Du Fay did this in *Ecclesie militantis* by taking traditional features of the isorhythmic motet, such as polytextuality and isorhythm, and exaggerating them: the work has three different texts instead of two, two tenors instead of one, five voices instead of four, plus an exceptionally complex rhythmic organization. This is not, then, a typical isorhythmic motet: it is in fact extremely unusual. But it is clearly "related" to the isorhythmic motet – all of its features can be understood as related to (or descended from) features of the traditional model. One way of expressing that relationship is to describe the structure of the category "isorhythmic motet" as a prototype or family resemblance category. The features of this unusual motet then become part of the ongoing definition of the category.

These examples have brought out a number of important points. Recognition and classification are essentially the same activity. Recognition often involves phrases such as "it sounds like" or "it sounds sort of like." These phrases have to do with similarity. Similarity does not lend itself to the binary either/or choices of classical categories: it is better represented by graded prototype or family resemblance categories. The category or mental representation that we compare things to in the process of recognition consists of an abstraction that includes features derived from one or many different works. Both listener and composer work with essentially the same kind of mental representation of a category or genre: the listener says "that sounds like a [genre]"; the composer says "I'm going to write a [genre]" or "I'm going to write a piece like [those English pieces I heard last week]" or "like [specific piece]."

When a composer sits down to write a piece belonging to a particular genre, he may not have a conscious list of generic features (or not a very long one), but that doesn't mean that a list could not be made. In fact, making such a list (for listeners or beginning composers) is a good way of speeding up the process of genre acquisition.³² We are all beginners when it comes to the fifteenth-century motet; while lists of features are never the whole story, since they cannot hope to match the expert's complex internal category representation and graded similarity judgments, they will assist our genre (and sub-genre) acquisition.

Listeners and composers thus have mental representations of genres which are invoked (often unconsciously) as part of the process of recognition and of creation. Mental representations (i.e. categories) are often organized in a hierarchy, and we can work down the hierarchy towards more and more specific identifications. These mental representations can also be internally structured in a variety of ways. Sometimes a work shares a list of necessary and sufficient features with an abstraction derived from multiple examples (classical category). In other cases a work's membership in a genre is measured by its similarity to a central or prototypical member (prototype category). A work may share some, but not all, attributes with a mental representation, and be related to or descended from the genre as a whole, or specific works within it (family resemblance category). A work may also belong to more than one category. We need to be alive to all these possibilities in our investigation of the motet and its many subgenres.

Generic evolution

What does it mean "to be descended from" a genre or category? Every new work is necessarily descended from previous works in the same genre (or, in the case of generic mixture, from more than one genre), in as much as every work is created in relation to past works, on the one hand, and every work is perceived or recognized in relation to past works, on the other. This is almost a tautology or a truism. It does, however, point to the engine behind generic change: the pressure for novelty within a tradition. The concepts of relationship and descent also lead directly to our next analogy: evolution and natural selection. In thinking about categories, and their role in creation and recognition, we have been concentrating on the function of the genre inside the mind. With Darwin we look as well at the fate of the work once it has left its creator, and the way in which that fate affects the origin, development, and change of the genre or subgenre as a whole.

In defending evolutionary analogies for genre Fishelov points out that their critics often mix models and refer to the life span of the individual organism or to Lamarckian adaptation rather than to true Darwinian evolution and natural selection. He finds the careful application of the Darwinian selection model to be much more fruitful for genre studies than the mixed models.³³ In order to understand the analogy between generic change and Darwinian evolution, it is thus essential to have a clear understanding of Darwin's basic

theory, which is all too often misunderstood. Because eloquent recent explanations of evolution (by Richard Dawkins, for example) are necessarily informed by knowledge of genetics, they are not directly relevant to my analogy with the motet.³⁴ I have chosen Darwin's own presentation of evolution and natural selection because of its power and authority, and because the actual mechanisms of inheritance were still unknown to Darwin, making his version peculiarly suitable to our problem.³⁵

Darwin's use of the word "species" also differed from the technical biological definition used today. Modern biologists define species as a reproductive community: all the members of a species can mate and produce fertile offspring.³⁶ For Darwin species meant no more than "a set of individuals closely resembling each other . . . it does not essentially differ from the term variety, which is given to less distinct and more fluctuating forms."³⁷ His persistent claim was that forms of life "can be classed in groups under groups," although the boundaries of these groups were essentially arbitrary.³⁸ The arbitrariness of Darwin's presentation is especially applicable to genre, since there are no necessary limitations on generic mixture or interbreeding.

