

# Leading Notes

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# Leading Notes

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NATIONAL EARLY MUSIC ASSOCIATION

# Introduction to the repertory: the fifteenth-century chanson

Dennis Slavin

Dennis Slavin is an Assistant Professor at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

*There is no composition written over forty years ago which is thought by the learned as worthy of performance. [But today] there flourish, in addition to many singers who perform most beautifully, an infinite number of composers such as Johannes Okeghem, Johannes Regis, Anthonius Busnois, Firminus Caron and Guillermus Faugues, who glory that they had as teachers in this divine art Johannes Dunstable, Egidius Binchois and Guillermus Dufay, [all] recently passed from life. Almost all these men's works exhale such sweetness, that, in my opinion, they should be considered most worthy, not only for men and heroes, but even for the immortal gods.*

Johannes Tinctoris, *Liber de Arte Contrapuncti* (1477),  
trans. Albert Seay as *The Art of Counterpoint*,  
Musicological Studies and Documents, 5 (1961)

'Great Men' dominate our view of history in part because our access to the past has been dominated by reports of their actions and the artefacts they have left us. One possible account of music from the fifteenth century, therefore, tells the story by describing features of works by its best composers. Here the judgement of Tinctoris – shorn of its disdain for music written before the 1430s – has stood the test of time remarkably well: with a few revisions (including the addition of Englishmen John Bedyngham, Robert Morton and Walter Frye), the composers whose music he exalts comprise the pantheon of 'greats' from the middle of the fifteenth century still found in most history books. While acknowledging that any such inventory must be incomplete, we might round out the century by adding Baude Cordier, Nicolas Grenon, Hugo and Arnold de Lantins, and Leonel Power to represent the earlier decades, and composers such as Josquin des Prez, Alexander Agricola, Jacob Obrecht, Heinrich Isaac, Loyset Compère, Pierre de la Rue and Antoine Brumel from the period after the publication of Tinctoris's treatise.

Although we question Tinctoris's dismissal of earlier music, in an important sense the line he drew is not entirely arbitrary; during the 1420s and 30s compositional technique, especially that of composers from the Burgundian territories of the north to Savoy in the south, underwent significant changes. Earlier music by composers from northern Europe tends to be more dissonant to modern ears, the independent lines of its polyphonic textures more angular and irregular. By contrast, later composers employ harmony that is more triadic (placing greater emphasis on the 'imperfect' interval of the third) and write melodies that move in smoother, more predictable phrases. Such descriptions, of course, are general and somewhat subjective, but Tinctoris was not alone in recognizing that a stylistic bridge had been crossed. As early as 1441, Martin le Franc, chronicler of the

Duke of Burgundy, noted that Dufay and Binchois had taken up the 'English guise' (*la contenance angloise*) by adopting the techniques of Dunstable. The reference to England suggests that these developments were not merely chronological, and indeed we find in music by Power, Dunstable's slightly older compatriot, numerous examples of the characteristics that we now associate with the beginning of the musical 'Renaissance' – the features that Tinctoris deemed so sweet.



Chansons from the fifteenth century survive in dozens of manuscripts that range in size and appearance from a few tattered leaves, to large, modestly decorated collections compiled over an extended period, to sumptuous chansonniers of beautifully illuminated parchment. These must have functioned in an equally wide variety of ways: as aides-mémoire for performance or written means of transmitting music, as personal collections of repertory meaningful to a particular individual, or as valuable gifts, products of professional scribes and illuminators. Nearly all manuscripts are anthologies of music by several composers, and many songs are transmitted anonymously. When more than one manuscript transmits a particular work, the versions rarely are identical; although establishing greater authority for one version is sometimes possible, the concept of a definitive version is generally inappropriate. Scribes and performers enjoyed a freedom that may seem foreign to us, accustomed as we are to respecting and relying on written texts. European culture of the fifteenth century rarely depended on written sources for detailed instruction; oral transmission of information was the norm.

One of the most important manuscript sources of fifteenth-century song is found in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, where it has the shelf mark Canonici misc. 213. An extraordinarily precious anthology of more than three hundred pieces, it was compiled from 1426 to 1436, probably as the private collection of an early Humanist living in the Veneto. To his special love for French music we owe the survival of over two hundred pieces found in no other extant sources, including many from the earliest decades of the fifteenth century. (For editions and recordings see the lists at the end of this essay.) Their style represents a marked pulling back from the extraordinary complexity in vogue at the turn of the century; rhythms are far simpler and melodies more syllabic. In this sense they point the way towards the style of Binchois and Dufay.

Indeed, in a number of respects the magnitude of the stylistic break between the earlier composers and the later 'teachers' hailed by Tinctoris has been exaggerated. Composers such as Cordier and Grenon affirmed the pre-eminence of the musical texture that would hold sway for most of the century: although duets and four-part pieces are not uncommon, most songs feature an upper voice (*cantus*) that dominates by moving in quicker rhythms than the two lower voices (*tenor* and *contratenor*). Generally, either the *cantus* or *tenor* was written first, the others composed successively in counterpoint to it.

Few chansons by Dunstable survive (none by Power), but more than a hundred French-texted songs ascribed either to Binchois or Dufay come to us in manuscripts from the 1420s–60s. (Again, *Canonici 213* is our most important source.) Nearly all of the chansons of Binchois are settings of ballades or rondeaux. Along with virelais and bergerettes, these were the fixed forms of courtly poetry employed in most French secular music of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. A somewhat provincial composer (especially in contrast to the peripatetic Dufay), Binchois was attached for most of his life to the court of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy. His jewel-like songs display a striking reverence for courtly values in form and expression, and evince supple and imaginative use of a limited range of rhythmic and melodic shapes.

Dufay's chansons explore a far wider variety of expressive devices and musical techniques than those of Binchois. In this variety we may see a reflection of the searching, restless spirit of a man whose career included appointments ranging from Cambrai to Rome and acquaintance with some of the brightest political and religious lights of his day. One of the many notable features of his style is organization at levels ranging from individual melodic phrases to the mapping of entire pieces, which lends his music an unusual feeling of inevitability – unusual, that is, because to ears accustomed to the directionality of tonal music this feeling is generally absent from the compositions of his contemporaries. Dufay is the musical figure who stands tallest in the first half of the fifteenth century.

An unusually interesting collection of forty-five songs by Dufay deserves mention here. Based on their recension in *Canonici 213*, the songs are edited by Ross W. Duffin in tidied-up versions of their original notation (*Ogni Sorte Editions, SR4*). This edition allows performers to approach the music with fewer of the preconceptions engendered by modern notation in score and encourage them to perceive the rhythmic and melodic groupings of individual parts – features that bring this music to life. *Ogni Sorte* publishes several such editions, each of which includes an admirably concise introduction to fifteenth-century notation.

The most prolific and accomplished chanson composers of the next generation were Ockeghem and Busnoys. In their songs the textures tend to be somewhat more homogeneous because phrases often begin with imitation and rhythms of the *tenor* and *contratenor* generally are closer to those of the *cantus*. Dissonance is controlled more

strictly than in the songs of Dufay, resulting in even greater emphasis on harmonies of imperfect intervals. Whereas the beauty of some of the sacred music of Ockeghem – for many years a composer for the French Royal Court – is brilliant and austerely intimidating, songs such as *Ma bouche rit* are invitingly intimate. The chansons of Busnoys, who was closely associated with the court of Burgundy, beguile with smooth, finely wrought melodies and tonal architecture of crystalline clarity.

Chansons from the last quarter of the fifteenth century are marked by increasing tendencies towards textures of equal voices (partly a result of greater use of imitation, which, in turn, is linked to a shift towards simultaneous – versus successive – compositional technique), use of devices such as sequences, and textures of four or more voices that vary within the course of a piece. Whereas courtly texts still were the basis for most polyphonic songs, strict adherence to their fixed schemes of repetition began to relax and composers often used tunes drawn from a popular repertory as *cantus firmi* around which they wove other voices.

