# From Maker to Composer: Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450–1500

By ROB C. WEGMAN

*For David Fallows on his fiftieth birthday*

LAUREYS. They're singing the motet; it's time to go.
HERCULES. Which motet is it?
SAMSON. 'T is but my guess: *In te Domine speravi* with two sopranos.
ZACHARIAS. It's a fine motet. Who might have made it (*wie macht ghemaeckt hebben*)?
LAUREYS. Lupus, the choirmaster of St. Donatian's at Bruges.
SAMSON. Really?
ZACHARIAS. Ah, that was a good *componist* in his time.
HERCULES. What! Has he died? I saw him not long ago.
LAUREYS. I do believe he is dead, for when I was last in Bruges there was a new master.
HERCULES. God have his soul; he was a good man.
SAMSON. You speak well, Hercules; he was truly a man of honor. I have spent a good time with him on many occasions.
LAUREYS. And what is more, I have learned that Richafort has died.
HERCULES. But when did they die?
LAUREYS. When so many people died, in the year 1540, in the same year that the Emperor departed from Bruges.
SAMSON. By my faith, it was very hot and dry weather at that time; it didn't rain for five or six weeks.
ZACHARIAS. You are right; it was a very unhealthy year.

THIS PASSAGE, one of several of musical interest from a Flemish-French conversation manual of 1543, occurs in a colloquy among four Brussels citizens attending Mass in the local church of Our Lady

Earlier versions of this article were read under the title "Singers and Composers in Flemish Urban Centers: A Social Context for Busnoys and Obrecht" in colloquia at the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana (March 1995), the University of California at Santa Barbara (November 1995), and at the national meeting of the Renaissance Society of America (Bloomington, Indiana, April 1996). The original research was made possible through a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship at Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

at the Zavel.[1] Among the worshippers is Emperor Charles V whose singers, along with those of Queen Mary of Hungary, participate in the service. On offer is some of the best vocal musicianship in Western Christendom, to judge from the comments of the four interlocutors who repeatedly draw attention to the singing, the quality of the voices, the relevant liturgical items, and the composer of the final motet—information that one might expect to find in program notes and concert reviews today. Laureys appears especially well informed: he identifies the soloists of a "duo" and even remembers from which regions in the Low Countries they originate.

The Brussels conversation manual provides the earliest known evidence on how citizens in the Low Countries might have responded to performances of vocal polyphony—not in literary contexts (letters, diaries, or travel accounts), but in casual conversation. What is immediately striking about the dialogue is the vivid *popular* interest in works and authors to which it bears witness, extending even to details of voice layout and biography. The question "Who has made it?" recurs later on in the same manual, after lunch in the home of Master Jacob vanden Dale: "I believe it was made by Gombert." "Who is he?" "The Emperor's choirmaster." For Brussels citizens in the 1540s, it would appear, the performance of a "fine" composition immediately prompted the question of its author—as if one's musical experience remained somehow incomplete without the knowledge of his name.[2]

From a historical viewpoint, it is not self-evident that listeners in the past should always have responded to music in this way. In the early sixteenth century, for example, it would not generally have occurred to citizens of the Low Countries to inquire immediately who had made this or that product, rather than to ascertain whether it was

[1] *Ghemeyne t'Samenkoutinghe van Jan Berthout, Besluytende dry schoone ende profijtighe Dialoguen van Maeltijden ende verscheyde Coopmanschappen* . . . (1543; reprint, Dunkirk: Jan Weins, 1623); see René Lenaerts, *Het nederlands polifonies lied in de zestiende eeuw* (Mechelen: Het kompas, 1933), 155–59; Bonnie J. Blackburn, "The Lupus Problem" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1970), 5–6; and Glenda G. Thompson, "Music in the Court Records of Mary of Hungary," *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 34 (1984): 132–64. Guillaume Richafort died on 13 March 1540, Lupus Hellinck before 14 January 1541.

[2] In this respect there is a noteworthy contrast between the conversation manual and the Middle Dutch pilgrimage account of the Delft barber Arent Willemsz, dated 1525, which includes a detailed eyewitness description of polyphony being performed at St. Mark's, Venice: Willemsz employs such musical terms as *contrepoont* and *fabridon*, but his narrative is devoid of any interest in composers and works, and (significantly, for the present article) could be consistent with the polyphony having been extemporized. See Iain Fenlon, "St. Mark's Before Willaert," *Early Music* 21 (1993): 547–63.

adequate to its purpose. Yet this only underlines the truism that composers, by this time, were no longer considered "mere" makers or craftsmen. Lupus Hellinck in fact emerges from the conversation as something of a regional celebrity. The reason for his fame lies in musical authorship: "He was a good *componist*," as Zacharias acknowledges, using a professional designation to emphasize Lupus's creative achievements. While that may not strike the modern observer as particularly noteworthy, the conversation manual happens to be the earliest known Middle Dutch source for this Latin-derived neologism.[3] And this is unlikely to be a mere accident of random survival: the related Middle Dutch verb *componeren* begins to be documented in a specifically musical sense in the 1540s as well, and by 1550 payment records from 's-Hertogenbosch (see below) list Clemens non Papa as "sanger ende *componist*." Before the 1540s, it would have been customary for citizens to refer to someone like Lupus Hellinck simply as Laureys does: "choirmaster of St. Donatian's"—a qualification, in other words, that draws no special attention to compositional activities, and indeed does not necessarily imply them. The popular interest in musical authorship to which the manual testifies is thus paralleled by a new vernacular usage that highlights, for purposes of everyday conversation, the special significance of musical creativity and authorship.

As the following article aims to demonstrate, the Brussels conversation manual comes at the end of a period of about seventy-five years during which "the composer," specifically of vocal polyphony, professionalized and acquired increasing cultural status—not only in the eyes of those who began to describe themselves as such, but also in the popular consciousness. Indeed one might plausibly argue that it was during this period that the modern concept of the professional composer originated and became influential.[4] This highly significant, if

[3] J. A. N. Knuttel et al., eds., *Woordenboek der Nederlandschen Taal*, 25 vols. to date (The Hague and Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff and A. W. Sijthoff, 1902- ), vol. 3, pt. 2, cols. 2098–99, gives as the earliest source for the Dutch "componist" and "componeren" P. de la Croix, *Crispijn Musikant* (Amsterdam, 1685): "ik ben een komponist."

[4] On late medieval perceptions of musical authorship and the emergence of "the composer," see Edward E. Lowinsky, "Musical Genius—Evolution and Origins of a Concept," *The Musical Quarterly* 50 (1964): 321–40 and 476–95; reprinted with postscript in Edward E. Lowinsky, *Music in the Culture of the Renaissance and Other Essays*, ed. Bonnie J. Blackburn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1:40–66; Ludwig Finscher, "Die 'Entstehung des Komponisten': Zum Problem Komponisten-Individualität und Individualstil in der Musik des 14. Jahrhunderts," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 6 (1975): 29–45 (with discussion on 135–42); Paula Higgins, "Musical Politics in Late Medieval Poitiers: A

exceedingly complex, historical development took place in several countries in Europe over the same decades, though not always at the same pace, and certainly not along parallel trajectories. The Low Countries were, in fact, comparatively late in adopting a vernacular derivative of the Latin *compositor:* the Italian *compositore* and the German *componist* are documented as early as the 1470s and 1480s. In a sense that is surprising, especially for a geographical region that had produced the leading composers in Europe during the fifteenth century, including the very men to whom the Italian and German terms had first been applied (Martini, Isaac, and Bordon). Where else than here would one have expected to find the early recognition, if only in a new vernacular usage, of the distinct professional identity and status of composers?

One does not resolve this question by assuming that the professionalization of the composer, and the cultural recognition of musical authorship were typical Renaissance developments that might have originated in Italy and were slow to reach the North. The present article, which explores the emergence of both phenomena in urban musical culture in the Low Countries, will arrive at a different conclusion: that they stemmed from and perpetuated long-established modes of thought. At bottom, that is, they were late medieval phenomena. To demonstrate this in what follows it will be necessary first to examine how the same musical culture could have operated without a significant awareness of musical authorship, and indeed without a writing-oriented musical aesthetic altogether. Particular attention will be paid to what I shall describe throughout this article as "oral" or extemporized counterpoint, to indicate the absence of a significant written dimension.[5] (An example in point might be the "duo," of which Laureys and his friends had wondered only about the names of the singers, possibly because they understood the music in question to be neither written nor conceived by a single individual.) Against this

Tale of Two Choirmasters," in *Antoine Busnoys: Method, Meaning, and Context in Late Medieval Music*, ed. Paula Higgins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, forthcoming); idem, "Musical 'Parents' and Their 'Progeny': The Discourse of Creative Patriarchy in Early Modern Europe," in *Music in Renaissance Cities and Courts: A Festschrift in Honor of Lewis Lockwood*, ed. Anthony M. Cummings and Jessie Ann Owens (Detroit: Harmonie Park Press, 1996), 169–86; and idem, *Parents and Preceptors: Authority, Lineage, and the Conception of the Composer in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, forthcoming).

[5] On orality and literacy in general, and the different ways they condition and structure mentalities and consciousness, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), which deals with many of the issues discussed here.

background, it will be possible eventually to appreciate the vast conceptual distance that needed to be traveled for Brussels citizens in the 1540s to talk about works and their composers as they did.

### *1. Discant in an Urban Context*

At bottom, the art of the composer was the art of counterpoint, of course, yet this was hardly his art alone. Even if almost everything we know about fifteenth-century counterpoint derives from treatises, of which a great many have survived, it would be premature to conclude from this that the art presupposed literacy, or even Latinity. In almost every case, the treatises codify the rudiments of an improvisatory practice that was widely taught and transmitted orally, and known popularly as *discant:* the singing of consonant intervals over given melodies.[6]

Nor would it be correct to situate the practitioners of discant exclusively among professional musicians or noble dilettantes. The practice was in fact dispersed, in varying degrees of skill and experience, throughout the urban communities of the Burgundian Low Countries. It was a popular art, a living practice. As such, however, it tends to remain largely obscured from our view, not only because unwritten traditions by definition leave little or no documentation, but particularly because it is hard to avoid the presumption, fostered by our writing-dependent culture, that whatever evidence survives must pertain to written polyphony unless otherwise indicated. In many

[6] For the practice and its conceptual basis, see Richard L. Crocker, "Discant, Counterpoint, and Harmony," this JOURNAL 15 (1962): 1–21; and Klaus-Jürgen Sachs, *Der Contrapunctus im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert: Untersuchungen zum Terminus, zur Lehre und zu den Quellen*, Beihefte zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft 13 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1974). The word *discant*, as it appears in fifteenth-century documents from the Netherlands (many of which will be cited in this text), normally means polyphony according to the rules of counterpoint, and by itself does not specify whether the music is written or extemporized. Other Middle Dutch words that are synonymous to *discant* are *musike* (the expression "discant ende musike" is frequently used in alternation with either of the two nouns), and the rare *contrepoont* (and again one sometimes encounters "contrepoont ende discant"). Thus, an *Ave Maria* "in discant" or "in musike" can mean either a polyphonic rendering of the plainchant or, in a copying payment, a written setting. I will argue below that this ambiguity was to give way, around 1500, to a perceived opposition between composition and improvisation. However, the words *discant*, *musike*, and *contrepoont*, in the fifteenth century, are as yet innocent of any such perception: depending on context they can refer to both written and unwritten music. It is the contention of this article that in most cases, the context either plausibly or definitely implies extemporized singing. The most obvious exceptions are copying payments for music "in discant" or "in music," and references to "discant boucken," "libri discantus," "livres de musique," and so on.

cases, it might be more historically appropriate to presume the opposite.