Darwin's theory of evolution was first fully presented in *The Origin of Species* published in 1859. The problem that Darwin posed himself was one of categorization and classification: what is the relationship between species and varieties, and are species fixed? He first had to free himself of the Aristotelian habit of seeing species as classical categories; he had to demonstrate that change is continuous. Darwin's concern thus speaks very directly to our problem of generic formation and change.

In *The Origin of Species* Darwin first set out to show that species were not fixed, "immutable productions . . . separately created," but that they "descended, like varieties, from other species."³⁹ Having demonstrated this, largely by means of a "careful study of domesticated animals and of cultivated plants," he then went on to show "how the innumerable species of the world have been modified, so as to acquire that perfection of structure and coadaptation which most justly excites our imagination."⁴⁰ Modification is achieved by means of "Natural Selection": given the "Struggle for Existence among all organic beings,"⁴¹ "individuals having any advantage . . . over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind," and "variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed."⁴² The organisms which are selected – i.e. survive to reproduce – are those better adapted to their specific conditions of life. A change in conditions will lead to

Models and methods

the selection (survival and reproduction) of different organisms.⁴³ Natural selection will thus lead, on the one hand, to extinction of some species and varieties, and on the other to “divergence of character.”⁴⁴ “Thus the small differences distinguishing varieties of the same species, will steadily tend to increase till they come to equal the greater differences between species of the same genus, or even of distinct genera.”⁴⁵ Darwin concludes his chapter on natural selection with an extended analogy.

The affinities of all the beings of the same class have sometimes been represented by a great tree. . . . The green and budding twigs may represent existing species; and those produced during each former year may represent the long succession of extinct species. . . . The limbs divided into great branches, and these into lesser and lesser branches, were themselves once, when the tree was small, budding twigs; and this connexion of the former and present buds by ramifying branches may well represent the classification of all extinct and living species in groups subordinate to groups. . . . So by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications.⁴⁶

The “ramifications” of Darwin’s Tree of Life recall Fowler’s “ramifying roots”: in both natural and generic evolution, the “former and present” are linked by means of constant descent with variation. Darwin’s formulation makes clear that there is a powerful connection between variations in the environment and those ramifications that survive.

Analogies with genre

Darwin’s basic idea has been extremely productive in a wide variety of fields. It can also serve as a stimulating model for generic change and for the problems of categorization and classification of the motet.⁴⁷ The analogy goes like this.

The motet is the organism; the genre is the species; the subgenre is the variety. The natural environment is equivalent to the cultural environment. New motets are “generated” from earlier ones in ways that guarantee both similarity and variety. Motets vary, as organisms do: no two organisms are the same, and each new composition is different from its predecessors. The new motets that are received favorably by the cultural environment – by performers, patrons, audiences – survive and reproduce; those that fail to thrive and are poorly received are not copied into repertory manuscripts or imitated by other composers (most of these works are probably lost to us today). The offspring of a motet can be either copies or imitations. Copies are literal

reproductions: a single work is copied into multiple manuscripts. Imitations are new works that resemble the first work (this kind of reproduction is more analogous to biological reproduction). A work will be reproduced if the original motet is perceived as successful: if there is a good fit between the work and its cultural environment.⁴⁸ A new subgenre (variety) results from the production of a work markedly different from previous works that serves in turn as a model for other works like it, or possibly from the interbreeding of two different subgenres.

