

Introduction

“Be still, noise and tumult of the world! Flee, anxiety, which gasps hoarse in the chest! Allow us to sing in the ritual and to make our measures equal!”¹ These are the initial demands of Loyset Compere in his mythologically inflected prayer motet for musicians, *Sile fragor*. While Compere dramatically silences the world and banishes anxieties, he also draws attention to the physicality of singing and to the mental acuity, musical training, and emotional commitment that it requires. In a similar vein Josquin Desprez ends the prima pars of his highly personal, acrostic-bearing Marian prayer motet, *Illibata dei virgo nutrix*, by asking “that our throats may call out to you with pure praises and may with zealous art shout: ‘ave!’”² The immediacy and physicality of these requests humanize the shadowy, indistinct figures of late-fifteenth-century musicians, revealing the similarity of their concerns, experiences, and training to our own. The secunda pars of Josquin’s text continues the self-reflexive trope by referring to the actual singers of the motet and to its unique cantus firmus, expressed in solmization syllables drawn from the name Maria – “You alone, consoler friend, can save those singing ‘la mi la’ in your praise!”³ Self-referential pieces such as these provide tantalizing windows into the hopes, desires, and professional activities of the community of musicians employed in the performance of liturgical music c. 1500.

Self-reference occurs in artistic creations across a broad range of times and media, examples ranging from informal sketches like those of the face and hands of the youthful Albrecht Dürer from the late fifteenth century, to twenty-first-century film meta-musicals, for example the nostalgic

¹ “*Sile fragor ac rerum tumultus: / fuge pavor qui pectore raucus anelas. / Psallere nos sine et nostros equare modos.*”

² “. . . ut guttura / Efflagitent, laude teque pura / Zelotica arte clamet ‘ave.’” The acrostic, found in the first letter of each line of text in the prima pars, spells out “JOSQUIN Des PREZ.” This was first identified in 1925 by Smijers, “Een kleine bijdrage over Josquin,” 313–19.

³ The syllables are derived from the name Maria through the technique of *soggetto cavato*, a practice first described by Zarlino in the first and second editions of his *Istitutioni harmoniche*. See chapter 66, Part III of the facsimile of Zarlino, *Istitutioni harmoniche* (Venezia, 1561). Also see Marco and Palisca’s translation of the 1558 edition; *The Art of Counterpoint*, 241.

blockbuster *La La Land*, released in December 2016.⁴ The meanings and motivations behind self-referential creations vary according to their original contexts, but self-referential pieces are unified by the common thread of providing evidence for the creator's awareness of the act of creation on some basic level. Looking at them can provide us with essential information about how the creators thought about themselves as artists, or at least about how they wanted to project themselves to an audience. I prefer to use the term "self-reference" for these types of pieces because it is descriptive of the work such pieces accomplish, and general enough to encompass all the different types of reflexivity that occur in music of the late medieval and early Renaissance periods, but other terms could be applied, including self-reflexive and meta.⁵

In the case of written music of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, self-reference can be expressed in two ways. First, through textual references to music or musicians, such as by incorporating the names of musicians in the text or as an acrostic, or through the inclusion of terms and concepts used in music education. The second way that self-reference can be expressed is through musical structures and organizational schemes that foreground the compositional process and musical medium, such as cantus firmi or comprehensive mensural or melodic structures borrowed from music theory.⁶ Some fifteenth-century pieces include both of these techniques, amplifying the textual references to music or musicians through cantus firmi clearly borrowed from music theory or pedagogy. Others set generic texts, often those of the five ordinary Mass texts, but are self-referential because they explore a theoretical principle in their cantus firmus, for

⁴ On Dürer see the discussion by Joseph Koerner in *The Moment of Self-Portraiture*. On film musical see Feuer, "Self-Reflexive Musical"; and Fear, "'La Land': How a Young Filmmaker Resurrected the Hollywood Musical."

⁵ There has been a fair amount of work done on self-referentiality in theatre, film, and opera, but very little on self-reflexivity in non-narrative forms. An exception is Stone, "Self-Reflexive Songs." Stone's work is related to research into authorship and the construction of the self in fourteenth-century poetry, including the works of Machaut. For related ideas about authorship see the books of Laurence de Looze, Kevin Brownlee, and most recently, Elizabeth Eva Leach.