Let us start our exploration with a concrete case. On 16 October 1454, the magistrates of Leiden appointed the composer Jacob Tick as choirmaster at the church of St. Peter.[7] The appointment contract enumerates Tick's responsibilities for the five or six choristers under his care: among other things, he was to train the boys in singing discant, with which they were to adorn the liturgy every day. In Leiden, as elsewhere, extemporized discant constituted an important complement to performances of written polyphony—not as a second-best option in the absence of suitable repertory, but rather as a practice that was applied and appreciated for its own sake. The essential importance of oral musical skills in fifteenth-century churches is corroborated by a number of chapter decisions at Cambrai cathedral which mention appointments of new singers on the express condition that they improve their ability to "sing upon the book" (*cantare super librum*).[8]

Yet the need for Tick's expertise was not confined to the purely utilitarian purpose of training choirboys. He promised, in addition, to instruct every schoolboy whose parents "desire and request to have their children taught in discant." It would thus appear that the municipal officials viewed counterpoint as a valuable skill for both liturgical and generally secular purposes. As such, the art was not reserved exclusively for children of the well-to-do. An additional clause in Tick's contract covered the eventuality of parents being too poor to pay for lessons in discant.[9] Poverty, it was evidently felt, should not pose an impediment to musical training, even if children were taught for their own rather than the church's benefit.

Nor was the teaching of discant reserved exclusively for boys: while the document refers to the choristers as "jongen" (boys), it designates all other pupils neutrally as "kinderen" (children). More concrete evidence of this can be found later in Tick's career. By 1468,

[7] For the appointment contract discussed here see Christiaan C. Vlam and Maarten Albert Vente, eds., *Bouwstenen voor een geschiedenis der toonkunst in de Nederlanden*, 3 vols. (Utrecht: Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis, 1965–80), 1:171–73.

[8] Craig Wright, "Performance Practices at the Cathedral of Cambrai, 1475–1550," *The Musical Quarterly* 64 (1978): 295–328, at 313–14: seven chapter decisions from the period 1485–1534, in which the expression for oral polyphony is "to sing upon the book" (*cantare super librum;* more on this usage below).

[9] Vlam and Vente, eds., *Bouwstenen* 1:172; for a translation of the relevant passage, see Rob C. Wegman, *Born for the Muses: The Life and Masses of Jacob Obrecht* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 59 n. 27.

he had trained his two daughters to such a level of musical professionalism that they sang "new masses" together with him and his son at the court of Frank van Borselen, count of Oostervant.[10] The example is significant in that it confirms that social pressures did not prevent girls from receiving formal training in polyphony—even, as apparently in this case, written polyphony. It is exceptional only in that secular women, for once, had the opportunity to perform sacred music in a context that required the administration of a payment.[11] (As bailiff of the duke of Burgundy and the council of Holland, by 1459, Tick was well-enough connected to create such opportunities for his family.)[12]

Documents from Ghent recording the inheritance of orphaned children frequently tell us that girls were to be "sent to school," although it is not always clear whether this involved private tutoring or formal school instruction.[13] Although discant would naturally have been a lesser priority than reading and writing, the Leiden case shows that the availability of suitable musical instructors could be a matter of public concern. Nor is this the only example. In 1454 the city of Venlo in Guelders rewarded a singer for having "taught discant to our burgher children," confirming the perceived public need for musical instruction even in the most provincial outposts.[14] One can only wonder how many children in towns of the Low Countries were

[10] C. Lingbeek-Schalekamp, *Overheid en muziek in Holland tot 1672* (Poortugaal: Blok & Flohr, 1984), 208. For Tick's compositions, none of which appears to have survived, see Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 63 n. 35. Similarly, on 9 March 1481 Maximilian I rewarded the "chantre de musique" Adrien van Hove for having "chanté de musique avec sa femme et deux de ses filles devant lui à son disner pour sa plaisance"; see Georges Van Doorslaer, "La Chapelle musicale de Philippe le Beau," *Revue belge d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art* 4 (1934): 21–57 and 139–65, at 34.

[11] On women singers and musicians in late medieval courts, see Paula Higgins, "Parisian Nobles, A Scottish Princess, and the Woman's Voice in Late Medieval Song," *Early Music History* 10 (1991): 145–200, and the extensive bibliography cited therein.

[12] Lingbeek-Schalekamp, *Overheid en muziek*, 203–4. Tick was also active as succentor at St. James, Bruges, from August to December 1463. See Alfons Dewitte, "Zangmeesters, organisten en schoolmeesters aan de Sint-Jacobparochie te Brugge, 1419–1591," *Biekorf* 72 (1971): 332–49, at 347; and Reinhard Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 123.

[13] David Nicholas, *The Domestic Life of a Medieval City: Women, Children, and the Family in Fourteenth-Century Ghent* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 128–29. On musical instruction to boys and girls in schools in Brabant and Flanders, see Barbara Helen Haggh, "Music, Liturgy, and Ceremony in Brussels, 1350–1500," 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1988), 1:149–52; and Reinhard Strohm, *The Rise of European Music, 1380–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 288–89.

[14] Gerard Nijsten, *Het hof van Gelre: Cultuur ten tijde van de hertogen uit het Gulikse*

taught discant without this necessitating decisions or payments by city magistrates. One suspects that the Leiden and Venlo examples have survived precisely because these cities, unlike Ghent or Bruges, were not teeming with professional musicians already. They may thus represent merely the few documented instances of a widely perceived musical need, which led to public measures only in exceptional circumstances.[15]

In these cases, the art of discanting was in all likelihood taught and transmitted as a living practice, possibly without the use of a single treatise.[16] What mattered was the practical skill of singing correct successions of consonant intervals: the rules were internalized, not by learning them from Latin manuals, but by applying them in lessons as well as in communal music making. At most, instruction would have involved books or slates with monophonic tunes, with the master singing the written melodies, and the pupils improvising (either by turns or together) counterpoints of increasing floridity. Hence the popular designation

*en Egmondse huis (1371–1473)* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1992), 122: "die onser burgerkynderen dyscant geleert had."

[15] Exceptions are documented as well. On 15 October 1482 the dean and chapter of the church of Our Lady at Tholen agreed with the magistrates of that city on a number of new regulations concerning the duties and rewards of the choirboys. The ordinance had become necessary because many parents of schoolchildren "do not wish to have their children taught in any *muzike* or discant." (*Muzike*, in Middle Dutch, was used as a synonym for polyphony, usually in opposition to *simpelsanck*, plainchant.) In order to encourage local parents, "that they might more willingly have their children taught in song," the city undertook to pay for tabards to be given annually to the four principal choristers. See Vlam and Vente, eds., *Bouwstenen* 3:223–25. Interestingly, Antoine Busnoys held a canonry *in absentia* at this church; see Paula Marie Higgins, "Antoine Busnois and Musical Culture in Late Fifteenth-Century France and Burgundy" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1987), 120–21.

[16] It must not pass unnoticed here that Adrian Petit Coclico, in his treatise *Compendium musices* of 1552, says this explicitly about his own training: "As a mere boy I was entrusted to the protection of the most noble musician, Josquin, where, when I had perceived those elementary precepts of our art, incidentally, from no book (*nullo ex libro*), I began at once to sing and in singing to observe those things with which today many precepts deal, and to form my song and all my models after his example." See Adrian Petit Coclico (d. 1563), *Musical Compendium* (Compendium Musices), trans. Albert Seay (Colorado Springs: Colorado College Music Press, 1973), 7; and *Adrian Petit Coclico: Compendium Musices*, facs. ed. Manfred F. Bukofzer, Documenta musicologica 9 (Kassel and Basel: Bärenreiter, 1954), Biij. However, the fact that this needed stating (as if readers would have assumed the opposite by default) would suggest that the kind of training "from no book" that Coclico received (and of which he evidently was rather proud) had become relatively unusual by the mid-sixteenth century. This would be in line with the changing status of writing and literacy in musical practice after about 1500, discussed in more detail below. I am grateful to Paula Higgins for pointing out this and the other passages from Coclico referred to below.

"singing upon the book" (*chanter sur le livre, cantare super librum, singen opten boeck*) as a synonym for oral counterpoint.

The fifteenth century was, in many ways, the age of the popularization of counterpoint, of its diffusion outside the world of clerics and intellectuals. Indirect evidence for this can be gleaned from the increasing circulation of discant treatises in the vernacular.[17] The best-known examples are from England, where some of the practices discussed involve exceedingly simple mental aids, and do not presuppose mensural literacy. Despite the rudimentary level of these teachings, Leonel Power specifically wrote his Middle English treatise "for hem that wil be syngers, or makers, or techers," in other words, for professional musicians.[18] Such manuals, one suspects, catered to the growing work force of nonclerical singers, for whom benefices were reallocated in churches everywhere in the course of the fifteenth century.[19] In churches that lacked the funds to pay professionals, local

[17] Sachs, *Der Contrapunctus im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, 207–20, lists eleven counterpoint treatises in Italian, five each in English and Spanish, and one in French, all in fifteenth-century sources. For a hitherto unnoticed fifteenth-century counterpoint treatise in Middle Dutch, see Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 10876–83, fol. 142v: "ix accorde siin daer men contrepoont ende alle discant mede seet, de welke siin: unisonus, unisono [*sic*], 3$^{e}$, 5$^{te}$, 6$^{te}$, 8$^{ve}$, 10$^{e}$, 12$^{e}$, 13$^{e}$, 15$^{me}$. Ende dese deel dommen in twe partyen, deen siin perfecte ende dander imperfecte. Der perfecte siin .v. ende dander imperfecte .iiij. Die .v. perfecte siin unisonus, 5$^{te}$, 8$^{ve}$, 12$^{me}$, quintedecime, ende met desen es men sculdich te beghinnenne ende te inden, ende deesen en machmen gheen twe setten deen na dander, als twe unisones oft twe quinten oft enich vanden .v. perfecten, daer en sijn imperfecten tussen, der welke siin .iiij. Dats te wetenne, terce, sexte, decime, terdecime, ende deser mach men wel setten .iij. oft .iiij. deen naer dander. Als die musike gradatim clempt ofte daelt, ende die achterste so es sculdich dan perfecte te siin, na dat die imperfecte accorde sij altoes nemen die naeste. Ende als die musike clempt soe sal sal [*sic*] dat contrepoont dalen, ende als die musike daelt soe sal dat contrepoont clemmen nader torgelen die voer gheseet." The question of the function, readership, distribution, and cultural status of counterpoint manuals is exceedingly complex, and probably cannot be answered for the treatises as a genre. I am arguing here that counterpoint was generally taught and transmitted as an oral practice, and that written codifications served mainly to record the basic rules for reference.

[18] For examples, see Thrasybulos Georgiades, *Englische Diskanttraktate aus der ersten Hälfte des 15. Jahrhunderts: Untersuchungen zur Entwicklung der Mehrstimmigkeit im Mittelalter* (Inaug.-Diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, 1935), 12–30; Sanford B. Meech, "Three Musical Treatises in English from a Fifteenth-Century Manuscript," *Speculum* 10 (1935): 235–69; Manfred Bukofzer, *Geschichte des englischen Diskants und des Fauxbourdons nach den theoretischen Quellen* (Strasbourg: Heitz, 1936), 132–60.

[19] By the procedure known as incorporation. For a detailed discussion of this procedure at Antwerp in the early fifteenth century, see Josef van den Nieuwenhuizen, "De koralen, de zangers en de zangmeesters van de Antwerpse O.-L.-Vrouwekerk tijdens de 15e eeuw," in *Gouden jubileum gedenkboek, ter gelegenheid van de viering van 50 jaar heropgericht Knapenkoor van de Onze-Lieve-Vrouwkatedraal te Antwerpen*, ed.

citizens themselves could sing discant on a voluntary basis, for a small *pourboire*, as at the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft in 1455.[20] Attempts to make fairly sophisticated compositions, even four-part masses, available to those who could not read mensural notation, led to the circulation of music in stroke notation.[21]

More direct evidence of the popularity of counterpoint is provided by theatrical plays, in which ordinary people are sometimes portrayed as possessing skills in discant.[22] The famous example from the Wakefield Second Shepherd's Play, even if partly humorous in intent (since few would have expected to encounter advanced musical skills in the countryside), does suggest that the extemporized singing of polyphony was considered a relatively normal pastime:[23]

---

Paul Schrooten (Antwerp: Choraelhuys, 1978), 29–72. On the reallocation of benefices in general see Pamela F. Starr, "Rome as the Centre of the Universe: Papal Grace and Music Patronage," *Early Music History* 11 (1992): 223–62, at 238–46 and 261–62.