But where does the composer belong in this schema? If we take as our model the subset of natural selection known as artificial selection – conscious manipulation of the environment by humans in order to create varieties according to desired specifications – then the composer is the breeder. “Variation under domestication,” as Darwin called it, involves selecting plants or animals with certain characteristics and allowing them to reproduce, while “weeding out” any without the desired characteristics. In the first chapter of *The Origin of Species* Darwin uses the breeding of domestic animals to demonstrate variation, and he spends pages and pages documenting the extremes to which such variation can go: “Breeders habitually speak of an animal’s organization as something quite plastic, which they can model as they please.”⁴⁹ Composers, like breeders, select the features that they wish to propagate from the available options, reproducing some traits, introducing new varieties, and forming new hybrids. Like a breeder, the composer takes over some of nature’s role, manipulating the environment in order to select for specific features. As Darwin comments, “one of the most remarkable features in our domesticated races is that we see in them adaptation, not indeed to the animal’s or plant’s own good, but to man’s use or fancy.”⁵⁰ The works of the composer/breeder are, however, subject to a subsequent selection process as well: that of the external world, the “market” or the cultural environment. Some of the works will be well received, others will not; as the composer/breeder becomes aware of this it will influence his future works.

Analogy need not mean identity, however; and there are important differences between biological and cultural evolution. In culture, unlike biology, there are few rigid limitations on breeding: it is possible to combine features from any two different genres (to combine, through breeding, features from two different species, even from different genera) and to take as “parent” a work from several generations back.⁵¹ Composers are not limited to the

Models and methods

chance combinations of hereditary traits appearing in the offspring of two parents; they can pick and choose their traits from a wide range of “parents.” The offspring of a work can be either physical copies or imitations, and we will explore the extent to which these two kinds of reproduction are inter-related.

Nevertheless, the analogy is productive and leads to some fruitful and unexpected implications. Geographical isolation, for example, is likely to lead to “divergence of character” and the development of new species or varieties (genres or subgenres). In Darwin’s travels in the *Beagle*, he studied the flora and fauna of the Galapagos Islands. He discovered that while the finches on all the islands resembled each other and resembled finches on the Latin American mainland, they had developed different kinds of beaks on each of the different islands. The beaks were an adaptation to the kinds of food available on each island.⁵² Motets could evolve in just the same way to fit the cultural “niches” available to them in different regions. The coming together of previously separated varieties is likely to lead to new hybrids. New varieties can be developed to suit the desires and cultural practices of patrons and audience.

The evolutionary analogy thus accounts for the variety of kinds of motet in a way that is responsive to cultural and political developments. Subgenres can be explained by their antecedents or ancestors; new subgenres are formed by the coming together of previously separated or distinct varieties and genres; subgenres that survive are those that are able to respond to the changing tastes and needs of patrons and audiences. To tell the story of the motet in the fifteenth century is to tell the story of the creation, evolution, and extinction of the various subgenres.

The evolution of the medieval motet

Before we turn to the fifteenth-century motet, let us see how the analogy works for a genre whose history is relatively well known: the medieval motet. The facts I present are uncontroversial; only my manner of presentation is unusual.

We begin with the aboriginal motet: the thirteenth-century motet in France. It generally had three voices: triplum and motetus over a slower-moving pre-existent tenor. Triplum and motetus each had its own text, in Latin or in French. Imagine that the motet was a species of bird on an island,

called France. (I will call the different regions islands, to emphasize their cultural separation.) We could call it a finch, after Darwin's finches. But we want a bird that is bred by humans and that undergoes "variation under domestication." One of Darwin's prime examples was the pigeon, which like the motet developed an astonishing variety of forms and was put to many different uses. In the nineteenth century different strains of pigeon were developed for eating (the squab), for communication (the carrier pigeon) and for aesthetic enjoyment (the pouter, the Jacobin, the fantail).⁵³