⁶ Cantus firmus technique, or the practice of composing a piece of polyphonic music around a preexistent melody, is key to this discussion because it allowed Renaissance composers to infuse a composition with a range of symbolic associations. This melody is generally referred to as a cantus firmus or tenor. Usually cantus firmus melodies were borrowed from plainchant or popular songs, making polyphonic settings of the ordinary texts of the Mass appropriate for a specific occasion, like a commemorative service at a side altar dedicated to an individual or a celebration of an important saint like the Virgin Mary. The classic text on cantus firmus is Sparks, *Cantus Firmus in Mass and Motet, 1420–1520*. Other contributions to the discussion of how cantus firmi generate meaning include Bloxam, "Text and Context"; Brown, "The Mirror of Man's Salvation."

example the gamut of Guidonian hexachords. In each case, the self-referential features make these works into compositions about music itself.

The musicians' motets by Compere and Josquin discussed above are just two of almost 100 pieces composed between 1450 and 1530 that refer directly to musicians or music. Many musicologists have used the texts of a few of these works to establish elements of composers' biographies, or to reflect on potential connections between composers and the social gatherings that might have prompted self-referential composition.⁷ Other pieces have been investigated for their complex and beautiful musical structures, based on abstract elements of music theory.⁸ Despite their popularity in modern scholarship, these pieces have never been investigated as a group for what their self-referential aspects reveal about the international community of literate, professional musicians active in the decades around 1500. Also, a large number of them are anonymous or obscure compositions that have received little attention from modern scholars, but certainly served in a cultural niche similar to the pieces by famous composers.⁹ What was the purpose of writing a piece of music *about* music, and why did such a broad range of composers participate in this practice in the decades around 1500?

The answer to this question is linked to two of the most important musical advances of these decades – the printing of polyphonic music, which began in Venice in 1501, and the engagement of the first professional composers, as distinct from performing musicians.¹⁰ During the late fifteenth century, even before the advent of music printing, the idea of the composed work increased in importance and was significantly altered, contributing to the iconic status of certain composers. Paula Higgins asserts that before 1460 music theorists rarely mentioned composers by

⁷ To name just a few of the sources on *Illibata de virgo nutrix* alone see Antonowycz, “*Illibata dei virgo*”; Sherr, “Josquin’s Roman Style”; Macey, “*Illibata dei virgo nutrix* and Galeazzo Maria Sforza”; Clutterham, “Dating Josquin’s Enigmatic Motet”; Rodin, *Josquin’s Rome*. Some other relevant articles include: Smijers, “Een kleine bijdrage over Josquin”; Rifkin, “*Omnium bonorum plena* Reconsidered”; Fallows “Josquin and Trent 91”; Montagna, “Caron, Hayne, Compère”; Wegman, “From Maker to Composer” and “Ockeghem, Josquin and Brumel.”

⁸ For example, *In hydraulis*: Brothers, “Vestiges of the Isorhythmic Tradition”; van Benthem, “Text, Tone, and Symbol.”

⁹ For example, the anonymous motet *Decantemus in hac die* and Van Stappen’s *Exaudi nos*, both published by Petrucci in Venice.

¹⁰ For Petrucci see Boorman, *Ottaviano Petrucci*; Cumming, “Petrucci’s Publics”; and van Orden, *Music, Authorship, and the Book*. For arguments on the development of the first professional composers see Wegman, “From Maker to Composer”; Wegman, “Isaac’s Signature”; Wilson, “Isaac among the Florentines”; and Zanovello, “Isaac in Florence, 1502–17.” Other intertwined elements of change that had an impact on musicians include the beginning of the Reformation period.

name and that ascription of musical works in manuscripts was less common from the thirteenth through the early fifteenth centuries than in later manuscripts.¹¹ Jessie Ann Owens has written about the importance of composer genealogies and the elevation of composers to heroic status in the sixteenth century, revealing some of the roots of modern celebrity culture.¹² Looking for earlier documentation of this process, Rob Wegman has proposed that during the second half of the fifteenth century there was a shift from a medieval “maker” of music in general to an early modern “composer” of distinct musical works.¹³ He and Giovanni Zanovello have shown that because Heinrich Isaac was paid to be the court composer of Maximilian I despite the fact that the composer lived in Florence, far from the actual court, he should be considered the first professional composer.¹⁴ Similarly, while residing in northern Europe Jacob Obrecht sent motets and Masses to rulers in Italian courts as written representations of his own musical voice and at least one of these pieces alludes to its own written status as an object.¹⁵ The emergence and popularity of new types of self-referential compositions parallel these developments, many of them issuing from the pens of these same composers. Self-referential compositions themselves provide evidence for how musicians were involved in the development and transmission of the early modern concept of the composer.