[20] Dinant Petrus Oosterbaan, "Kroniek van de Nieuwe Kerk te Delft," *Haarlemse bijdragen: Bouwstoffen voor de geschiedenis van het bisdom Haarlem* 65 (1958): 215–16, publishes the following chronicle entry for the year 1455 (my trans.): "Concerning the first discant and *musiic* that was sung here. Anno LV, master Zibrant, the schoolmaster, began to sing *musiic* on high feast-days in the church, for which he taught some of his pupils as well as some priests, and laymen who took pleasure in this. And they received nothing from the church but a pittance or gift, which they could spend together in merriment." Musical collaboration between laymen and priests is also suggested by *Maître* Pierre Pathelin's claim, in the well-known play named after him (written before 1470), "mais je m'ose vanter que je say aussi bien chanter ou livre avecques nostre prestre"; Jean Dufournet, ed., *La Farce de maître Pierre Pathelin* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), 50. On lay participation in liturgical services at Brussels, see Haggh, "Music, Liturgy, and Ceremony," 1:191–92.

[21] Margaret Bent and Roger Bowers, "The Saxilby Fragment," *Early Music History* 1 (1981): 1–27. The success of such attempts at popularization is shown by the survival of the Saxilby mass in a set of fragments at Bologna; see Charles Hamm, "Musiche del Quattrocento in S. Petronio," *Rivista italiana di musicologia* 3 (1968): 215–32. For another example, see Hugh Benham, " 'Salve Regina' (Power or Dunstable): A Simplified Version," *Music & Letters* 59 (1978): 28–32. For stroke notation in general, see Jan van Biezen and Kees Vellekoop, "Aspects of Stroke Notation in the Gruuthuse Manuscript and Other Sources," *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 34 (1984): 3–25. Tinctoris may have referred to this and similar practices in his definition of *suppositio:* "the introduction of certain bodies (*corpora*) in order that they may signify sounds in the place of notes"; see Johannes Tinctoris, *Terminorum musicae diffinitorium: A Facsimile of the Treviso Edition (ca. 1494)* (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966).

[22] For music in French plays, see Howard M. Brown, *Music in the French Secular Theater, 1400–1550* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), esp. 101–5; and André Pirro, *Histoire de la musique de la fin du XIV^e siècle à la fin du XVI^e* (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1940), 124–32.

[23] Arthur C. Cawley, ed., *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (London: J. M. Dent, 1974), 85. Tenor, mean, and treble are, of course, standard designations for the "sights" in improvised English discant of the kind described in the treatises by Leonel Power and others. See, for an excellent summary, Sylvia W. Kenney, *Walter Frye and*

1 SHEPHERD. . . . By the rood, these nights are long! Yet I would, ere we yode, one gave us a song.
2 SHEPHERD. So I thought as I stood, to mirth us among.
3 SHEPHERD. I grant.
1 SHEPHERD. Let me sing the tenory.
2 SHEPHERD. And I the treble so high.
3 SHEPHERD. Then the mean falls to me. Let see how ye chant.
[*They sing*

A similar scene can be found in the late fifteenth-century Flemish mystery play *Het Spel van de V vroede ende van de V dwaeze Maegden*, based on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Mt 25.1–13). Unlike the three shepherds, the five foolish virgins plainly could not get their musical act together, though it remains unclear who was the more foolish here: Pride for being able to sing only discant, or the other virgins for being apparently unable to join her:[24]

RECKLESS. Who is going to deliver something pleasant? Miss Pride, would you not sing us a little song?
WASTE-OF-TIME. I would have asked her, if I had the courage.
PRIDE. Alas, I have a cold; my singing would please nobody.
VAINGLORY. Come on, I pray, a song or two.
PRIDE. It would be useless; I am so congested, I would not know how to utter it.
RECKLESS. My, my! You used to sing so well; are you finished already?
PRIDE. I am telling you, it is impossible. I know nothing but discant (*discant*), and there is no one here who can join me. Why don't you sing? I'll give you my place.
RECKLESS. Why, good Lord, that would suit me well! Vainglory, would you sing us something?
VAINGLORY. I would gladly do it, but frankly, I cannot.
WASTE-OF-TIME. Dear, you all make such a fuss about it! Then let me sing, in my coarse manner: Folly, help me and sing with me.
FOLLY. Gladly, but I can sing only in falsetto (*fosset*).
WASTE-OF-TIME. Yes, well, that is good enough for me.
FOLLY. Rise then, as you please, Ainsy que vou plaist.
WASTE-OF-TIME. Now listen everybody, for it is a nightwatch song (*doncker auweet*).
[*Here they sing a verse or two together*

---

*the* Contenance Angloise (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), 91–122. For three-part singing among ordinary citizens in fifteenth-century England, see also John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 285–87.

[24] Marcel Hoebeke, ed., *Het Spel van de V vroede ende van de V dwaeze Maegden* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 117–19; vv. 251–75 (my trans.). On polyphonic songs in Flemish morality plays see also Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 156–57.

Yet another reference, from the early Tudor play *Hickscorner*, alludes to a popular practice of extemporizing counterpoints upon vernacular tunes: "now *Hey trolly lolly*! Let us se who can descaunt on this same."[25]

Such examples confirm that singing, whether of discant or of monophonic tunes, was seen to enhance and enliven even informal social occasions. German theorists in the period 1550–1650 observed that extemporized counterpoint, although by then rare in churches, was still being practiced among miners, horsemen, tailors, cobblers, shepherds, "and all the rest of the artisans," both during work and in public taverns.[26] A similar example from a much earlier period concerns the public baths at Basel, where the visiting Castilian nobleman Pero Tafur reported in 1438/39 that "the people generally sing well; down to the common folk they sing artfully in three parts like skilled artists."[27] In light of such evidence, it seems doubtful that one should necessarily classify discant practices among ordinary citizens as "domestic" music making, taking place in the privacy of the home. The concept of the nuclear family, of course, had little social reality at a time when domestic privacy was valued less than the communal bonds

[25] Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, 257. For a contemporary description of a two-part counterpoint on *L'ami Baudichon*, see Brown, *Music in the French Secular Theater*, 104. It might be objected that these latter examples concern secular rather than sacred music, yet I would argue that this distinction was not perceived as relevant to "discant" as a general musical practice and idiom: the notion of an intrinsically ecclesiastical musical style did not become established until the seventeenth century; see Lorenzo Bianconi, *Music in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. David Bryant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 109. Tinctoris, meticulous in his formulations as always, talks only of polyphony whose text is sacred (as in his definitions of "missa" and "motetus"; *Terminorum musicae diffinitorium*), or whose precious sound quality demands that it be reserved for "sacred things" (as with the music of the fiddle and rebec; see Karl Weinmann, *Johannes Tinctoris (1445–1511) und sein unbekannter Traktat "De inventione et usu musicae": Historisch-kritische Untersuchung* [Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1961], 46). (The apparent absence of any perception that music might be intrinsically sacred *as music*—rather than carry sacred text, or be suitable for worship—ties in directly with the question of the meaning and the effects of music, discussed in section 8 below.) From this perspective, the melody of *L'ami baudichon*, for instance, would have been just as "secular" in the example cited above as it became "sacred" by being underlaid with Ordinary text in the mass attributed to Josquin: the perception of *musical* incongruity or incompatibility appears to be a later development (early sixteenth century), one that is of considerable interest for the history of musical aesthetics.

[26] See Ernest T. Ferand, " 'Sodaine And Unexpected' Music in the Renaissance," *The Musical Quarterly* 37 (1951): 10–27, at 17, 19, and 25.

[27] See Karl Stehlin and Rudolf Thommen, "Aus der Reisebeschreibung des Pero Tafur, 1438 und 1439," *Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 25 (1926): 45–107, at 54.

of the clan, the guild, the parish, and the town. Among the latter groups, the singing of discant could have articulated and tightened communal bonds—which might explain why the popular demand for training in counterpoint occasionally necessitated public measures.

## 2. *Regional and National Manners of Discant*

Like every living practice, counterpoint diversified into regional and national "manners," even distinct techniques—although of course we learn about them only when witnesses had the chance to hear a manner different from their own. The late fifteenth-century theorist Guillelmus Monachus, in his *De preceptis artis musicae*, presented an orderly account of the discant idioms of the English, the French, and "apud nos," probably the Italians.[28] English ways of singing never ceased to impress Continental musicians. The autobiography of the German composer Johann von Soest (1448–1506) describes how, even as an accomplished singer at the court of Cleves in the mid 1460s, he was so deeply impressed by the art of two visiting English singers that he resigned his position and moved to Bruges (where they lived) to learn from them "contreyn und fauberdon."[29] Surely the young Soest would not have traveled more than

[28] Guillelmus Monachus, *De preceptis artis musicae*, ed. Albert Seay, Corpus Scriptorum de Musica 11 (American Institute of Musicology, 1965), 29–44. See also Georges Chastellain's report about trumpeters, minstrels, and other instrumentalists at the royal court of Portugal in the late 1440s, "jouans a la mode du pays"; Jeanne Marix, *Histoire de la musique et des musiciens de la cour de Bourgogne sous le règne de Philippe le Bon (1420–1467)* (Strasbourg: Heitz, 1939), 83. All of the citations in the present section are examples of what contemporary observers *heard*, and how they accounted for their aural impressions in terms of perceived national or regional styles. Since I am concerned here with the apparent indifference, prevailing up to about 1500, as to whether heard polyphony was extemporized or sung from mensural notation, it is unnecessary to establish for every citation that performers were extemporizing, even though this was probably true in most cases. The point is that observers themselves showed little apparent concern to clarify this, and did not seem to regard the distinction as particularly relevant; this was to change later on. An interesting early exception is in the executors' account of the estate of John, duke of Bedford (d. 1435), which lists a "livre de motetz en la maniere de France" among his movable effects: "motet" is one of the few designations for polyphonic music in the late Middle Ages that positively rule out the possibility of extemporization (the genre involves written construction by definition), and the national "manner" is evidently established here through an act of reading rather than one of hearing. See Andrew Wathey, "Dunstable in France," *Music & Letters* 67 (1986): 1–36, at 12.

[29] Johann Carl von Fichard, ed., "Johanns von Soest eigne Lebensbeschreibung," *Frankfurtisches Archiv für ältere deutsche Litteratur und Geschichte* 1 (1811): 103–7. The fullest account of Soest's life and literary works is in Gerhard Pietzsch, *Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte der Musik am kurpfälzischen Hof zu Heidelberg bis 1622* (Mainz and Wiesbaden: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, 1963),

two hundred kilometers unless he expected to learn skills far more advanced than any discant treatise could codify.

Performances of two-part counterpoint, no matter how sophisticated, may not seem likely today to have precipitated many professional career moves. Yet Tinctoris, for example, confessed to being carried to virtual religious ecstacy by the two-part counterpoints of two blind viol players at Bruges.[30] Similarly, Binchois was said to be reduced to "vergongne," and Dufay to "despite et frongne," upon hearing another pair of blind viol players at the court of Burgundy.[31]

---

678–82 (96–100). Pietzsch incorrectly assumes that Soest went from Bruges to Harderberg in eastern Holland (ibid., 679), rather than to Aardenburg, the destination of the annual Bruges procession on the Feast of Cripples (Soest writes "Von Bruck kam ich zu Ardenburg"). To Pietzsch's account can be added a report by the organist and humanist Rudolph Agricola, in a letter written at Heidelberg on 7 June 1484, that Soest "composes vocal works for nine and even for twelve voices, but of his works for three or four voices I have heard nothing which pleases me much. But I should not like to present my taste as the judge. After all, it is possible that they are better than I can understand"; see Elly Kooiman, "The Biography of Jacob Barbireau (1455–1491) Reviewed," *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 38 (1988): 36–58, at 37 and 45 n. 21; and Sabine Žak, "Die Gründung der Hofkapelle in Heidelberg," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 50 (1993): 145–63, at 155–63.