The greatest figure of this period is Josquin des Prez. In his lifetime, Josquin seems to have been known as much for his artistic temperament as for his compositional prowess. Both are hinted at in a well-known letter to Ercole d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, from a spy he had commissioned to recruit a leading musician for his chapel. Coglia, the spy, compared Josquin with his most skilful rival, Heinrich Isaac: 'To me [Isaac] seems better suited to serve Your Lordship than Josquin because he is more good-natured and companionable and he composes new pieces more quickly. True, Josquin composes better, but he composes only when he wants to, not when he is asked to, and he asks 200 ducats in salary while Isaac is satisfied with 120 – but Your Lordship will choose.'

Josquin's style represents the brilliant marshalling of an effortless technique to clear expressive ends. Incisive, memorable motives are wedded to each phrase of text; each phrase thereby gains distinct character, but the overall effect is seamless. Josquin's style developed throughout his career; his music reflects the responses of an enquiring artist to the varied musical cultures through which he passed, such as the papal chapel and the courts of Ercole d'Este (who chose Josquin over Isaac) and Louis XI, King of France. However, whether he wrote in a more conservative tradition not far removed from Ockeghem, in nearly homophonic textures possibly influenced by Italian music, or in the strictly imitative counterpoint that would form the basis for music of the next century, Josquin – in the words of Martin Luther – was able to make the notes do as he wished; other composers did as the notes wished.

Although many other notable musical figures have been relegated by historians to the status of 'Josquin's contemporaries', their songs have much to recommend them. Some individual traits worth remarking include the quirky rhythms of Agricola, the contrapuntal virtuosity of Obrecht, and the 'international' style of Isaac. Along with many other northern musicians, these *oltremontani*

brightened the musical life of the Italian courts at the close of the fifteenth century.



Tinctoris's suggestion of teacher/student relationships among the composers he mentions should not be taken literally, but to a striking degree many of them seem to have known each other. Binchois and Dufay probably met at least twice, and both Dufay and Ockeghem (who stayed with Dufay on a visit to Cambrai in 1464) wrote laments on the death of Binchois. Josquin's *Deploration* on the death of Ockeghem mentions Pierre de la Rue, Brumel and Compère. Several compositions by Busnoys and Ockeghem suggest friendly competition, and many works by other composers modelled on those of their contemporaries or predecessors demonstrate that such competition and emulation was fairly widespread.

Most composers were priests associated either with the great cathedrals of northern Europe and Italy, or with the secular courts and chapels of its royalty and nobility. Their chansons were performed in a variety of settings, ranging from the private chambers of the nobility to elaborately costumed presentations at courtly events of great extravagance. In 1454, Philip the Good celebrated the mounting of a new crusade after the fall of Constantinople with a gala banquet, known as the Feast of the Pheasant, where a song variously ascribed to Binchois or Dufay was sung by a twelve-year-old boy seated atop a 'stag' who sang the tenor. More typical are accounts of performances that suggest greater intimacy; in that sense, amateur renditions at home come closer to preserving the flavour of the original context in which these chansons were savoured than programmes in large concert halls.

How were the songs performed (especially when stags were unavailable)? Although in some respects the information presented in fifteenth-century manuscripts seems to us frustratingly incomplete, for contemporary performers the silence of written sources would have been informed by myriad unwritten conventions of performance. Typical of the questions unanswered by surviving manuscripts is the basic one of performing forces – voices, instruments or combinations of both? In most surviving manuscripts the words of a song appear only under the cantus part. Until the 1970s, most modern performers understood this to mean that the tenor and contratenor were performed on instruments. However, stimulated by the writings and performances of Christopher Page, several scholars have argued in favour of all-vocal performance by pointing to inconsistencies in manuscript evidence and a wealth of documentary accounts of contemporary practice. The issue is unresolved, but dogmatic insistence on a single solution seems inappropriate; nevertheless, the choice of performing forces profoundly affects how we hear these pieces.

As I implied at the beginning of this essay, an account of some of the more immediately accessible stylistic features of music by the great composers of the fifteenth century tells only one story. Crucial episodes remain untold, in large part because we have only begun to investigate them.

For example, in so far as a song represents a composer's response to a poem, word/music relationships must be central to understanding the chanson. The most obvious type of relationship is that of 'tone painting' or 'madrigalism', a technique whereby the composer attempts to depict the actual meaning of a word in music (e.g. ascending pitches for 'Heaven'). This technique, the effect of which can range from trivial to profound, did not become widespread until the sixteenth century and some writers have concluded, therefore, that for earlier composers poems provided nothing more than formal skeletons for their musical structures. Yet, as Don Randel has suggested in an important palliative to that position ('Dufay the Reader', *Music and Language, Studies in the History of Music*, i, New York, 1983), some composers may have approached the problem from a point of view more syntactic than semantic, responding with great musical sensitivity to subtle structural features of their texts. Further research into the approach to text setting by individual composers might reveal much about their compositional procedures.

This has been the story of Great Men and their achievements. But hundreds of songs have escaped the close attention of scholars precisely because they come to us without manuscript attributions and therefore are not linked to the name of one of the 'greats'. Moreover, although a few composers, such as Busnoys, also wrote poetry, and some songs are settings of poems by well-known poets, the overwhelming number of poems are anonymous. In this connection I might mention intriguing new evidence of the participation of women in the learned subculture of the high musical style. In her article 'Parisian Nobles, a Scottish Princess, and the Woman's Voice in Late Medieval Song', *Early Music History*, 10 (Cambridge, 1991), Paula Higgins draws to our attention the intense poetic activity of noblewomen and the ladies in their service and the distinct possibility that some of the chansons of the period – especially ones that employ a woman's poetic voice – are settings of poems by women. (One of only three songs by Binchois whose poetic author is known is Christine de Pizan's ballade, *Dueil angoisseus, rage demesurée*.) What were the great musical achievements of women during the fifteenth century? For the time being, answers are obscured by stories of history that, in effect, have ignored the role of women. So far, only one manuscript from the period 1300–1566 is known to ascribe a song to a woman, and this attribution has been previously overlooked. But our knowledge of women composers from before 1300 and after 1566, the ample documentation of participation by women in other aspects of music making, and the strong musical interests, accomplishments and patronage of noblewomen such as Margaret of Austria and Mary of Burgundy suggest that some portion of the fifteenth-century chanson repertory that comes to us without attribution may have been composed by women. If so, doubtless it will be worthy of the heroines and goddesses that Tinctoris also neglected to mention.

The following lists, which are far from comprehensive, are guides for further exploration of this repertory.

#### Recordings

*The Garden of Zephyrus*, Gothic Voices, directed by Christopher

Page (Hyperion A661444)

*The Castle of Fair Welcome*, Gothic Voices, directed by Christopher  
Page (Hyperion A66194)

*The Medieval Romantics*, Gothic Voices, directed by Christopher  
Page (Hyperion CDA66463)

*Secular Music of Guillaume Dufay* (complete), Medieval Ensemble  
of London, directed by Peter Davies (L'Oiseau Lyre DSLO-  
611 PSI, 6 records)

*Secular Music of Johannes Ockeghem* (complete), Medieval  
Ensemble of London, directed by Peter Davies (L'Oiseau  
Lyre D254DS3 PSI, 3 records)

*Le Banquet du voeu 1454*, Ensemble Gilles Binchois, directed by  
Dominique Vellard (Virgin Classics, VC7 91441-2)

*Josquin Desprez, Motets and Chansons*, The Hilliard Ensemble  
(Reflexe 1435731)

#### Editions

Besseler, Heinrich, ed. *Guillelmi Dufay Opera Omnia*, Corpus  
Mensurabilis Musicæ, 1/6 (Rome, 1964). A thorough  
revision of this volume is being prepared by David  
Fallows.

Duffin, Ross W. *Chansons: Forty-five Settings in Original Notation*.  
Ogni Sorte Editions, SR4.