Self-referential compositions are also important sources of information on how the composer understood and communicated the unique status of written music and projected this within the musical community of fellow professionals, amateurs, and patrons. These pieces, though unified by the idea of self-reference, encompass a wide range of genres, lengths, and styles. There are three prime types of self-referential pieces composed between 1450 and 1530, organized by period of composition in Appendix A. The first two categories – musicians’ motets and laments for musicians – are defined by the subject matter of their texts (music or musicians), and the social context of the composition (as a memorial or praise of a musician). Works of the third type are compositions, primarily motets and Masses, notable for displaying or being constructed around musical features borrowed from basic elements of music theory or

¹¹ Higgins, “Musical ‘Parents’ and Their ‘Progeny,’” 172.

¹² Owens, “Music Historiography”; Owens, *Composers at Work*.

¹³ Wegman, “From Maker to Composer.”

¹⁴ On Isaac as a “court composer” see Zanovello, “Isaac in Florence, 1502–17”; and Wegman, “Isaac’s Signature.”

¹⁵ The motet is *Inter preclarissimas virtutes*. Wegman, *Born for the Muses*; Murray, “Jacob Obrecht’s Connection,” 129.

pedagogy, including hexachords, solmization syllables, and/or mensural structures. For lack of a better word I have called these pieces *Musica* compositions, because there is such a wide variety of ways in which these pieces can be constructed.¹⁶ Some of the musicians' motets and laments are also themselves *Musica* pieces. All of this information can be found in Appendix A, which also indicates the relevant chapter or chapters for each piece. All these categories are tied together by the shared thread of self-referentiality which leads us to three important points. First, many of these pieces mark bonds of musical parentage, presenting claims of influence between different generations of professionals. Second, they reveal in their construction and texts the impact of contemporary intellectual trends in abstract music theory on composed music. And finally, they reveal one of the means through which musicians created and presented their public selves, which contributed significantly to the creation of the composer as a distinct professional category.

Chapter Outline

In light of the two basic types of self-reference in music of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, textual and musical, this book is organized into two sections. "Part I: Music about Musicians," encompassing Chapters 1–4, examines pieces that memorialized individual musicians in their texts, like musicians' motets and laments for musicians. "Part II: Music about Music" is comprised of Chapter 5–7 and turns away from texts, showing instead how compositions displaying abstract concepts of music theory, like the hexachord and solmization syllables in their musical structures, worked in tandem with the theoretical treatises of Johannes Tinctoris, Franchinus Gaffurius, and others to promote the status of music as a humanistic discipline. Each section is introduced by a brief introductory chapter (Chapters 1 and 5) that shows how expressions of the professional concerns of musicians in compositions are mirrored in self-referential paintings, especially paintings associated with regional guilds dedicated to St. Luke, the patron saint of painters and illuminators. Each of the body chapters presents a list of compositions (drawn from Appendix A) unified by self-referential features or approach.

¹⁶ Referring to the cantus firmus treatment, Edgar Sparks called many of these types of compositions hexachordal or constructed tenor compositions, but this categorization does not indicate the similarity between these types and other compositional strategies. *Cantus Firmus in Mass and Motet, 1420–1520*.