[30] Weinmann, *Johannes Tinctoris*, 45–46 (my trans.): "A little time ago [this is in the early 1480s] I heard at Bruges two blind brothers from Flanders, men no less educated in literature than experienced in music, of whom one was called Carolus and the other Johannes [Fernandes], sounding together on this kind of viol, the former the top parts and the latter the tenors of many songs, in so skilled and so pleasing a manner, that I have truly never found greater delight in any euphony." The counterpoints of the Fernandes brothers (described by Tinctoris as "the top parts and . . . tenors of many songs") were performed on instruments, yet this does not diminish their relevance in the present context: after all, it would be anachronistic to project on this period a perceived generic difference between vocal and instrumental music such as to turn "counterpoint" into an exclusively vocal phenomenon. For the crucial importance of oral counterpoint traditions to fifteenth-century instrumental music, see Keith Polk's significant study, *German Instrumental Music of the Late Middle Ages: Players, Patrons, and Performance Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[31] Gustave Reese, *Music in the Renaissance* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959), 51. For more on these viol players see Marix, *Histoire de la musique et des musiciens*, 29–30, 117–18, and 182; Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges*, 88–89; and Paula Higgins, review of the same, this JOURNAL 42 (1989): 150–61, at 159 n. 20, where Jehan Fernandes is identified as the father of the viol players mentioned by Tinctoris. See also the report by the Castilian nobleman Pero Tafur, who visited the Burgundian court at Brussels in 1438/39 and wrote: "At this court I encountered two blind men from Castile who played the lute, and whom I have seen again since in Castile"; Stehlin and Thommen, "Aus der Reisebeschreibung," 67. The Fernandes brothers visited Frank van Borselen, count of Oostervant, in 1455 (Lingbeek-Schalekamp, *Overheid en muziek*, 201, my trans.): "Item, on 8 November [1455], given to two players who belonged to my gracious lord of Burgundy and who were blind, and who visited my lord [of Oostervant] in his room in The Hague, 6 sc. 6 d. gr."

It may be a modern prejudice to assume that oral polyphony could compete with composed music only if it involved more than two voices. Singers of discant could excel not only by expert coordination within a larger ensemble, but also by developing virtuoso soloistic skills. These are precisely the areas that are covered least well in contemporary treatises. Most authors limited themselves to what Klaus-Jürgen Sachs has called the *Kernlehre:*[32] note-against-note singing in two parts, which represented the most elementary stage of fifteenth-century discant training. (Tinctoris called such counterpoint "completely ridiculous" when sung upon a mensural tune, and "childish" when sung upon a plainchant.)[33] In the few cases where treatises touch on more advanced stages—those that people would actually have practiced and enjoyed—they typically lose every semblance of system, and approach the informality of the teaching situation by giving either isolated bits of practical advice (mostly to cover eventualities) or examples to be imitated.[34] Unlike the first basic steps, the experience of constant training and practice could not be digested into a system of rules—save the one general rule that such experience, especially before the age of twenty, was irreplaceable.[35]

If Johann von Soest traveled to Bruges to learn discant in the English manner, elsewhere national or regional styles of discant were "imported," or at least emulated. When Maximilian I established a new chapel at his court in Vienna, in 1498, the singers and choirboys were required "auf Brabantisch zu discantieren."[36] Similarly, an en-

[32] Sachs, *Der Contrapunctus im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, 57–122.

[33] Johannes Tinctoris, *Opera theoretica*, ed. Albert Seay, 2 vols., Corpus Scriptorum de Musica 22 (American Institute of Musicology, 1975 and 1978), 2:121, or *C* II.xxii.8, as references to treatises in this edition will be given hereafter: upper-case roman numerals refer to books, lower-case roman numerals to chapters, and arabic numerals to sentences. Individual treatises are abbreviated as follows: *Complexus effectum musices* (*E*); *Expositio manus* (*M*); *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (*C*); *Liber de natura et proprietate tonorum* (*T*); *Liber imperfectionum notarum* (*I*); *Proportionale musices* (*P*); and *Tractatus de notis et pausis* (*NP*).

[34] Sachs, *Der Contrapunctus im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, 123–69.

[35] As Tinctoris observed in his *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (my trans.): "In our time I have not known even one man who has achieved eminent or famous rank among musicians if he began to compose or to sing *super librum* at or above his twentieth year of age" (III.ix.7).

[36] Hertha Schweiger, "Archivalische Notizen zur Hofkantorei Maximilians I.," *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 14 (1932): 363–74, at 365. At the wedding of King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary with Beatrice of Aragon, in Székesfehérvàr (Stuhlweissenburg) in 1476, the singers of his chapel were reported (by the delegate of the Elector of Saxony) to have sung Mass "mit löblichem Gesang *mit frantzösischem gesetzten*." The formulation "gesetzten" seems to imply the performance of written music, which cannot be entirely excluded in the case of Leo X's entertainment either

tertainment hosted by Leo X in Rome in 1520 involved choirboys singing "alla Inghlese," which probably referred not to compositions or their execution, but rather to a distinctive discant idiom.[37] One might see in this a background to contemporary perceptions of national styles of singing. References to the English in particular, who were said by Continental observers to *jubilare* (as opposed to *cantare* on the mainland),[38] have often been associated with the "florid" style of the Eton Choirbook. Yet evidence that *jubilare* could refer to oral counterpoint—as distinct from composition—is provided in Soest's autobiography: "And soon I entered the choir school, where I quickly learnt fully to command the art, so that I could solmize artfully, and also could jubilate counterpoint; and in addition I learnt to compose."[39]

There is substantial evidence to suggest that the singing of oral counterpoint took up a large part of the daily activities of church musicians. At Cambrai cathedral, for instance, "the technique of improvising polyphony on psalm tones and other liturgical chants *super librum* was practiced throughout the period 1475–1550, and possibly well before and after. All lesser vicars were expected to be skilled in this art, and it constituted a principal mode of performance at the canonical hours, at least on festal days of duplex rank."[40] A foundation document of a votive Mass for the confraternity of the Holy Sacrament in the church of Our Lady at Antwerp, dated 23 July 1506, stipulates, among others, that the vicar-singers should "discant" (*discanteren*) upon the Alleluia and Sequence, sing the Communion "with counterpoint" (*metten contrapuncte*), yet do the Introit "without

(see below, n. 37). See Emile Haraszti, "Les Musiciens de Mathias Corvin et de Béatrice d'Aragon," in *La Musique instrumentale de la renaissance*, ed. Jean Jacquot (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1955), 35–59, at 39. During his visit to Barcelona, on 1 March 1519, the Flemish singers of Emperor Charles V were said to have sung Matins after the Roman manner: "Y aprés de vespres, foren dites matines ben trossades *more romano*"; see Emilio Ros-Fábregas, "Music and Ceremony During Charles V's 1519 Visit to Barcelona," *Early Music* 23 (1995): 374–91, at 388 n. 20.

[37] Bonnie J. Blackburn, "Music and Festivities at the Court of Leo X: A Venetian View," *Early Music History* 11 (1992): 1–37, at 5 and 12–17. For the next sentence, see ibid., 14–15.

[38] Tinctoris in *P* Prologus 12 (who echoes public opinion by observing that the English "are *commonly* said to jubilate"), and Frank Ll. Harrison, *Music in Medieval Britain* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 171.

[39] Von Fichard, ed., "Johanns von Soest eigne Lebensbeschreibung," 97: "Und ted mych bald in dy sangschol, da lert ich bald dy konst fur fol, das ich kunstlich kont solnysyrn, auch contrapunckt kont *iubylyrn;* dar tzu so lernt ich *componyrn.*"

[40] Wright, "Performance Practices at the Cathedral of Cambrai," 322.

singing upon the book" (*sonder opten boeck te singen*), which implies that the latter was standard practice for Introits.[41] Even as late as 1597, Thomas Morley remembered, "As for singing upon a plainsong, it hath been in times past in England (as every man knoweth) and is at this day in other places the greatest part of the usual music which in any churches is sung."[42]

Against this background it seems at least worth considering that a phenomenon like the *contenance angloise* in the early fifteenth century involved much more than the distribution and emulation of English compositions. Channels for the transmission of written music, after all, had been as well established in the fourteenth century as in the fifteenth. Yet for oral traditions of discanting "alla Inghlese" (and indeed "auf Brabantisch") to spread to other countries it was essential that foreign musicians could be heard practicing their art in the first place (as Soest, for example, had done). The music historical significance of the Council of Constance (1414–18) and the English annexation of Normandy (1417–49)[43] may lie more in the creation of new opportunities for oral transmission of foreign discant styles than in the distribution of hitherto unknown compositions. Martin Le Franc's well-known comments about the *contenance angloise* have usually been taken to refer to composition, but he in fact contrasted the new "practice" in which Dufay and Binchois "discanted" (*deschanterrent*) with the way Tapissier, Carmen, and Césaris had only very recently "sung" (*chanterrent*)—which of course is not to deny that all these men were also active as composers.[44] Rather than speaking of any written music by Dufay and Binchois, which he might have heard and perhaps even sung himself, Le Franc reported the opinion of those "who had heard them" in person.

Given the dissemination of discant practices among urban popu-

[41] Van den Nieuwenhuizen, "De koralen," 67–68.

[42] Thomas Morley, *A Plain and Easy Introduction to Practical Music*, ed. R. Alec Harman (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 206.

[43] Manfred Schuler, "Die Musik in Konstanz während des Konzils, 1414–1418," *Acta musicologica* 38 (1966): 150–68; Harrison, *Music in Medieval Britain*, 243–45; Wathey, "Dunstable in France"; Strohm, *The Rise of European Music*, 106–24.

[44] For this and the following citations from Le Franc, see David Fallows, "The *contenance angloise:* English Influence on Continental Composers of the Fifteenth Century," *Renaissance Studies* 1 (1987): 189–208. Reinhard Strohm, for example, argues that Le Franc associated the *contenance angloise* exclusively with composition, to the exclusion of English traditions of extemporized polyphony: "In the lines containing the term *contenance angloise* and the name of Dunstable, [Le Franc] expresses respect for musical works, not for [the performing techniques of] faburden or English discant" (*The Rise of European Music*, 128–29).

lations, there is every reason to regard the *contenance angloise* as a phenomenon that would have excited ordinary people as much as professional musicians. One does not necessarily have to suspect hyperbole when Martin Le Franc writes that the manner in which Tapissier, Carmen, and Césaris *chanterrent* was "so good . . . that they astonished all Paris." The public response to the *nouvelle pratique* of the English may have been no less enthusiastic elsewhere. In September 1416, after hearing English singers perform a service in Cologne cathedral, a local chronicler surely echoed public opinion in commenting that they "sang as well as had been heard in the cathedral for thirty years."[45] Against this background of genuine musical interest and involvement, one might understand the efforts of civic communities throughout the Low Countries to place choral polyphony on a firm financial footing.[46]

### *3. Singing as a Profession*

Evidence that ordinary citizens took a keen interest in discant, and practiced it among themselves, shows that singing, as such, was not a sharply defined trade. For a start it lacked the principal characteristic of medieval trades: protection. In Ghent one was a professional trumpeter by virtue of membership in the local guild of trumpeters—which in turn presupposed formal training and recognized mastership.[47] While some citizens might have played the trumpet for recreational purposes, the guild would undoubtedly have brought legal action against them if it perceived a threat to the livelihoods of its members.