Perkins, Leeman L. and Howard Garey, eds. *The Mellon  
Chansonnier* (New Haven, 1977). Surprising though it may  
be, complete editions of the songs of neither Ockeghem

nor Busnoys have yet appeared, but several pieces by each  
may be found in this elegant facsimile of a Neapolitan  
manuscript from the 1470s, which comes complete with  
parallel transcriptions in modern notation.

Reaney, Gilbert, ed. *Early Fifteenth Century Music*, Corpus  
Mensurabilis Musicæ, 11 (1955-83), 7 volumes. Music by  
composers from the first three decades of the fifteenth  
century, and anonymous works from Canonici 213.

Rehm, Wolfgang. *Die Chansons von Gilles Binchois*, Musikalische  
Denkmäler, 2 (Mainz, 1957).

Smijers, Albert, M. Antonowycz and W. Elders, eds. *Josquin  
Desprez Werken* (Amsterdam, 1921-), 55 fascicles.

The complete works of most of Josquin's famous contemporaries  
are available in the Corpus Mensurabilis Musicæ series;  
individual articles on each in *The New Grove* will provide  
additional information.

#### Further reading

Apel, Willi, *The Notation of Polyphonic Music 900-1600*  
(Cambridge, Mass., 1942; several later editions). The  
classic text for those interested in mastering the subtleties  
of notation.

Brown, Howard Mayer, *Music in the Renaissance* (Englewood  
Cliffs, New Jersey, 1976). A good survey, if now somewhat  
dated.

Fallows, David, *Dufay* (London, 1982; rev. edn. 1987). The best  
book available on music of the fifteenth century.

Kemp, Walter H., *Burgundian Court Song in the Time of Binchois*  
(Oxford, 1990). The first serious attempt to come to terms  
with the anonymous poetry (and a small repertory of  
anonymous songs).

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# Scipio engulfed: notes from an editor's diary

Clifford Bartlett

Clifford Bartlett, music publisher, editor and reviewer, discusses some of the difficulties in preparing editions of early music.

Last summer, Roy Goodman phoned me to discuss whether I might produce a new edition of Handel's *Scipione* for a performance he was to conduct at the 1992 Handel Festival at Karlsruhe. We talked briefly about versions and whether there was any usable performance material available. I sent Roy a couple of short items that were not included in the Chrysander edition, and we assumed, more or less on principle and without close study of the revisions which Handel made for a revival in 1730, that it would be best to present the work as at the first performances in 1726 (but perhaps reinstating the original opening of Act III, which Handel cut before the première). I checked with Eleanor Selfridge-Field at the Center for Computer Assisted Research in the Humanities in case her organization had the music encoded, but it did not. So I negotiated a fee with the Badische Stadstheater and got on with producing the edition.

Anyone studying Handel's output is still dependent on the complete edition of his works published by the Deutsche Handelgesellschaft between 1858 and 1894, virtually a one-man effort by Friedrich Chrysander. *Scipione* is not one of Chrysander's better productions, chiefly because the documentary information which is needed to explain what he prints is lacking; but it was at least possible to produce a working copy by photocopying it. Fortunately, *Scipione* just gets into Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp's *Handel's Operas 1704–1726*, so Winton Dean's unrivalled knowledge of the source material is available. I had most of the autograph material on microfilm, thanks to the systematic filming of Handel autographs by Research Publications. The main manuscript of *Scipione* is very confused, but Winton Dean's description makes unravelling it quite easy. Both the 1726 and 1730 librettos were also readily available. I did not have the 'conducting score', a copy made from the autograph by Handel's copyist for use as a working copy and now in Hamburg, but that did not matter, since it contains only the 1730 version.

So I was all set up: all I needed to do was to check the Chrysander score (which is usually printed extremely accurately, once one gets to the actual notes) against the autograph, put the music on to the computer, run off scores for the singers, conductor, keyboard players and production staff, then reformat the files to produce instrumental parts: tedious, but not problematic.

But then we heard from the producer, Daniel Benoin. He had apparently decided that the only way he could conceive the opera was to set it in a hotel in Riyadh; the snag was that he could not believe in a counter-tenor General Schwarzkopf (i.e. Scipione). Work on the edition paused while we waited for Roy and Daniel to get together

to solve the problem. Then Roy and I eventually managed to meet briefly (in a taxi from Hilversum to Schiphol) on 13 December and agree that we should go for the 1730 version, in which Scipione was a tenor.

Meanwhile, the singers were getting impatient – not surprisingly, since the first night was only two months away. The 1730 version of the opera is substantially (about 50 per cent) different; but fortunately Handel took the new arias from other operas, so I could temporarily send the singers some sort of copy by adding the new words to photocopies of the Chrysander scores of the originals. I faxed to Karlsruhe explaining that half my work on the original version had been wasted, so the fee needed to be renegotiated, and assured them that I would get on with *Scipione* as quickly as possible, so that they could get complete scores after Christmas. (The contract, incidentally, was not signed until 13 February, two days before the première.) I also now needed to see the Hamburg score. We toyed with the idea of sending someone to Hamburg, but fortunately Anthony Hicks had a microfilm and kindly agreed to lend it to me.

But, unknown to the management at Karlsruhe, two interruptions (apart from Christmas itself, which received a minimal celebration in our household) delayed further work on *Scipione*. I had to produce at very short notice, in effect between Christmas Eve and Twelfth Night, the music for two very different CDs: a Josquin anthology for EMI and a group of anthems by Pelham Humfrey for Harmonia Mundi (USA). Both really needed a thorough checking of sources. This was not possible for the Josquin (apart from a few items I had in facsimile), but fortunately I had the major sources of the Humfrey at hand on film, and was able to improve considerably on the *Musica Britannica* edition. That interrupted *Scipione* for a while; however, thanks to the amazing speed with which my assistant, Brian Clark, manages to input music, all of *Scipione* was on the computer by the time that Humfrey was collected on 5 January. After a meeting about filming the Brandenburg Concertos at Köthen for CD-I (material for a future article, perhaps, especially the opening of Prince Leopold's sarcophagus), I was ready to concentrate on *Scipione* again.

Karlsruhe was getting impatient. Act I was sent by the fastest means our postal services could manage: not quick enough, so Acts II and III were faxed. Then on Wednesday 15 January came an alarming fax from Roy, who was in Paris with the European Baroque Orchestra. The Karlsruhe rehearsals had started already (no one had warned the conductor that he wasn't booked to be there until the second week of rehearsals) and it emerged that two singers were the wrong voice: could I instantly fax more

transpositions? The following afternoon Roy phoned from a Paris station: he was on his way to Karlsruhe – would I get someone to meet him there? He phoned again the next day: he was flying back on Saturday to see me so that we could work through the weekend to salvage a version performable by the singers he had available.

Roy arrived Saturday afternoon and stayed until Sunday evening (with six hours sleep). We went through the opera, changing the pitch as necessary, making the cuts which the producer required (with some modification, since he had deprived one singer of virtually all her arias) and fixing the recitative. The big problem with having a tenor Scipione is that virtually none of the recitative for the tenor version survives. We had intended initially that the singers work from the original recitative and make adaptations for the transpositions during rehearsal. But in a day of rehearsal Roy had got some concept of the voices we were dealing with, so we rewrote passages that were unsingable to fit the voices concerned – a perfectly authentic process! (We followed the principle of leaving the harmony unchanged and redistributing the voice part within the existing chords.) We photocopied and bound twenty copies of the score, and Roy returned to Karlsruhe exhausted, if not in time for the beginning of Monday's rehearsals (after a night ferry and driving all the way with harpsichord in tow), at least in time for the singers each to have a decently printed complete score that afternoon, four weeks before the première.