So let us think of our motet as a kind of pigeon, cultivated by pigeon breeders (composers and performers), and consumed, used and admired by pigeon fanciers (other musicians, patrons, audience). It first emerged as a distinct species in France in the early thirteenth century, and it flourished there: breeders put some effort into developing different varieties, and there was consistent demand from fanciers. Visitors from other islands sailed to France, liked the pigeons and brought some home to their own islands, England and Italy.⁵⁴ The climates and native flora in France, England and Italy were all a little different; the fanciers used the pigeons in different ways and valued different features in a good pigeon, so the breeders selected for the desired qualities. On each island only the pigeons with the appropriate qualities were allowed to reproduce, and only those that flourished in the native habitat did well. For a while contacts between France, England and Italy were rather limited; gradually the varieties of pigeon on the three islands grew different from each other, helped along by the breeding efforts of the French, English and Italians.

Having set up the analogy, let us continue the narrative by calling a motet a motet. It was during the fourteenth century that the different national varieties of motet developed in different directions. In France many features of the aboriginal motet continued into the fourteenth century. The pre-existent, rhythmically patterned tenor part persisted, but slowed down, while the triplum and motetus (still with their own texts) sped up. The motets also got bigger and more complex with the addition of a contratenor and the development of isorhythm. French-texted motets gradually died out, as a new French-texted species, the chanson, made its appearance, and took over the ecological niche formerly held by the French-texted motet; the new larger Latin-texted motet took on a life of its own. The motet fanciers – university-trained clerics and cathedral officials who admired and discussed motets at private gatherings – liked a learned, acerbic flavor. The motets they enjoyed

were characterized by complex isorhythmic schemes and Latin texts often filled with sardonic commentary on government and society.⁵⁵

English motets developed many distinctive features during the first half of the fourteenth century. The French-texted motets did poorly in England, while the Latin-texted motets, especially those with sacred subjects, flourished. (Motet fanciers on every island spoke Latin, but French-texted motets were valued highly only in France.) While the rhythmic layering of the French motet persisted, the use of cantus firmus was not an essential feature of the English motets. The motet fanciers seem to have been monks, who preferred a devotional flavor and bred their motets (and most other polyphony) for use in church: English motets generally had multi-purpose sacred texts, with no political or social allusions.⁵⁶ The importation of isorhythmic French motets in the second half of the century virtually wiped out the new English strain. Certain sub-breeds or varieties of French motet were preferred in England, however, and a certain amount of interbreeding went on.⁵⁷

Motets (or any other kind of written polyphony) do not seem to have been cultivated in Italy in the thirteenth century, and climatic conditions were such that there are few fossil remains of fourteenth-century Italian motets. From what we can see, however, Italian motets (like English ones) did not have pre-existent cantus firmi, but they retained the slow tenor and faster upper voices of the thirteenth-century motet. Isorhythm did not develop, but some motets were characterized by repetition of the rhythms of all the voices for the second half of the piece. Texts were usually laudatory, about doges, princes, bishops, or saints. Italians bred their motets for use at court or in church, usually in the context of some civic ceremony.⁵⁸

At the beginning of the fifteenth century conditions changed. England won a significant battle with France (the Battle of Agincourt, 1415) and occupied large portions of the country; English lords who took up residence in France brought music and musicians (motets and motet breeders) with them.⁵⁹ The urgent need to end the papal schism brought religious and political leaders from all over Europe together at the Council of Constance (1414–18); they also brought their musicians along.⁶⁰ Suddenly motet breeders (composers and performers) were brought together from all over. This brings us to the situation in the early fifteenth century, the starting place for this book.

The evolutionary analogy thus clarifies the motet's historical development. By the early fifteenth century there were many different varieties (subgenres) of the motet, many of them developed to suit the different tastes of the

French, English, and Italians. Although the various subgenres or varieties were different from each other, they all descended ultimately from the aboriginal thirteenth-century French motet. This makes the motet a good example of a family resemblance category: we can recognize the different national traditions of motet composition as belonging to the same genre or family because we know their history. Different features are prominent in different subgenres, varieties, or branches of the family. The ways in which these different subgenres interacted with each other and with other evolving genres, along with the pressures brought to bear on those interactions by subsequent political and cultural events, determined the history of the motet in the fifteenth century.