[45] Schuler, "Die Musik in Konstanz," 158. Significantly, at the cathedral of Troyes it required a formal prohibition by the chapter, on 1 July 1448, to discontinue the singing of gymel ("ille cantus anglicus") in the daily psalmody of the singers and vicars; see Arthur-Émile Prévost, *Histoire de la maîtrise de la cathédrale de Troyes* (Troyes, 1906; reprint, Geneva: Minkoff, 1972), 155.

[46] For one example among very many, see the contract between the town magistrates of Middelburg and the Westmonsterkerk, dated 1 November 1500, in which it was decided to have "an honest, solemn song of discant with a choirmaster, tenorist, contrabass, soprano and treble (*triple*) as well as six little choristers" at Mass and Vespers on all major feasts, as well as in the Salve every evening; the city was to pay all the expenses. See Willem Sybrand Unger, *Bronnen tot de geschiedenis van Middelburg in den landsheerlijken tijd*, 3 vols., Rijks geschiedkundige publicatiën 54 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1923–31), 1:510–11.

[47] For this and what follows, see Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 47–56. For another example, see Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges*, 89–91: in 1466, the Bruges barber Jean Basin was charged with allowing his eleven-year-old nephew Jan Huissen to play instruments at public feasts and masked balls without being a member of the guild or a citizen of the town.

Indeed the members themselves could incur fines for the professional "contagion" of exercising their trade with nonmembers.

Singing did not enjoy such protection, and this gave rise to a fiercely competitive labor market which in turn dispersed singers across a sliding scale of relative financial success, there being no sharp professional boundary line (or safety net) *de jure*. A singer could apply for positions anywhere if he coveted a higher place on the scale,[48] yet his own position, conversely, could come under threat at any time from unsolicited applications by outsiders. A case in point is Antoine Busnoys's successful application, in September 1465, for the choirmastership at Poitiers, a position, significantly, that was not vacant to begin with.[49] In most other professions, guilds were designed to rule out such merciless outside competition. The virtual absence of professional guilds for vocal musicianship remains unexplained—although one reason may be that the best professional singers tended to be clerics, and hence that singing could rarely develop into a family trade.[50] It is true that the London confraternity of St. Nicholas counted many singers and even composers among its members, yet this was really a guild of parish clerks, not musicians *per se*.[51] The only documented example of a genuine guild of singers comes very late in the fifteenth century, and in a musical outpost: in 1498 the singers of the church of Our Lady in the eastern Dutch Hanse town of Zwolle founded their own confraternity, with limited and strictly professional membership, headed by a *zangdeken* ("dean of song").[52]

At the lower end of the professional scale, depending on the economic climate, amateurs might conceivably have tried their luck, and professionals might barely have been able to cling on.[53] In every

[48] Some time in the late 1460s, when he was a singer at the church of Our Lady at Maastricht, Johann von Soest "conceived the plan . . . to travel away to Italy, to Rome, where the companions (*gesellen*) were singing so well in the Papal chapel" (von Fichard, ed., "Johanns von Soest eigne Lebensbeschreibung," 112). He did not travel further than nearby Cologne, where the provost of St. Gereon sent for him and offered him employment, which he immediately accepted.

[49] See Higgins, "Musical Politics in Late Medieval Poitiers," in *Antoine Busnoys* (forthcoming).

[50] For this issue, see Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 45–56.

[51] Hugh Baillie, "A London Gild of Musicians, 1460–1530," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 83 (1956–57): 15–28.

[52] J. H. Hofman, "Het gilde der zangers in de Lieve Vrouwen-kapel te Zwolle," *Archief voor de geschiedenis van het aartsbisdom Utrecht* 13 (1896): 102–7.

[53] In an extremely interesting letter, finished "in haste" at midnight on 4 February 1450, Pieter de Langhe, choirmaster at Tournai cathedral, writes to a Robijn Scufeleere at Florence that "because of him [a certain Pieter, who was apparently living in Italy] I have, upon my troth, been *without service for six months, and largely used up my*

major city there must have been numerous individuals who had been choristers in their childhood, and who might be forced by poverty to capitalize on whatever musical skills they had retained.[54] The accounts of the confraternity of Our Lady at 's-Hertogenbosch are filled with one-time payments to singers "from elsewhere" who joined in for a while in the hope of finding employment, yet were found to be unsatisfactory in the end.[55] Many other singers "from elsewhere" joined in at 's-Hertogenbosch without even the hope of obtaining permanent employment; they must have led a precarious existence, traveling from one city to another. There was thus a plentiful supply of cheap labor; yet whenever there was an actual vacancy, the confraternity would send messengers as far as Brussels, Ghent, and Bruges to find sufficiently skilled singers.

### *4. The Composer: A Social Perspective*

The sliding scale of professional success was, of course, defined largely by skill and experience. As far as the practice of discanting was concerned, the scale must have slid imperceptibly but deeply into amateur musicianship. On the other hand, familiarity with mensural notation, with written music, was a different matter altogether. While there were distinct social, economic, and devotional benefits to literacy in the vernacular (for which primary schooling was available throughout Flanders), the ability to read and write mensural notation could hardly have constituted a necessity for nonprofessionals.

Unlike the practice of counterpoint, which could be and was widely popularized, mensural theory was essentially intellectual in its conception, involving specialized Latin terminology and modes of thought whose underlying rationale could not be fully comprehended

---

*savings*. And I had six companions, four of whom are now in the chapel of the king of France, and the two of us are at Tournai. And there I am master of the choirboys, and receive, praise God, at least 42 crowns per year, excluding accommodation. And I am, praise God, very well, and intend to stay here, never again to move abroad, so that I will not be moving to [Italy], for the one whom I shall be serving does not live abroad"; see Armand Grunzweig, "Notes sur la musique des Pays-Bas au XV$^{e}$ siècle," *Bulletin de l'Institut historique belge de Rome* 17 (1937): 72–88, at 80–85 and 87–88.

[54] A concrete example is Pieter Huericbloc, a Ghent citizen who was elected guild *deken* or representative in 1452, and of whom a contemporary observed, "when he took office, he was so poor in estate and property that he used to go singing in company for profit in public houses and taverns"; see A. G. B. Schayes, ed., *Dagboek der Gentsche Collatie* (Ghent: L. Hebbelynck, 1842), 220 (my trans.).

[55] Albert Smijers, ed., *De Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap te 's-Hertogenbosch* (Amsterdam: G. Alsbach, 1932).

except through university training in the liberal arts.[56] It may be no coincidence that Tinctoris points to vernacular musical terms (*vulgariter* or *communiter*) only in his discussions of "popular" subjects such as the Guidonian hand and solmization (*M*), musical instruments (*De inventione et usu Musicae*), and significantly, counterpoint (*C*), but not in his treatises on mensural theory. Thorough grounding in this latter area could not be taken for granted even among professional musicians: the theorist famously criticized many of the best-known composers of his time for being "entirely ignorant" of musical proportions, or at least notating incorrectly those few they did know (*P* Prologus 14). In a similar vein he urged elsewhere that musicians should read and study Boethius's *De institutione arithmetica* (*C* III.ix.5), something that few would have been in a position to do outside the liberal arts curriculum of a university. It would appear, moreover, that singers could fall short even of standards much less exacting than those demanded by Tinctoris. According to a complaint voiced by the chapter of the Sainte-Chapelle of Paris on 11 February 1511, Dreux Prieur, who had worked there as master of the choirboys in 1509–10, "doesn't know how to read or sing and doesn't understand anything he says while reading."[57] Whatever the truth of the matter, a complaint like this was evidently thought to be worth taking seriously even for a musician employed at a prestigious choral foundation.

At the lower end of the professional scale, mensural knowledge is likely to have been rudimentary, in many cases even nonexistent. For ordinary individuals, ownership of books of mensural polyphony was virtually out of the question. In most people's experience, discant was a practice, an event, and music a fleeting phenomenon.[58] To handle the elusive complexity of polyphonic sound on paper, to capture and manipulate it as an object, to reflect upon it as a finished "work," was

[56] See also Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, 285–86.

[57] "Aussi ne sçait lire ne chanter et n'entent ou aulcune chose qui die en lisant"; Michel Brenet, *Les Musiciens de la Sainte-Chapelle du Palais* (Paris: Picard, 1910), 60.

[58] Present-day apologists of improvisation highlight precisely this as its defining aspect. See, for instance, Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (London: The British Library, 1992), 35: "It may be that opponents and supporters of improvisation are defined by their attitude towards the fact that improvisation embraces, even celebrates, music's essentially ephemeral nature. For many of the people involved in it, one of the enduring attractions of improvisation is its momentary existence: the absence of a residual document." The relationship between improvisation and musical literacy is also addressed in Robin Moore, "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 23 (1992): 61–84.

to take it out of the sphere of actual music making into the world of clerics and intellectuals.

As far as the cultural status of writing is concerned, the difference between fifteenth-century counterpoint and its ultimate descendant in the modern period could scarcely be overestimated. Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725) is essentially a manual of written counterpoint: it does not codify the rules of a living practice, whose independent existence it can take for granted, but rather offers a method for mastering an idealized but fossilized "classical" style. Just as the living language of scholastic Latin had once been turned into the dead language of humanist Latin, so Fux's Parnassus was really a burial mound, commemorating with written exercises an ancient tradition that had largely expired.[59] That we are inheritors of Fux should not necessarily cause us to regard medieval counterpoint treatises as culturally equivalent to *Gradus ad Parnassum* or its offspring. In most musical centers it would have served no practical purpose, nor would it have warranted the expense, to teach children to write down in exercises what the church and the community really needed them to be able to sing (and sight-read) instantaneously.[60]

In the medieval tradition of counterpoint theory (which stretches

[59] "Since the eighteenth century . . . music as art has been separated from handicraft by a gulf that may be felt as a misfortune but cannot be denied. . . . instructions in craft and recipe books of *musica practica*, ever since Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum*, have been sinking more and more into mere exercises in a dead language, to studies that of course transmit some concept of disciplined musical grammar, but fall short of real composing" (Carl Dahlhaus, *Esthetics of Music*, trans. William W. Austin [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982], 14). By the early eighteenth century, survivals of the practice of "singing upon the book" in French cathedrals struck contemporary observers as both strange and absurd. See Craig Wright, *Music and Ceremony at Notre Dame of Paris, 500–1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 352–53; Jean Prim, "*Chant sur le livre* in French Churches in the Eighteenth Century," this JOURNAL 14 (1961): 37–49; and Jean-Paul Montagnier, "Le Chant sur le livre au XVIII[e] siècle: Les *Traités* de Louis-Joseph Marchand et Henry Madin," *Revue de Musicologie* 81 (1995): 36–63.