Next came the instrumental parts. The Karlsruhe management seemed to be panicking unnecessarily about these. Their argument, 'We have the best players from throughout Europe: they need to study their parts in advance', seemed to me to be a *non sequitur*. I cannot imagine any reputable English player who knew that there was going to be ample rehearsal time needing to study his part a month ahead. I was flying to that part of Germany on 23 January to see a music-dealer in Wiesbaden, to find some pictures for 'The Brahms Experience' in Baden-Baden, and to discuss Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse* – another project worth an article – in Stuttgart, so I delivered them to Karlsruhe and had a chance to hear the singers at rehearsal (and admire Roy's skill as a rehearsal pianist). For the next fortnight, apart from responding to requests to fax replacements for a few pages with misprints, I could get on with other jobs, such as the routine running of King's Music (which included dealing with a desperate phone-call from Karlsruhe – where to get a set of parts of *Samson* for the evening before the *Scipione* première?) and proof-reading the 750 pages of *The New Oxford Book of Carols*.

All there was to do now was to see the production. I don't make a habit of flying around Europe just to attend a single performance, but it really did seem worth making the effort to see the result of all this labour. It would have been nice to have caught *Samson* as well (with the same conductor and choir as the Humfrey recording that had interrupted *Scipione* at Christmas), but there was only time to fly out on Saturday morning and back on Sunday

afternoon. I had heard hints (beyond the General Schwarzkopf impersonation) about the production, and I was fearing the worst. In fact, it was one of the most enjoyable operatic productions I can remember.

The set was a hotel foyer during the Gulf War. The parallel was not, of course, exact, and to anyone understanding the Italian text or knowing the opera well, the substitutions would have seemed superficial. But in so many respects the producer found visual images which conveyed a meaning to a non-specialist audience in a way which helped the music. At the most negative level, action only once interfered with the music. There was one marvellous practical idea: the continuo harpsichord was placed, as if a bar pianist, on stage, so that the relationship between player and singer was closer than normal; it also enabled Robert Aldwinckle to read a paper openly when he was not playing! The convention of the exit aria seemed less artificial than usual, thanks to the large number of doors that are inevitable in a hotel foyer. The lift, too, was a good way of providing different levels. Two arias particularly memorable visually were one presented as a television interview (we saw Scipione performing to camera and also on screen) and another with Armira prancing around to the pop music she was listening to on a Walkman but also in time to Handel's music. A final, tongue-in-cheek gesture was for the cast to appear in eighteenth-century Roman costume for the final chorus. All this sounds horrible, but it worked!

I won't write a review of the performance. One singer disappointed (apparently having an off night); Scipione, who had been in hospital for the dress rehearsal (when Roy had to sing his contribution), lasted until nearly the end before cracking; the rest were fine, as was the orchestra. Roy's operatic débüt was a success and he was invited back for two operas next year. At the party after the show, all was sweetness and light. I am not sure whether I was blamed for the delay in supplying the music, but at least everyone seemed pleased in the end. And we discovered why the wrong singers had been booked: the management had heard a recording of a performance conducted by Charles Farncombe with a tenor Scipione and assumed that it was of the 1730 version, whereas in fact it was of a mixed version.

The details of the process of getting an opera from the manuscript to the stage would have been very different in Handel's time: no faxes, no transposing computers (though copyists were then cheap). But the problems of communication would have been the same, with similar misunderstandings. We began the project with naive ideas that all we needed to do was to stage the work as Handel originally wrote it. By the end, it became clear that, despite the wholesale borrowing from other works, the revised version was musically stronger. It seems unscholarly to perform a mixture of Handel's two versions; but Handel himself had no compunction about transposing to fit the singers he had at his disposal, and to pay excessive regard to the details of a specific performance is to ignore the authentic conditions of Baroque operatic performance. 

## Further on pitch

Simon Hill

Simon Hill is a Vicar Choral at St Paul's Cathedral and is the founder and director of the Myriell Consort, specializing in the domestic vocal repertory of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.

Clifford Bartlett rightly remarks that 'the division of voices into sopranos, altos, tenors and basses is not a law of nature' – long-suffering choirmasters would readily agree with the assertion that 'they are all baritones and mezzo-sopranos'. There should be no surprise at this; other human attributes such as height and intelligence tend to be distributed over a gaussian curve, with the majority occupying the middle range, so why not voice ranges? (See Richard Miller, *Techniques of Singing*, Chapter XVI.) Renaissance choral composers were well aware of this, and the tessituras of their voice parts are by no means evenly spaced a convenient fourth or fifth apart. This is especially so in English church music of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; written voice ranges are remarkably constant throughout the period, so that the few exceptions stand out by their rarity. The normal written bass range was  $F-b'$ , while the tenor range was an unusually narrow  $c-d'$ . The two parts thus overlapped by almost an octave, covering a mere octave and a sixth between them. This overall range is narrow enough to be encompassed by a single voice, and I would postulate that this voice was, in fact, the ubiquitous baritone; any *real* tenors or basses would sing on their appropriate parts, while the remainder could be distributed between the parts as necessary. (That some choirs did have real basses is shown by surviving music with written ranges down to bottom D or C.)

Until at least 1636 (Charles Butler, *The Principles of Musik*) boys' voices were divided (more realistically than now) into trebles and means; the latter were the most common (like the mezzo-soprano), with a written range of  $c'-d''$  (occasionally going lower but seldom if ever higher), while the rarer, highly prized treble had a range of  $f'-f''$  or  $g'-g''$  (usually written in the G2 clef). The countertenor is more of a problem, since its written range changed during the period – starting in the early sixteenth century with a range identical to the tenor (a true 'contra'-tenor), by the middle of the century its upper range had increased by a further third or fourth. Finally, towards the end of the century, the bottom of the range starts to shrink, so that by the early seventeenth century the normal written countertenor range was  $d-g'$  or  $a'$ , but with the bottom notes appearing more in isolation within a choral texture rather than in an exposed melodic context. This looks to me like a baritone voice gradually extending its upward range by use of falsetto, then subsequently extending the falsetto downwards, reserving baritone production only for the lowest notes in a choral context.

We will probably never know the exact pitch of English Renaissance choral music; the average pitch of voices has almost certainly changed over the centuries as well. (Since average height is known to have increased, it seems highly

likely that vocal pitch has correspondingly dropped.) However, if the great corpus of English church music of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is to be performed today with its original effect, it needs to be sung at a pitch that will ensure that the written range  $F-d'$  lies comfortably within the compass of today's baritone voices. Modern reference works disagree on the exact range of the voice, but seem to place its mid-point around  $f$  (*Harvard Dictionary*),  $f^{\#}$  (*New Oxford Companion*) or  $g$  (*New Grove*). The mid-point of the range  $F-d'$  lies between  $e^{\flat}$  and  $e$ , so that a transposition of between a tone and a minor third upwards from original notated pitch would seem appropriate.

The minor third transposition employed in the 1920s by E.H. Fellowes and his colleagues when editing this repertory for performance derived largely from the note appended to the Tenbury copy of the *Pars Organica* of Tomkins's posthumous *Musica Deo Sacra* (1668), which equates the note  $f$  with the pitch given by an open pipe 2  $\frac{1}{2}$  feet long. However, already around the turn of the century John West had been using a transposition of a tone in his Novello editions of this repertory, and as early as 1873 Ouseley had pointed out (in his edition of Gibbons's sacred works) that 'an open pipe two feet and a half in length will not produce our modern  $F$ , but a somewhat sharp  $G$ '.

In making this observation in 1668 (along with another about the speed of the semibreve pulse), Tomkins's editor (?his son, Nathaniel) was not writing for posterity, but for a very immediate readership who would know precisely what he meant without recourse to a higher degree in practical physics. From at least the beginning of the sixteenth century (All Hallows, Barking: 1519) until the Commonwealth, church organs had been built to a nominal pitch of 10' C which (as we know from a letter of Nathaniel Tomkins from 1665) was equivalent to  $F$  of choir pitch. After the Restoration, organs were being built to other pitch standards, such as 10' G (Loosemore, Exeter: 1665). The organist of a cathedral such as Exeter, purchasing copies of *Musica Deo Sacra* and reading the note, would realize that, since a 1  $\frac{1}{2}$ ' pipe on his instrument sounded  $G$ , the music was all written too low, and would need to be transposed up a tone. (There is also reasonable evidence that church pitch after the Restoration was up to a half-tone higher than  $a'-440$  – Purcell's church music usually works best at a pitch higher than  $a'-440$ .)