The subgenre of the musicians' motet is the subject of both Chapter 2 and 3. Chapter 2, "*Miserere supplicanti Du Fay: Building Community through Musical Devotions at Cambrai Cathedral*" explores self-referential features in two musicians' motets by Du Fay – *Fulgens iubar / Puerpera, pura parens / Virgo post partum* and *Ave regina celorum III*. Situating these compositions within the professional, liturgical, and devotional practices of Cambrai Cathedral reveals how these pieces functioned as musical prayers and also reinforced the corporate identity of the community of musicians connected to Du Fay at Cambrai. Chapter 3, "*Ora pro nobis: Forms of Self-Reference in Musical Prayers for Musicians*," expands on this close reading of Du Fay and Cambrai by comparing the texts and musical features of seven more musicians' motets composed between 1450 and 1505. These pieces are all musical prayers for musicians, although not all of them include the names of specific musicians. It is difficult to associate the pieces considered in this chapter with a patron, which distinguishes them from earlier musicians' motets like Binchois' *Novum cantum melodie* (1431) and Johannes Alanus' *Sub Arturo plebs* (late fourteenth century).¹⁷ These musical prayers reveal a preoccupation with the role of humans as creators of distinct musical objects that will endure, while at the same time drawing attention to the physical and yet ephemeral act of music-making.

The musical and textual features of twenty different laments for musicians written between 1460 and 1585 and their transmission histories are the subject of Chapter 4, "*Plorer, gemir, crier: Musical Mourning and the Composer*." The combination of languages, musical textures, and diverse presentations of preexistent music all act as markers of meaning. Focusing first on three laments from before 1500, this chapter demonstrates that early examples of this type resulted from direct personal connections, while later laments became monumental homages to the works of a "great man." Laments thus reveal a changing sense of history within the musical community and the growing importance of composition and publication as ways of preserving musical voice. Early laments also codified some of the basic markers of mourning – such as the first elegiac use of the Phrygian mode in Obrecht's musical lament for his father – and reveal the importance of humanistic learning and music theory to the self-realization of the professional community of musicians.

¹⁷ Bent, *Two 14th-Century Motets in Praise of Music*; Bent and Howlett, "Subtiliter alternare"; Wathey, "Anglo-French Musical Relations."

The basic argument of the second half of the book, laid out in Chapter 5, “Paintings about Painting and Music about Music-Making,” is that abstract musical features, like comprehensive explorations of mensural or modal structures and constructed or hexachordal tenors, represent musical tools of the trade and evoke professional identity, similar to the brushes or painterly techniques presented in guild paintings of St. Luke. Chapter 6, “Simple Lessons? Music Theory as Emblem of Composition” explores relationships between twelve works composed between 1460 and the 1490s that display aspects of music theory or terms in their compositional framework. By interacting with late-medieval music-theoretical discourse, these pieces highlight the role of the composer through the foregrounding of the musical work as a material object, created by an individual.

The final chapter is concerned entirely with compositions based on a singular and complex musical symbol – the hexachord. Entitled “Constructing the Composer: Symbolic Use of the Hexachord in Compositions c. 1500,” Chapter 7 lays out how the hexachord was central to an important conflict in music-theoretical discourse in Italy in the late fifteenth century and to the various ways that the hexachord was used in multiple sources and contexts, including humanistic compendia of knowledge. As a *cantus firmus*, the hexachord instilled compositions with a particular range of associations that were related to the professional identity of musicians and their efforts to establish musical practice within the tradition of the liberal arts. This chapter focuses in particular on motets and polyphonic Masses included in Petrucci’s Venetian publications, as pieces that were both widely disseminated and intended to be consumed by a broad market including both professionals and amateurs. These pieces reinforced the different ways that musicians navigated the professional landscape c. 1500 and successfully redefined the role of the medieval maker into the individual composer of the early modern period.

The Conclusion draws together the two sections of the book by reflecting on a famous piece that fits easily into the arguments of both and that has posed significant interpretive problems for modern musical scholars – *Illibata dei virgo nutrix*. As mentioned before, this famous motet is constructed musically around a tenor built from solmization syllables derived from the name “Maria,” and textually around an acrostic naming its composer, Josquin Desprez. The text also includes references to the act of singing musical prayers, and to the throat itself as the source of these prayers. The extreme contrasts in musical style between the two halves of the motet and the inclusion of “in-jokes” in an otherwise serious prayer motet has caused modern scholars to question its authenticity or propose

a complicated genesis involving a long gap of time between the composition of its two parts. These issues are resolved when we understand this motet and others like it as an expression of professional identity – the self-referential, musical evocation of humanistic learning in the first half followed by a second half that represents the sensorially rich act of musical prayer.