[60] See, for example, Wright, *Music and Ceremony*, 174–75: "As was typical of most formal education in the Middle Ages, the choirboys at Paris learned the bulk of their material not by reading and writing, but through oral presentation by a preceptor. . . . The capitular acts at Notre Dame, furthermore, make no mention of slates or wax tablets upon which to write, and it was not until the seventeenth century that the canons of Paris provided an instructor in writing for the boys. Instead, they were taught to read texts and music at sight and to retain a vast store of knowledge in their heads." See also ibid., 325–29. The only possible exception known to me is in a document discovered by Paula Higgins: in 1407/8 the Sainte-Chapelle at Bourges paid for six tablets "pour faire le contrepoint desdiz enffans." See her "Tracing the Careers of Late Medieval Composers: The Case of Philippe Basiron of Bourges," *Acta musicologica* 62 (1990): 1–28, at 9 and 25.

back to the 1330s) the acknowledgment that counterpoint can actually be practiced in writing comes comparatively late, and then only incidentally, in treatises evidently intended for academic readership. Prosdocimus de Beldemandis, doctor at the University of Padua, writes in 1412 "that counterpoint taken in the proper sense is twofold, vocal and written: vocal, that which is uttered, and written, that which is notated."[61] Johannes Tinctoris, whose treatises bear a decidedly academic stamp, describes the distinction in 1477 as follows:

> Furthermore, counterpoint, both [note-against-note and florid], is made in two ways, either in writing or in the mind. Counterpoint that is written is commonly called a made thing (*res facta*). But that which we accomplish mentally we call counterpoint in the absolute sense (*absolute*), and they who do this are commonly said to sing upon the book (*cantare super librum*).[62]

What is remarkable here is not that Tinctoris recognizes the existence of extemporized counterpoint, for that is what counterpoint is understood to be *tout court* ("in the absolute sense").[63] Indeed, for him the very expression "extemporized counterpoint" could only have been a pleonasm: if counterpoint and discant are generally oral, then it is written polyphony that needs the distinguishing adjective (*cantus compositus*, *res facta*). This is the kind of early usage we find in a court ordinance of King Duarte I of Portugal, dating from the mid 1430s, which makes a distinction between "canto feito" on the one hand and "descanto" on the other.[64] Only after about 1500, as writers increas-

[61] Prosdocimo de' Beldomandi, *Contrapunctus*, ed. Jan Herlinger (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 32–33.

[62] *C* II.xx.2–3; trans. quoted, with slight changes, after Bonnie J. Blackburn, "On Compositional Process in the Fifteenth Century," this JOURNAL 40 (1987): 210–84, at 248–49. For Tinctoris's possible association with the University of Naples, see Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 73 nn. 14 and 15, but note the comments in Allan Atlas, *Music at the Aragonese Court of Naples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 76–77.

[63] Elsewhere in Tinctoris's writings, *absolute* has the sense of either "totally," "without exception" (*C* II.xxiii.2), or "generally" (as opposed to "particularly"; *T* xxiv.3–4).

[64] Duarte I, *Leal conselheiro*, ed. José Ignacio Roquete (Paris: J. P. Aillaud, 1842), 453. (I am grateful to Manuel Pedro Ferreira for pointing out this reference to me.) This is also the situation as ethnomusicologists frequently find it. See, for instance, Bruno Nettl, "Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach," *The Musical Quarterly* 60 (1974): 1–19, at 6: "Alan Merriam, in discussing composition in a number of tribal societies, does not bring out that these cultures single out the improvisatory nature of any of their musical products; and this applies even to those among them that articulate ideas about composition. Similarly, an explicit term for improvisation

ingly articulate the distinctive and normative conceptual status of composed polyphony, does the notion of "extemporized counterpoint" become more verbally specific, with novel adjectives that emphasize, for instance, the absence of writing (*mentaliter*, *alla mente*), immediacy (*ex tempore*, *subita*, *abrupta*, *repente*), chance (*ad sortem*), the unforeseen (*improvisus*), and ultimately the aspect of oral tradition (*usualis*).[65] In Tinctoris, too, the unusual recognition that counterpoint can be made in writing forces him to articulate more precisely (*mente*, *mentaliter*) what he can tacitly take as accepted almost everywhere else. Nowhere in his *Liber de arte contrapuncti* does Tinctoris imply that one must learn to devise correct successions of consonant intervals by actually writing out examples such as he provides.[66] Nor does he provide any guidelines as to how one should travel the conceptual distance between singing consonant intervals and writing out separate parts in mensural notation—even if he stresses that the same rules should govern the end result in both cases.[67]

---

seems not to be used in various Asian cultures." See also Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice*, xii: "The word improvisation is actually very little used by improvising musicians. Idiomatic improvisers, in describing what they do, use the name of the idiom. They 'play flamenco' or 'play jazz'; some refer to what they do as just 'playing.' " Similarly, the typical early fifteenth-century usage is to "sing discant."

[65] See especially Ferand, " 'Sodaine and Unexpected' Music." The earliest document known to me where improvisation is explicitly described in opposition to composition is a letter by Thomas Oedenhofer, written at Vienna on 13 March 1460: "He [Caspar Gossembrot], and also his daughter Sibilla, can compose counterpoint as well as fashion immediately, in the act of singing, what may be brought under [their] eyes" ("scit et filia sua Sibilla contrapunctum facere et *e vestigio, que subiecta fuerint oculis, cantando formare*"). See Gerhard Pietzsch, *Zur Pflege der Musik an den deutschen Universitäten bis zur Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1971), 34.

[66] In his *Compendium musices* of 1552, Adrian Petit Coclico still ascribed an essentially oral musical pedagogy to Josquin, allegedly from firsthand experience. Although his account may be of questionable value for Josquin's biography, it is unlikely to be significantly at odds with standard mid-sixteenth-century practice: "My teacher, Josquin des Pres, never rehearsed or wrote out any music, yet in a short time made perfect musicians, since he did not hold his students back in long and frivolous precepts, but taught precepts in a few words at the same time as singing through exercise and practice. . . . When he had seen his students firmly grounded in singing, able to pronounce neatly, to sing ornately and to put the text in the correct place, he taught them the perfect and imperfect types (of consonances) and the manner of singing counterpoint on plainchant with these types" (Coclico, *Musical Compendium*, trans. Seay, 16, with minor revisions after the Latin original in *Adrian Petit Coclico: Compendium Musices*, ed. Bukofzer, p. Fij verso).

[67] As late as 1552, Coclico still made a point of arguing that improvisation was the indispensable prerequisite to composition: "There are many who pride themselves on being composers because they have composed many pieces, having followed the rules and types of composition but making no use of counterpoint; my master Josquin

The question of the status of writing obviously has important social and cultural dimensions. From our point of view it may not seem particularly unusual that Ludwig van Beethoven, at the age of twenty-four, learned counterpoint neatly according to Fux's *Gattungen*, and we would not classify his elementary exercises (most of which have survived) as "compositions."[68] This is mainly because by the late eighteenth century there was already an aesthetic of the work in operation according to which a composition aspired to the status of art, to being an expression or evocation of elevated feelings and emotions.[69] Writing, as such, was not a defining criterion in this aesthetic: the latter centered on the composer's "idea," without which a counterpoint exercise, despite being written, could not aspire to the cultural status that composition then enjoyed.

---

thought little of them and held them as a laughing-stock, saying they wish to fly without wings. The first requirement of a good composer is that he should know how to sing counterpoint by improvisation (*contrapunctum ex tempore canere*). Without this he will be nothing" (Coclico, *Musical Compendium*, ed. Seay, 24, with minor revisions after the Latin original in *Adrian Petit Coclico: Compendium Musices*, ed. Bukofzer, p. Lij verso). However, the fact that Coclico needed to argue this, and that there were "many" who apparently thought otherwise (against whom he invoked the authority of Josquin), would only seem to confirm the normative conceptual status that composition had acquired in the early sixteenth century. By the end of that century, in fact, an observer like Morley was unable to imagine that improvised polyphony (which evidently was no longer practiced in England) would have sounded at all well—a perception that has also prevailed in our own time: "which causeth me to marvel how men acquainted with music can delight to hear such confusion as of force must be amongst so many singing extempore. But some have stood in an opinion which to me seemeth not very probable, that is that men accustomed to descanting will sing together upon a plainsong without singing either false chords or forbidden descant one to another, which till I see I will ever think impossible" (Morley, *A Plain and Easy Introduction*, 206–7).

[68] Printed in Gustav Nottebohm, *Beethovens Studien* (Leipzig and Winterthur: Rieter-Biedemann, 1873).

[69] As Dahlhaus stresses, "The idea that music is exemplified in works [rather than in performances], no matter how firmly rooted it has become in the past century and a half, is far from self-evident. . . . Even up to the present time this idea is foreign to listeners who restrict their musical experience to popular music. And we would be blind captives of a habit of speaking were we to minimize the resistances met by this idea and pass over them lightly" (*Esthetics of Music*, 10–11). For a recent study of the emergence of the work-concept and associated musical-aesthetic values after ca. 1800, see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). For similar developments in the sixteenth century (Germany in particular), see Walter Wiora, "Musica poetica und musikalisches Kunstwerk," in *Festschrift Karl Gustav Fellerer zum sechzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. Heinrich Hüschen (Regensburg: Gustav Bosse, 1962), 579–89. The concept of the musical work is much more problematic in the fifteenth century; for two significant studies, see Martin Staehelin, "Bemerkungen zum Verhältnis von Werkcharacter und Filiation in der Musik der Renaissance," in *Datierung und Filiation von Musikhand-*

In the fifteenth century, however, no such perception existed. The aesthetic sensibility that we can discern in the writings of Tinctoris, for instance, pertains exclusively to the aural perception of music as a sounding phenomenon, the crucial criterion being "sweetness" (*suavitas, suavitudo, dulcedo*).[70] That a given musical event might be based in notation was an accidental circumstance: it did not affect the aesthetic criteria by which the event itself was to be judged. Not surprisingly, then, *compositio* was principally a technical term, covering all counterpoint that was written out—including what we would call exercises, although these, in all probability, would seldom have been written. The defining criterion of the term was writing: hence a counterpoint exercise was just as much a *compositio* or *res facta* as a cantus firmus mass or tenor motet. True, the latter would undoubtedly have enjoyed a much higher cultural status in this period. Yet they derived that status not from the fact of their being *compositiones* (which distinguished them only from oral polyphony, not from exercises), but from the degree to which they embodied "art" and "invention" (which distinguished them from exercises, but not necessarily from oral polyphony).

*Compositor* similarly was a technical term: unlike in the modern period, it had little or no social reality. We do not normally encounter either this word or *compositio* outside the specialized realm of music theory, and even there they are of comparatively late occurrence.[71] "Composer" is never used as a professional designation in contracts, testaments, or legal cases (where it would have reflected social status), but we do find it, by rare exception and only toward 1500, in court

*schriften der Josquin-Zeit*, ed. Ludwig Finscher, Quellenstudien zur Musik der Renaissance 2; Wolfenbütteler Forschungen 26 (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1983), 199–215; and David Fallows, "Embellishment and Urtext in the Fifteenth-Century Song Repertory," *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* 14 (1990): 59–85.

[70] See Rob C. Wegman, "Sense and Sensibility in Late-Medieval Music: Thoughts on Aesthetics and 'Authenticity,' " *Early Music* 23 (1995): 298–312. See also Martin Staehelin, "*Euphonia* bei Tinctoris," in *Report of the Twelfth Congress: Berkeley 1977*, ed. Daniel Heartz and Bonnie Wade (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1981), 621–25. For a different interpretation, see Christopher Page, "Reading and Reminiscence: Tinctoris on the Beauty of Music," this JOURNAL 49 (1996): 1–31.