Clifford Bartlett draws attention to Morley's objection to the transposition of 'high clef' pieces, but his remarks are not the exception that they seem, since Morley would appear to be referring to *secular* music. A large proportion (perhaps the majority) of this repertory (the so-called

'English Madrigal School') has an overall range of three octaves,<sup>1</sup> implying that it is written for an ensemble including *treble* voices (which were much in demand for domestic music making, as Richard Alison implies in the title page of his *An Howres Recreation in Music* of 1606). However, the notated range is usually *G–g'* or *a''* rather than the *F–f'* or *g''* of the church repertory, implying a pitch standard approximately one tone lower than church pitch. The other voices follow their usual clefs and ranges (with the same allowance), although the tenor voice (and clef) are frequently absent (the tenor voice being regarded as 'ordinary' or 'indifferent'). Thus the normal four-part scoring was not for SATB, but for Treble, Mean, Countertenor and Bass (as in most of the Dowland four-part Ayres). In five-part music, the treble is usually doubled, while in six-part music, the countertenor is the next to be doubled and this, combined with the tendency to write the bass part in the *F3* rather than *F4* clef, gives a standard six-voice clef combination of *G2, G2, C2, C3, C3, F3* which, at first sight, might appear to be a 'high-clef' version of a piece for SSATTB.<sup>2</sup> In fact, as Morley says, the music is intended to sound at this pitch, and if sung at a lower pitch 'will not breed so much contentment in the hearer as otherwise it would do'.

It may be wondered why the tenor voice was so disparaged at this period. It was evidently on account of its narrow range – just over an octave, as against the bass part's notated range of an octave and a fourth ('neither ascending to any high or strained notes, nor descending very low', as Charles Butler wrote). If a higher pitch standard for the church repertory is accepted, then the highest tenor note in modern terms lies between *e'* and *f'* – significantly, this is the location of what the classic vocal schools call the 'passagio', the point at which a marked registration change occurs, and which does not seem to have been conquered until the late eighteenth century. Before that, tenors would always resort to falsetto for notes above *f'* (see Roger Fiske: *English Theatre Music of the 18th Century*, pp. 270–71), so that Michael Kelly, Mozart's first Basilio, could create a furore in 1789 by singing a top *a'* in full voice (to be matched later in the early nineteenth century by Duprez's 'ut de poitrine'). The tenor was indeed a limited voice: he could not sing as low as a baritone, and if he sang any higher it would be in falsetto and he would become a countertenor!

As for *that* much-misunderstood voice, as a professional countertenor of over twenty years standing, I must take issue with Clifford over some of his remarks about falsettists. It is as meaningless to talk about 'the range of the male falsetto voice' as it is to talk about 'the range of the male voice' or 'the range of the female voice'. The falsetto voice lies approximately an octave above the 'natural' (speaking) voice on which it is based. Thus, a baritone will have a falsetto in the mezzo-soprano range, centering around *f'–g'*, while a bass will have a falsetto more in the contralto range, with a centre around *d'–e'*. Any tenors who decide to cultivate their falsetto will end up as sopranos, with a range centred around *a'–b'*.

Statistically, most falsettists are likely to be within the mezzo-soprano range and, with a good two-octave compass, should have no difficulty in coping adequately with parts down to *g* or *f*; those with voices in the contralto range should be able to go lower, but are unlikely to be comfortable above about *d''* or *e''*. The fact that some of today's countertenors are less effective below *c'* does not mean that this is a necessary feature of falsetto singing; it is purely a deficiency of technique, as it is with many sopranos who find the same problem. In high voices, there is a registration point (similar to the tenor's) around *c'*, below which one needs to develop the 'chest voice' in order to be effective – mastery of this register will colour the whole of the rest of the vocal range. In the falsetto voice, this is not to be confused with the 'gear-change' – the switch into 'natural' voice (what, by the way, is a 'soft tenor', and how is it produced by a baritone or bass?) – the voice remains in falsetto all the way down, but with a change of resonance.

Finally, to Clifford's original question: to transpose or not to transpose? I must admit that, as a working singer, often with little rehearsal time, I prefer to read the music at the pitch I am singing it. Small transpositions tend to lead to intonation problems, while large ones lead to errors in reading (both being compounded by the modern use of the natural sign to indicate both a flat and a sharp third). There is also the problem for keyboard players in accompanied pieces (not all are fluent transposers of often complex organs parts); and there is the regrettable fact that many conductors are all too ready to accept exactly what is printed on the page, without question. The English church repertory of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is, after all, mostly performed by those who do not specialize in early music (see the remarks quoted in Peter Phillips's articles in *Early Music*, 1980).

The problem is, of course, the emotive word 'transposition' – we do not baulk at performing Bach's Mass in *B* minor (how many flats in that?!); we simply think of it as *a'-415* (a no more 'historic' pitch than *a'-440*). Woodwind instrument makers regularly use *a'-460* as the pitch for their Renaissance-type instruments, and this would seem an ideal pitch (just under a semitone above *a'-440*) for the English domestic repertory ('consort pitch'). A mean-tone above this would give us a 'choir pitch' of around *a'-515*, which sounds so much more acceptable than the shibboleth 'minor third'. Personally, though, I would rather see it written out in its nearest modern equivalent, flats and all!

<sup>1</sup> 'All these parts together (though for the deepest Bass voice, and the loftiest Treble voice) are contained within the compass of 22 notes...but ordinarily they do not exceed the number of 19 or 20.' (Butler)

<sup>2</sup> A good example (although not using the full bass range) is Wilbye's 'Why dost thou shoot' (First Set, 1598):



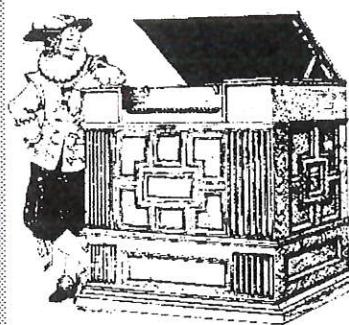
Compare the standard voice parts of church music:



An example of a madrigal involving a tenor voice would be Tomkins's 'When I observe' (Songs, 1622), which is also, incidentally, scored for means only, with an overall range of only twenty notes:



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# Ma bouche rit

Jean Ockeghem

Cantus

1. 5. Ma bou- che rit et ma pen- sé e pleu-

4. Vos- tre pi- tié veult donc- que je pleu-

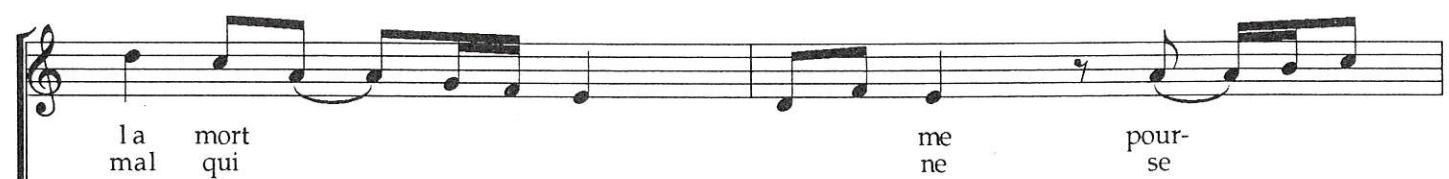
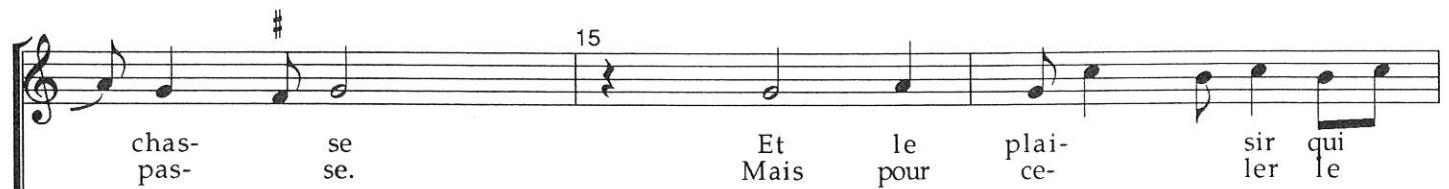
Tenor

Contratenor

re, re, Mon ceil s'es- Mais ri- gueur joie [veult] et que

10

mon cuer mau- dit l'eu- meu-



20

chas-pas- se se Sans Et re-pour con-cou- fort vrir qui le

m'ai-deul de ou ne je sel-la- queu-beu - re. re.