[71] This is not to imply, of course, that theorists before the fifteenth century would never have used the words *componere*, *compositor*, or *compositio* in connection with music, only that such early occurrences are too incidental to add up to an established usage, and that the words tend to be used in their most literal sense, without the social and cultural overtones they acquired later on. For examples, see Ernest T. Ferand, "Komposition," in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 7:1423–55, at 1427–28; and idem, "Zum Begriff der 'compositio' im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert," in *Bericht über den siebenten Internationalen Musikwissenschaftlichen Kongress, Köln 1958*, ed. Gerald Abraham et al. (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1959), 104–7, at 105.

accounts, where it typically reflects an individual's terms of employment, his particular status as a servant.[72] When Heinrich Isaac, on 3 April 1497, was appointed composer at the court of Maximilian I (a position held *in absentia*), payment records indeed mention him as "Hainrich Ysacc, componist" (see below, section 9).[73] Similarly, in 1504–5 Jacob Obrecht is listed in financial documents of the court of Ercole d'Este at Ferrara as "compositore de canto," and here too there are grounds for suspecting that he was employed as a composer rather than singer.[74]

These are exceptions even for musical institutions, however: in the Low Countries the word does not appear as a professional title in payment lists of choral establishments until well into the sixteenth

[72] Sachs, *Der Contrapunctus im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, 138–39. In Middle English and Middle Dutch, *composicioun* and *compositie* had principally denoted a contract, agreement, or settlement, never a musical work. See Hans Kurath with Sherman M. Kuhn, eds., *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956–88), ii/1. 471–72; Henry Holland Carter, ed., *A Dictionary of Middle English Musical Terms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961); and Eelco Verwijs and Jacob Verdam, eds., *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1885–1952), 3:1747. Cognates of the word "composer" are not documented in either language; its popular association with music (rather than with "putting together" in a general sense) is a late development, not documented before the sixteenth century (see below, n. 75). In copying payments from St. Donatian's, Bruges, words used for "composed" are *conscriptus* (1467), *factus* (1476), *confectus* (1488), *compositus* (1491), and *editus* (1498); at Cambrai cathedral *fait* (1462–64) and *compilatus* (1470 and 1472). See Alfons Dewitte, "Boek- en bibliotheekwezen in de Brugse Sint-Donaaskerk XIII$^{e}$–XV$^{e}$ eeuw," in *Sint-Donaas en de voormalige Brugse Katedraal* (Bruges: Jong Kristen Onthaal voor toerisme Brugge, 1978), 61–95, at 90–95; Jules Houdoy, *Histoire artistique de la cathédrale de Cambrai, ancienne église métropolitaine Notre-Dame* (Lille: L. Danel, 1880), 193–95, 198, and 200. In French, one of the earliest known attestations of "to compose" (in its specifically musical sense) is found in a description of two music manuscripts made for the French royal court in 1471: "et commence ladicte table *Noel* de Okeghan *per totum adventum* Et après ledit *Noel, Asperges me Domine*, et ledit *Asperges* composé par Bunoys ainsi que porte ladicte table" (Higgins, "Antoine Busnois and Musical Culture," 141).

[73] Martin Staehelin, *Die Messen Heinrich Isaacs*, 3 vols. (Berne: Paul Haupt, 1977), 2:46–47; Schweiger, "Archivalische Notizen," 368–70 and 372–73.

[74] Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 349–50. Lewis Lockwood has traced the combined designation *cantadore compositore* in accounts of the court of Ferrara as early as 1473. See his *Music in Renaissance Ferrara, 1400–1505* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 154–55; and below, section 9. A musician can also be designated as composer in accounts when he is rewarded specifically for the writing of new music but not otherwise employed at the establishment. Such paid commissions are, however, exceedingly rare before 1500. The earliest example known to me is at Siena cathedral: in 1484, "maestro Pietro Bordone, *chonpositore* di chanto figurato" is rewarded "per *conponitura* di motetti, credi, e altri chanti fighurati"; see Frank A. D'Accone, "A Late Fifteenth-Century Sienese Sacred Repertory: MS K.I.2 of the Biblioteca Comunale, Siena," *Musica disciplina* 37 (1983): 121–70, at 131–32; and more on Pieter Bordon in Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 70–71.

century.[75] As Roger Bowers has observed, on the basis of a wide-ranging analysis of documents from similar establishments in England, "in the particular circumstances under which the Church promoted the exercise of music, performers were employed as performers, but nobody was employed specifically as a composer."[76] The administrative attitude to composition, indeed, seems to have been one of benign indifference: "for his [ecclesiastical] employers, any musician's talent for composition was just a windfall—a bonus they were probably glad of when it manifested itself, but one which they had no particular right to expect, and did not normally attempt to demand, of any of their musicians."[77]

[75] The earliest examples known to me are from the payment lists of the confraternity of Our Lady at 's-Hertogenbosch: "eenen sanger ende *componist* geheyten Clemens non Papa" ("[paid] to a singer and composer called Clemens non Papa"; 1 October 1550) and "vyff vreempde sangeren die mede gesongen hadden, wair aff dat drie *componisten* wairen" ("to five foreign singers who joined in the singing, of whom three were composers"; 21 October 1562); see Maarten Albert Vente, "De Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap te 's-Hertogenbosch, 1541–1615," *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 19 (1960–63): 32–43, at 39–40. It is also in the sixteenth century that "componeren" and related words begin to be used in a specifically musical sense in the Dutch language. One of the earliest documented instances is in the appointment contract of Claudin Patoulet as choirmaster at the church of St. Bavo, Haarlem, on 31 January 1546: "Des so moet hij de coraelen . . . hoer musycke leeren ende oick leeren *componeren*, als zij daer bequaem toe wesen sullen" ("And he must teach the choristers their *musycke* and also teach them to *componeren*, if they have an aptitude for this"; Vlam and Vente, eds., *Bouwstenen* 1:83–84, also p. 85 for an example from 1558). Given that this clause concerns the education of choirboys, it need not necessarily refer to formal composition in the modern sense, rather than to the writing of counterpoint exercises.

[76] For this and the next sentence, see Roger Bowers, "Obligation, Agency, and *Laissez-faire:* The Promotion of Polyphonic Composition for the Church in Fifteenth-Century England," in *Music in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Patronage, Sources and Texts*, ed. Iain Fenlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–19, at 10–11. Different conditions may have obtained in France, however, as persuasively argued by Paula Higgins in "Musical Politics in Late Medieval Poitiers." Moreover, even in England and the Low Countries, churches did sometimes appoint choirmasters with the condition that they compose new music each year for one or more specified feast-days. For examples, see Bowers, "Obligation, Agency, and *Laissez-faire*," 11 (Durham, 1487 and 1496); and, for the Low Countries, Désiré Van de Casteele, "Extraits des Registres capitulaires de Saint Sauveur," *Annales de la Société d'Émulation de Bruges* 22 (1870): 142–57, at 143–44: on 20 January 1507, the canons of St. Saviour's, Bruges, appointed a new cantor who would be required, "after old custom," to compose a *novum motetum* every year for the feast of St. Eligius (1 December), a *nova missa* every year for the Feast of Cripples (Thursday after Pentecost), and *nova carmina* for the feast of Holy Innocents (28 December).

[77] In the Low Countries, the earliest unequivocal evidence of the encouragement of composition by ecclesiastical employers comes in the sixteenth century. At Our Lady's, Bruges, in the 1510s, the *magister cantus* was allowed to absent himself from liturgical celebrations "quandocunque occupatus fuerit in componendo et ordinando

Social dignity in music, the top end of the professional scale, was expressed rather in the term *musicus*, which implied academic distinction but not necessarily creative activity. Certainly the title must have been protected. When the canons of St. Donatian at Bruges hosted Johannes Ockeghem in 1484, their chapter minutes described him as "musicus excellentissimus."[78] Sixteen years later, they styled Jacob Obrecht as "bene famosus musicus."[79] When the 's-Hertogenbosch composer Paulus de Roda witnessed the testament of the master builder Alart Duhameel, on 12 December 1505, the document qualified him as "Paulus van Roy, musicus."[80] In these formal contexts, *musicus* carries rich overtones of learning and scholarship. In 1523, the *rhétoriqueur* Nicolle Le Vestu indeed remembered Ockeghem as "tresdocte en art mathematique, aritmeticque, aussy geometrie, astrologie, et mesmement musique."[81] Guillaume Cretin, in his *Déploration* of

missam claudorum et motetum Sancti Bonifacii facta per eum prius vel per alium suo nomine." Similarly, on 7 April 1559 the chapter of Our Lady's, Courtrai, decided that Melchior Haeghebaert, *magister cantus*, "excusabitur a frequentatione horarum et chori quoties impeditus fuerit in componendo musicam." See Alfons Dewitte, "De geestelijkheid van de Brugse Lieve-Vrouwkerk in de 16e eeuw," *Annales de la Société d'Émulation de Bruges* 107 (1970): 100–135, at 115; and Joseph Schmidt-Görg, "Die Acta Capitularia der Notre-Dame-Kirche zu Kortrijk als musikgeschichtliche Quelle," *Vlaams Jaarboek voor Muziekgeschiedenis* (1939): 21–80, at 65. Financial rewards (over and above the regular salary) tend to remain rare, however; in 1565/66 Jacob Bruneau, choirmaster at St. John's, Ghent, was rewarded for "having composed some canticles amounting to 30 folios or more" ("ghecomponeert hebben eeneghe canticquen draghende 30 bladeren ofte bet"). See Paul Trio and Barbara Haggh, "The Archives and Confraternities in Ghent and Music," in *Musicology and Archival Research*, ed. Barbara Haggh, Frank Daelemans, and André Vanrie (Brussels: Algemeen Rijksarchief, 1994), 44–90, at 77 n. 128.

[78] The document is printed in the exhibition catalogue *Johannes Ockeghem en zijn tijd* (Dendermonde: Oudheidkundige Kring van het Land van Dendermonde, 1970), 115. See also the letter of recommendation from Maximilian I to Queen Beatrix of Hungary, dated 8 January 1490, in which Jacobus Barbireau is introduced as "musicus prestantissimus" (Kooiman, "The Biography of Jacob Barbireau," 51).

[79] Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 308.

[80] P. Gerlach, "Het testament van de Bossche bouwmeesters Alart Duhameel en Jan Heyns," *Bossche bijdragen: Bouwstoffen voor de geschiedenis van het bisdom 's-Hertogenbosch* 30 (1971): 206–14, at 211–12. A polyphonic Requiem by Paulus de Roda was copied by the confraternity of Our Lady at 's-Hertogenbosch in 1496/97 (Smijers, *De Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap*, 202). For surviving compositions by him, see Thomas Noblitt, "Additional Compositions by Paulus de Rhoda?" *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 37 (1987): 49–63. The composer, who according to the obituary of the confraternity was the son of a Laurentius de Roda ('s-Hertogenbosch, Archief van de Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap, MS 48, fol. 34r), had matriculated at the University of Louvain on 6 June 1474 (Joseph Wils, *Matricule de l'Université de Louvain* [Brussels: Académie royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique, 1946], 2:304).

[81] Dragan Plamenac, "Autour d'Ockeghem," *Revue musicale* 9 (1928): 26–47, at 38.

1497 or later, unofficially elevated Ockeghem to the distinction of doctor, writing boldly that "docteur le puis nommer en la science, et prens tesmoings tous musiciens."[82]

While the word *musicus* denoted social status and public respect, the merely technical term *compositor* was devoid of any such overtones. Anyone could technically be a *compositor* by virtue simply of committing new music to paper, irrespective of social category or rank.[83] We learn from Tinctoris (who was acutely conscious of his own academic qualifications) that many Continental composers were *minime litteratus*, that is, possessed hardly any knowledge of Latin, or at least no university education.[84] Even Charles the Bold, as count of Charolais, tried his hand at composition: at the age of twenty-seven he "fist ung mottet et tout le chant," which was performed in his presence at Cambrai cathedral in 1460.[85] As Giovanni Spataro noted with disapproval in 1529, "even without studying the precepts of counterpoint everyone is a master of composing harmony."[86]

Needless to say, then, there could be little social cohesion among *compositores* by virtue of their creative activity alone. There were no "tools of the trade" by which individuals could be identified as composers in illuminations. In the famous copy of Martin Le Franc's *Le Champion des dames*, prepared at Arras in 1451, Dufay is depicted as "Maistre Guillaume du Fay" with his academic regalia: a purple tabard with scarlet shoulder-piece, and a scarlet biretta.[87] In his funeral monument, Dufay (like Obrecht in his famous portrait) is represented

[82] Guillaume Cretin, *Déploration de Guillaume Cretin sur le trépas de Jean Okeghem*, ed. Ernest Thoinan (Paris: A. Claudin, 1864), 37. In formal contexts Ockeghem is usually identified either as a cleric or as the first chaplain of the king of France.

[83] Note the difference between Tinctoris's definitions of *compositor* and *musicus:* "Compositor est alicuius novi cantus aeditor" and "Musicus est qui perpensa ratione beneficio speculationis canendi officium assumit" (*Terminorum musicae diffinitorium*).