25  
2. Ha,  
3. Puis cuer qu'en perce vers, point faul-vous saire et vous vous vou-

2. Ha,  
3. Puis cuer qu'en perce vers, point faul-vous saire et vous vous vou-

30

men-les      son-ven-      gier,      gier,      Dic-  
Pen-      tes      com-      bien      ment      tost      a-  
de

vez      o-      sé      son-  
ma      vie      a-      bre-      -      -      gier      que  
gier      vi-      de

35

faul- cer      ce que      m'a-      vez      pro-  
ne puis au point      m'a-      m'a-      vez      vez  
mis;      mis.

Edited from the manuscript Dijon, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 517, fols. 4v-6r,  
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Bruno Turner is well known as an editor, writer and broadcaster as well as for his performances and recordings as director of *Pro Cantione Antiqua*.

A look at *Plainsong in the Age of Polyphony*, ed. Thomas Forrest Kelly, Cambridge University Press, 1991, 241 pp. £40

In his Preface to this volume of essays, Peter Williams, General Editor of the series, writes that 'Cambridge Studies in Performance Practice will devote volumes to any period in which useful questions can be asked, ranging from at least Gregorian chant to at least Stravinsky'. The jacket (and a preliminary fly-leaf which precedes the Preface and the Introduction) emphasized that from 'at least the eighth century and for about a thousand years, the repertory of...plainsong, formed the largest body of written music...', also that it was the most performed and the most studied music in the West.

Peter Williams goes on to say that 'performance practice' is not merely about performing – how it *was* played and how you *should* play (often irreconcilable) – but also how it *was heard*. The General Editor's Preface is very well worth reading and so, as one might expect, is the Introduction by the volume editor, Thomas Forrest Kelly. Next we go on to learn that the contributors have gathered their sources from the liturgy, from architecture, art history, secular and ecclesiastical history and hagiography, in order to reassemble 'the tesserae of cultural history into the rich mosaic from which they came'.

Properly, a review should tell potential readers and purchasers at least in outline what they are getting. There are twenty-six pages of John Caldwell's 'Plainsong and Polyphony 1250–1550', wide-ranging and informative to the extent that it should be required reading for anyone inclined to believe that Gregorian chant was handed by the Archangel Gabriel to Gregory the Great in a form to be messianically rediscovered and restored according to God's revealed will in the books of Solesmes, the *Liber Usualis* in particular.

There follow thirteen pages by Michel Huglo that may well fascinate specialized chant scholars but will seem obscure to others as he pursues the variants of *puncta enim directiva* (the *custos* or *direct*), the little indicator sign of what the first note of the next line will be.

I noticed a small variant too; the footnote on page 33 gives Randall and the same dissertation author becomes Rendall on page 40. I only mention this because mistakes, misprints and misalignments seem not to have diminished with modern printing technology. However, Huglo does have something to say to less specialized readers in so far as he opens our eyes to the process of manuscript transmission, in this case revealing aspects of performance practice transmitted in Parisian chant manuscripts of the thirteenth century. He also links the notational practices of chant sources to those of polyphony, often intended for the

same singers.

Rebecca Baltzer's contribution processes through the liturgy of Notre Dame, not simply through the Parisian uses and forms but geographically through the building itself and out of it, literally in procession. With ground plans and illuminating quotations from contemporary rubrics, Baltzer brings her subject to life. In this essay we are led expertly into the full context of the chant and its companion polyphony.

I am not attempting a heavy scholarly review nor should I; this is not the journal nor I the proper person. That is why I shall now single out the fourth chapter, 'The Feast of Fools and *Danielis Ludus*: Popular tradition in a medieval cathedral play', as the essay you *must* read. You don't have to be a thirteenth-century specialist to find this excellent writing by Margot Fassler valuable, enthusiastic, erudite yet witty and wise. (T. S. Eliot once bewailed the loss of wisdom in our modern sea of information. This humane chapter might have cheered him up, because wisdom keeps bobbing to the surface of this veritable ocean of expertly-used information.)

On page 67, Fassler complains of the complete lack of understanding that has been the norm not only for the Play of Daniel, but also for most other 'religious music-dramas of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries'. Historians, she says, can serve performers well by helping to explain what obscure repertoires meant to those who created them. She elaborates this theme and gives a footnote that endears her to me greatly. She notes: 'This paper takes a more positive attitude...than is frequently expressed in the scholarly literature. After reading *Authenticity and Early Music* (Oxford, 1988), for example, one comes away with a grim list of the several ways historians shackle performers and dampen their spirits.' Fassler's detailed examination of the Feast of Fools and the Play of Daniel deals not only in facts but also in judgements of value, of function and of relationships to the real lives of clergy and laity, of masters and servants, even of God and man. It is fascinating.

There are four more chapters to describe. I shall be brief about two, without any disrespect, simply because of my own bias towards the others.

Anyone interested in Machaut's Mass, that perennial object of fascination and pleasure, should read Anne Walters Robertson's mobilization of the skills and arts of archival and historical research combined with the readings of chant books to localize this polyphonic masterpiece. She identifies very clearly the place and purpose of Machaut's Mass within a specific building (Reims Cathedral) and within a specific liturgical order: 'Machaut probably composed his polyphonic Mass in conjunction with a votive service that he endowed for the

Virgin. He incorporated the work into the Saturday mass for Mary at the Rouelle altar...certainly by the time of Guillaume's passing in 1377, this polyphonic Mass would have been sung in front of the statue to the Virgin and now over the grave of the dead brothers [i.e. Jean and Guillaume] as well!' This chapter should be read with Daniel Leech-Wilkinson's edition and monograph close at hand. But this contribution to our present collection of essays is not one that sheds light on plainsong performance practice.

Skipping to the final essay, Iain Fenlon is magisterial yet elegant in his picture of the Mantuan liturgy and its music which was directly founded and maintained by the enlightened patronage of masters 'endowed with the liberality that makes men illustrious' and who 'at extraordinary expense appointed singers to sing' (both quotations from *Tinctoris*). Oh, dear, where have such princes gone that I have never seen these three score years? (Quotation from the present author.) This fine chapter deals in outline and in detail with the interactions of liturgy, its chant and polyphony, fashioned by traditions and princely aspiration, with the movements of social purposes and political power.

Jennifer Bloxam on liturgical tradition and the music of Obrecht shows how chant sources can illuminate and indeed sometimes correct surviving polyphonic sources. Certainly, when dealing with an age of almost chaotic diversity in the performance of liturgy and chant from one locale to the next, it can be invaluable to realize fully the potential of 'local use' service books, especially those with music notation, and to pin down in place (even in time) the works of a composer such as Obrecht. The process and results of such studies are very well demonstrated. What Jennifer Bloxam contributes that connects her to my favourite essays in this book is her section on 'The music of Obrecht and the performance of plainsong'. She calls it a brief foray. She touches upon the notation of *cantus firmi*, upon those theorists of Obrecht's time who seem to insist upon the equality of plainchant's notes, upon their transfer into polyphony and the degree to which that apparent equality is transferred.

The standard of these essays is very high. Yet one has the feeling that the subject is so impossibly large that a single study can only scratch at the surface to reveal something, always of interest and of use to performers, but only *some* things. Scratch away a little further and you will find some other things, things that seem somehow to conflict with the previous finding, and which are often flatly contradictory.

To me, Richard Sherr's contribution – 'The performance of chant in the Renaissance and its interactions with polyphony' – is what I would like to have a whole book about: it is a disgrace that this chapter seems to be pioneering work. It should be common knowledge in the possession of scholars and in common use by performers. Lurking behind the scenes, as it were, is Dr Mary Berry and that shadow of her former self, Mother Thomas More, with a Cambridge dissertation, *The Performance of Plainsong*

*in the Late Middle Ages and Sixteenth Century* (1968) and an accessible article in the *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 92 (1965–6). Three separate chapters refer to her work.

Not all of her conclusions can still be fully sustained; for example, the similarity of speed for alternating chant matched with monorhythmic *cantus firmi* in, say, the hymns and responsories of John Sheppard can be disproved by widening the search and accumulating a store of contrary and disparate examples. Dr Berry, nevertheless, was right about so much that it is strange that 'it is only recently that serious studies of local melodic traditions of chant have been attempted' (a footnote, with good references, on page 179).

Sherr's wise remarks near the beginning of his essay are significant. He points out that one reason for the lack of serious modern interest in the rhythm of chant in the Renaissance (meaning, I think, the fifteenth century and most of the sixteenth) is that *cantus planus* can and did co-exist with the concept of *cantus fractus*. He defines the latter as not so much a technique of singing the chant mensurally as of writing it mensurally either strictly, as in certain hymns, or in what we must call quasi-mensural notation, a type which persisted until the late nineteenth century (evidenced by the widespread use of the so-called Medicean editions through to those of Ratisbon, and to such as Haberl's *Magister Choralis* (1864), a tutor of great influence).

When you have read this collection of essays and feel ready to return to it for really close attention, it will become virtually impossible not to give careful scrutiny to John Caldwell's wide-ranging contribution (Chapter One) jointly with, and almost inseparably from, Richard Sherr's (Chapter Seven). Here we are in the late medieval/early Renaissance world of new chant composition and of revised chant 'arrangements'. You might be led to think that the fascinating mensural Credo melodies and a few hymns (e.g. two of Dufay's, I think perhaps even three) are oddities or rarities. I would say that a very large number of such mensural and frequently regular metrical tunes exist in particular chant traditions and that they have been neglected because they were regarded as not really plainchant at all, but different, without ancient pedigree, and decadent. Chant corrupts, and corrupt chant, like absolute power, corrupts absolutely, or so the chant reformers and 'purifiers' have maintained with the backing of uniformity-seeking Roman church authorities nearly a century ago. Yet, we now must seek how chant was performed in the times of our revived polyphony of the medieval and early modern periods.

It seems to me ridiculous to perform the liturgical monophonic chants 'equal-note-plain' when the polyphony is mensural and (often) in regular quantitative poetic metre, and when an appropriate matching contemporaneous chant source gives exactly the rhythms, in black mensural notation, that are reproduced in the alternating polyphony. This can be easily demonstrated.

Apropos the mensural Credo melodies of the fifteenth

and sixteenth centuries, it should be mentioned that a whole mensural Credo (I) is buried away, rhythms intact, in the *Missa Si bona suscepimus* by Morales, and that a notable homophonic (four-voiced) Credo Romano (= Cardinale = IV) exists by Alonso Lobo – at least four sources survive – with the whole mensural rhythm preserved in all the voices and the melody intact in the tenor. It was obligatory on Sundays and many feasts at Seville for much of the seventeenth century, by order of the Chapter in 1648. A century and a half before that, the Credo Cardinale (and others less popular) had quite a vogue, often in two-voice versions in 'primitive' polyphony. There's another subject!

Now all we need is a book on chant notation from 1300–1850.



#### Editor's Note:

Due to an unfortunate confusion in the production of the previous issue, an error crept into the title of Bruno Turner's article, which should have read '...or how the Blessed Virgin came to reward St Ildephonsus in the year AD 666...', not the year AD 66. Our apologies to Bruno.

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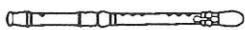
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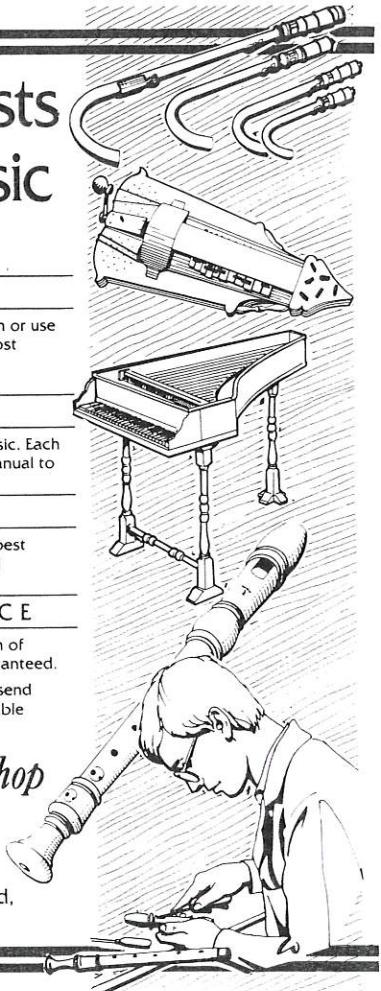
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# A view of the 'waning' Middle Ages

Christopher Page

Christopher Page is chairman of NEMA and director of Gothic Voices.

Anyone with an interest in the fifteenth-century songs so ably discussed by Dennis Slavin in this issue of *Leading Notes* will eventually encounter the luxurious edition of the *Mellan chansonnier* by Howard Garey and Leeman Perkins (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1979, 2 vols). The *Mellan* anthology is a collection from the 1470s containing music by Dufay, Busnoys, Ockeghem and other masters; as we sing or play these beautifully controlled songs, what kind of world are we to imagine as the music's original home? The two editors of the *Mellan chansonnier* have an answer to that question. Howard Garey, for example, declares that the poems of the *chansonnier* open 'a door...[to] the world so sensitively described by Johan Huizinga...'.

Johan Huizinga's book entitled *The Waning of the Middle Ages* is perhaps the most famous monograph ever written about the later Middle Ages in the North. (Garey's collaborator in the task of editing the *Mellan chansonnier*, Leeman Perkins, also praises it). This may seem perfectly straightforward: here we have two scholars citing a classic work. And yet, there is something very puzzling here. I recently re-read *The Waning of the Middle Ages* with mounting admiration but also with mounting alarm. The book is beautifully written and intensely persuasive, but I agree with a British historian who reviewed the English translation of the book, first published in 1924:

*[The Waning of the Middle Ages] leaves on the mind a curious impression: a sort of suspicion seizes the reader that if Professor Huizinga is right, most men who lived in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries must have been practically insane.*

Here is a strange situation: we have found two authorities on fifteenth-century song, Leeman Perkins and Howard Garey, relying heavily upon a book which presents people of the late Middle Ages as nearly mad. What has gone wrong?

*The Waning of the Middle Ages* was first published in Dutch in 1919. It is dramatic, vivid and, in many places, unforgettable:

*To the world when it was half a thousand years younger, the outlines of all things seemed more clearly marked than to us...The contrast between silence and sound, darkness and light...was more strongly marked than in our lives. The modern town hardly knows silence or darkness in their purity, nor the effect of a solitary light or a single distant cry.*

It was probably in 1907 that Johan Huizinga took a walk in the countryside around Gröningen and experienced a moment of intense inspiration: the fifteenth century in the North, he decided, was not a time of preparation for the Renaissance but rather a period of luxuriant over-ripeness: it was 'the autumn of the Middle Ages', the original title of

the book in Dutch. He adored the paintings of Flemish masters such as Hans Memling and van Eyck, with their almost heraldic depth of colour and their intensely sharp focus, but he found contemporary poetry and prose both naive and empty; the pageantry of courts and cities, complete with liveries, tableaux and symbolic figures, seemed to him only the shell of a meaning long dead; fifteenth century chivalry, he decided, was a charade, good for restraining the violence of knights and for expressing their ardent idealism, but with little bearing on real soldiering. The Gothic era, in short, was expiring; 'the soul of the Middle Ages' (a favourite phrase of Huizinga's) was nearly dead.

This suggestive but profoundly negative view of the later medieval period has been reinforced many times since *The Waning of the Middle Ages* was first published. Cartellieri reaches some similar conclusions in his study *The Court of Burgundy* (1929), while Huizinga's view of later medieval chivalry has been endorsed and further illustrated by Kilgour's *The Decline of Chivalry* (1937), Ferguson's *The Indian Summer of English Chivalry* (1960) and Barbara Tuchman's popular classic, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (1978). Now it so happens that musicology is a very young discipline, and like all young things it is dependent. For many decades musicologists have been occupied with huge tasks: editing the many hundreds of compositions that have survived from the Middle Ages; tracing the origin and development of various styles; establishing who the composers were and where they worked. As a result, broader questions of cultural history have been neglected. Musicologists have borrowed the concept of a 'Renaissance' in the fifteenth century from their colleagues working on the history of art and of literature, but does 'the Renaissance' really make sense in a musical context? Most of the truly influential music of the fifteenth century was composed not in Italy, regarded as the cradle of the Renaissance by art-historians, but in Huizinga's 'expiring' Gothic realm of England, France and Flanders. To make matters worse, there is virtually nothing in the history of fifteenth-century music which can be interpreted in terms of a 'rebirth' of classical learning, which is what the concept of a 'Renaissance' is designed to express.

When musicologists have considered these broader issues then *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, with its seductive imagery and its many wonderful insights, has often formed a plaster in which the music-historian can embed fragments of fact when no other kind of adhesion can be found. Time and time again, the resulting mosaic has formed a pattern familiar to all readers of *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. It is one in which the fifteenth century

seems sterile and exhausted. Here is one of the editors of the Mellon chansonnier, Howard Garey:

*Undeniably, the subject matter [of the secular song forms of the fifteenth century] is largely confined to the highly stylized amorous sentiments of aristocratic courts. In addition, the recurrence of certain themes, notably the all-too-cruel suffering of the unrequited lover; the strict adherence to the fixed forms of ballade, rondeau and virelai; the conventional turns of phrase; the stereotyped imagery; the excessive reliance upon a basic vocabulary...all these have been derided to some extent by modern critics.*

This is very unhelpful, and yet it represents a view that can be found everywhere (Dennis Slavin's piece in this issue is an honourable exception). Here, for example, is Craig Wright in his much-admired *Music at the Court of Burgundy* (1979):

*tradition, or stylized form, pervaded every aspect of late mediaeval life, from the intricacy of the poetic formes fixes to the impracticality of the armoured cavalry charge.*

These remarks are pure Huizinga with their emphasis upon the stylization of life in art and their confidence that chivalric military techniques had become anachronisms by the fifteenth century. Wright also owes something to Johan Huizinga in his willingness to believe that late-medieval people were capable of sustained irrational behaviour; would any reasonable man continually send expensively armed and trained knights into combat if it was *impractical* to do so?

The most sustained attempt to integrate Huizinga's views and the history of fifteenth-century music is made by Walter H. Kemp in *Burgundian Court Song in the Time of Binchois* (1990). Kemp links the evidence of Burgundian chronicles, literary texts, art, chivalry, legends and taste together in a way that is so strongly associated with Huizinga that the technique has been called 'Huizinga's method'. Kemp's vision of fifteenth-century culture is almost entirely derived from *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. For proof we need look no further than Kemp's assertion that 'Philip the Good, the third Burgundian duke, fashioned a court culture in a dream...'. That seems a rather odd choice of words until we recall that the concept of dream is central to Huizinga's view of the declining medieval world: 'if earthly reality is so hopelessly miserable...let us colour life with a beautiful appearance, let us live away in the dreamland of bright fancy, let us temper reality with the ecstasies of the ideal'.

All this is due for revision. Kemp describes Burgundian chivalry in the time of Dufay and Binchois as 'a preservation of a memory', as if such nostalgia and regret were characteristic of chivalry in the fifteenth century. In recent years, however, it has become clear that chivalric culture was nostalgic at all times in the Middle Ages. Chivalry, like the Christian religion, took its models of excellence and virtue from the past; knights looked back to Roland, Arthur or Julius Caesar in the twelfth century as much as they did in the fifteenth.

These issues gather around the tournament. Chronicles

and romances of chivalry leave no doubt that the festivities which accompanied jousts and tourneys were often adorned by chansons, both in ducal residences and in the halls of prosperous towns such as Bruges. Any assessment of the song repertoires of the fifteenth century therefore rests, in some measure, upon our judgement of the chivalric festivities and tournaments which enfolded them. In his book on Binchois, Kemp follows Huizinga and regards the tournaments of the fifteenth century as 'futile but highly stylized and ornamental pageants' which had supposedly gone to seed after their springtime in the twelfth century. This view is seriously out of date. As Larry D. Benson has argued in the consistently revisionist volume of essays *Chivalric Literature* (1980), edited by Benson himself and by John Leyerle:

*[Tournaments in the twelfth century] were crude and bloody affairs, forbidden by the Church and sternly suppressed by any central authority powerful enough to enforce its ban. Though older historians... believed that chivalry flourished in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and steadily declined thereafter, the most characteristic form of public expression of chivalric ideals, the tournament, was just beginning in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and thereafter steadily developed, culminating in the fifteenth and even sixteenth centuries...*

In an excellent study, published in Sydney Anglo's volume *Chivalry in the Renaissance* (1990), Richard Cooper has demonstrated the force and longevity of chivalric interests in sixteenth-century France, long after the death of Dufay:

*Writers like Kilgour and Huizinga tend to dismiss Renaissance chivalry as a decadent and devalued pastiche of its Mediaeval model...it can however be demonstrated that, far from waning, interest in things chivalric increased manifold during the sixteenth century in France.*

Cooper then proceeds to demonstrate his claim with a vast bibliography of chivalric material published in France in the 1500s. The appetite for such material was certainly not waning at the close of the Middle Ages.

Malcolm Vale's outstanding study of chivalry in the later Middle Ages, *War and Chivalry* (1981) leads us in a similar direction:

*...much has been made of the artificiality and unreality of the display which accompanied the later medieval tournament. Unlike their modern successors, fifteenth-century writers were not so convinced of the military uselessness of such chivalric diversions. In 1497, a tournament at Sheen palace offered Henry VII of England's courtiers the opportunity to 'learn the exercise of the deeds of arms' and the king had already proclaimed a tournament there in 1492 to test their military skills before the French campaign of that year...*

*The blood-letting of a heroic age may have some appeal to the imagination, but the wanton squandering of lives in the twelfth century tournoi hardly seems one of the more admirable features of the civilization that Huizinga saw as the supreme medieval achievement....*

During the last ten years the fifteenth century has been changing at great speed. Let us all wake up to that fact and, with the guidance of past masters such as Huizinga, make our own Middle Ages from our experience of the music and all that can be known about it.

This article is based upon a chapter in a book entitled *Discarding Images: Music and Culture in Medieval France*, to be published by Oxford University Press in the Spring of 1993, where full references may be found.

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## Correction

Some important words were inadvertently removed from the interview with Bill Hunt in the January 1992 issue. The last sentence of column 1, page three, should be replaced with:

If you use covered strings on the bottom of basses and tenors – basses in particular – they cloud up the whole texture, not just on that instrument but through the rest of the ensemble. It's usually the middle voices which suffer. But if you use gut strings on the bottom, which have a much shorter resonance – indeed almost the same length of resonance as the top strings – this achieves significantly greater clarity.

Our apologies to Bill for this excision, which managed to reverse the meaning of his original statements.

Cantus

Tenor

Bassus