[84] *P* III.iii.7. The composers were Domarto, Regis, Caron, Boubert, Faugues, Courbet, "and many others."

[85] David Fallows, *Dufay* (London: J. M. Dent, 1982), 73–74 and 288 n. 5. See also the statement by the Burgundian court official Philips Wielant: "He also took pleasure in music and was himself a musician. He could compose and sing willingly though he by no means had a good voice" (Richard Vaughan, *Charles the Bold: The Last Valois Duke of Burgundy* [London: Longman, 1973], 162).

[86] Bonnie J. Blackburn, Edward E. Lowinsky, and Clement A. Miller, eds., *A Correspondence of Renaissance Musicians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 336 and 345.

[87] Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 72 n. 8. For the illumination, see Fallows, *Dufay*, ill. 7, facing p. 21. For academic dress in general, see Aleksander Gieysztor, "Management and Resources," in *A History of the University in Europe*, vol. 1, *Universities in the Middle Ages*, ed. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 108–43, at 139–41; and Jacques Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 125.

as beneficed choral clergy: gown with surplice, and a fur *almutium* over the left or right arm.[88] Although it is tempting for the modern eye to look for individuality and historical verisimilitude in his facial features, the composer is principally portrayed in terms of what the Middle Ages valued most: outward signs of social dignity. There were no such signs corresponding to compositional activity.

## 5. *"Making" and "Doing"*

The question as to just what a *compositor* or a *compositio* is, then, needs to be decided on theoretical, not social or cultural, grounds. For this it may be best to return to Tinctoris, who is the most thoughtful and considered witness one might wish to have. As might be expected, the theorist takes a strictly empiricist and matter-of-fact view on these issues. He is interested in counterpoint and composition as objective phenomena, and in the rules that should govern them, but not in the thought processes that they (or the rules) may presuppose or require. He writes about them in the sober language of craftsmanship rather than in poetical metaphors. At the root of Tinctoris's perception lies the Aristotelian distinction between making (*poiesis*) and doing (*praxis*). Music, by definition, belongs to the latter category. To "make" is to produce a piece of work, an object, and sound is not an object but motion.[89] It is fleeting, transitory, immaterial: sound cannot be made (*factus*) but only uttered (*prolatus*). To think of music as a "thing" is a paradox: things have permanence and spatial extension, and for sound this is unthinkable unless it is represented by ink on paper, thus assuming matter and form.[90]

[88] Fallows, *Dufay*, ills. 1 and 2, facing p. 20; and Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 296–97 and frontispiece.

[89] This view was universal, backed as it was by the authority of Boethius: "sound is defined as a percussion of air remaining undissolved all the way to the hearing"; trans. after Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, trans. Calvin M. Bower (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 11.

[90] The conceptual distance between music as sounding motion and music as physical object was vast. The distinction runs right through Tinctoris's writings, for example, where *forma* applies exclusively to the shapes of material things: notes (*NP* iii.4, iv.4, etc.), letters (*M* iii.3), *ficta* signs (*M* iii.34), mensuration signs (*P* I.iii.11), and painted images (*C* II.xxx.6). *Nota*, having form, and described occasionally as *corpus* (*P* I.i.3 and *P* III.iii.5), is by definition a visual symbol, and it alone can be said to have rhythmic value ("signum vocis certi vel incerti valoris," in the *Diffinitorium*). Its immaterial, sounding counterpart is called either *sonus* ("quicquid proprie et per se ab auditu percipitur") or *vox* ("sonus naturaliter aut artificialiter prolatus"). Since there was no means of measuring the temporal duration of either *sonus* or *vox*, Tinctoris always discussed duration in terms of the values of written symbols. Similarly, *pars* is

The Aristotelian basis of Tinctoris's perception does not necessarily make it "bookish" or "intellectual." For most people it simply represented the social reality that music was accessible and intelligible to them only as sound, not in writing. And the principal characteristic of the perception is, in fact, its commonsensical nature, its rootedness in everyday language: a thing is a substance (noun) modified by accidents (adjectives), while motion is caused by action (verb), involving an agent (nominative) and patient (accusative).[91] Tinctoris's written/mental classification, cited above, parallels exactly this noun/verb distinction. While written counterpoint, by its very nature, can only be represented by a noun (*res facta* or *cantus compositus*), oral counterpoint necessarily requires one to use a verb (*cantare super librum*).[92] The noun *contrapunctus*, covering both, can be an overarching term by virtue of being, not an object, but an *ars*, a knowledge of the rules for making and doing.[93]

The matter-of-fact nature of this perception may explain why the Aristotelian "making," in popular usage, was widely employed as the word for "composing."[94] Tinctoris pointed out that a *cantus compositus*

---

consistently used in the sense of written part, since it implies a whole which is "compiled" of parts ("pars cantus compositi"). Oral polyphony cannot consist of *partes*, since it is not compiled (*compositus*), but sung on the spot. Tinctoris is careful to maintain the distinction: when discussing the practice of *cantare super librum*, he never uses the word *pars*, but speaks instead of "one who sings upon the book" (*super librum concinens*).

[91] For the correlation between such concepts and parts of speech in ordinary language, see Frederick C. Copleston, *Aquinas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), 84–85.

[92] Margaret Bent has stressed that the only nouns related to *cantare super librum* denote either the singers or the act of singing (*cantatio* and *concentus*, *cantantes* or *concinentes*); Bent, "*Resfacta* and *Cantare Super Librum*," this JOURNAL 36 (1983): 371–91, at 381–82. See also Blackburn, "On Compositional Process," 256.

[93] *Ars* was the Latin counterpart of the Aristotelian concept of *techne*. *Musica*, in music theory, was principally understood as *ars musicae* (that is, the knowledge or skill of music), rarely as the sounding phenomenon that we would describe as music (for which the usual term was *cantus*). Similarly, in his counterpoint treatise Tinctoris refers repeatedly to *ars contrapuncti* (including in the title), which indicates that *contrapunctus* could be understood in a broader than purely technical sense. Cf. *C* III.ix.2: "the things concerning the art of counterpoint, its *ratio* and *scientia* (knowledge and science), which I have collected in this little work, as best I could."

[94] For the following paragraph, see particularly Blackburn, "On Compositional Process," 262–65. Although writing, creating, and making are nowadays used interchangeably as synonyms for composing, medievals were acutely conscious of the distinctions between them, and they carefully maintained these in written statements. "To create," as Aquinas put it (ibid., 264), is to "produce something out of nothing," which only the Creator can. To make or to compose is to work on or put together material provided by nature, which is what the artist does. To write, finally, is to copy (*scribere*). For this see Copleston, *Aquinas*, 141–46; Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the*

is "commonly" called a "made thing" (*res facta;* see above). The designation *chose faite* does indeed occur in contemporary French poems and documents.[95] Leonel Power, as already observed, wrote his discant treatise "for hem that wil be syngers, or *makers*, or techers." A memorandum recording Dufay's arbitration in a dispute on the modal assignation of an antiphon, at Besançon cathedral on 14 September 1458, describes him as "venerabilis vir magister Guillelmus du Fay, in arte musica peritus et scientificus *factor*."[96] In 1502 a Ferrarese agent reported that Heinrich Isaac "ha *facto* uno moteto . . . et hallo *facto* in dui jorni."[97] The treasury of Maximilian I rewarded Jacob Obrecht in 1503 for a new mass "so er unns *gemacht* hat."[98] In 1496/97 the confraternity of Our Lady of 's-Hertogenbosch compensated a scribe for copying a Requiem which Paulus de Roda "*gemaict* heeft."[99] The royal court of Henry VII remunerated William Newark in 1493 "for

*Middle Ages* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 95–97; and idem, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 173–80. These and related issues are further explored in Ruth Hannas, "Humanistic Light on 'What Is Res Facta,' " *Revue belge de musicologie* 22 (1968): 51–63, esp. 53–56.

[95] Blackburn, "On Compositional Process," 261–62; Ernest T. Ferand, "What Is *Res Facta*?" this JOURNAL 10 (1957): 141–50; Markus Bandur, "Res facta/chose faite," *Handwörterbuch der musikalischen Terminologie* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1972- ). For more examples, and for an archivally based discussion of *res facta* and counterpoint, see Wright, *Music and Ceremony*, 344–54. Paula Higgins has discovered similar references in an inventory from the court of Anne of Brittany, dated 1491, which she has kindly allowed me to publish here: "Item deux livres de chant en papier à choses faictes . . . Item ung livre de plusieurs choses faites à l'ancienne faczon couvert de cuir rouge de bazanne . . . Item ung autre livre de choses faictes en papier" (Inventaire de la Trésorerie de l'Épargne d'Anne de Bretagne, 12 April 1491; Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS nouv. acq. franç. 1364, fols. 4r–v). For an example in Scotland, 1495, see Harrison, *Music in Medieval Britain*, 169: the new statutes for St. Mary's College, Aberdeen, required that the eight priests who held prebendaries should be skilled in "cantu gregoriano, *rebus factis videlicet prik singin*, figuratione, faburdon, cum mensuris et discantu," or at least in "cantu gregoriano, *rebus factis*, faburdon, et figuratione." ("Prick song" is indeed a synonym for notated polyphony.) Josquin des Prez, in his well-known motet *Illibata Dei virgo nutrix*, uses *factura* as an apparent synonym of *res facta;* see Josquin des Prez, *Werken*, ed. Albert Smijers (Amsterdam: G. Alsbach, 1922–69), Motetten, Bundel 5, Aflevering 14, 140.

[96] Franz Xaver Haberl, "Wilhelm du Fay: Monographische Studie über dessen Leben und Werke," *Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 1 (1885): 397–530, at 443. Nicolle Le Vestu's poem on Ockeghem's motet in thirty-six parts opens with the line "Ung *facteur* fut Okghem nommé" and continues "qui *feist* . . . ung motet"; Plamenac, "Autour d'Ockeghem," 37. Similarly, François Villon, sometime around 1460, speaks of "*faiseurs* de laiz, de motés, et rondeaux"; Villon, *Complete Poems*, ed. and trans. Barbara N. Sargent-Baur (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 268.

[97] Helmuth Osthoff, *Josquin Desprez*, 2 vols. (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1962–65), 1:211.

[98] Schweiger, "Archivalische Notizen," 373.

[99] Smijers, *De Illustre Lieve Vrouwebroederschap*, 202.

*makyng* of a song," and his colleague Avery Burton in the next year "for *makyng* a masse."[100] Examples could be multiplied: the crucial point is that the word "maker," unlike "composer," never became invested with the overtones of a later aesthetic, and retained the basic connotation of craftsmanship (not necessarily musical) that made it once synonymous with composer.

That these issues should appear contentious today is mainly because, unlike Tinctoris, we do have an interest in underlying thought processes, and tend to qualify our understanding of "counterpoint" and "composition" in the light of what these might have been. The issue of compositional process, for instance, amounts to the question of what, historically, composers thought and did before arriving at the notated work. And the issue of performance practice amounts to the question of what, historically, singers thought and did when turning the notated work into the musical event. These are important issues, of course, yet the consideration of thought processes or working methods cannot qualify the empirical status of the perceptible phenomena at issue, notation and sound.

Margaret Bent has proposed that *res facta* and *cantare super librum* do not represent discrete and mutually exclusive alternatives, but rather points of relative conceptual emphasis within a continuous field of practical musicianship—one upon which we cannot impose a distinction between "composition" and "improvisation" without serious historical distortion.[101] Her reasons for this were twofold. On the one hand, improvisation, if it was to lead to contrapuntally acceptable results, would necessarily have required such coordination and prior planning as we would associate with the compositional process. A

[100] Andrew Wathey, *Music in the Royal and Noble Households in Late Medieval England: Studies of Sources and Patronage* (New York: Garland, 1989), 278.

[101] Bent, "*Resfacta* and *Cantare Super Librum*," 378: "To remove the presumption of improvisation from [Tinctoris's comments on counterpoint and *res facta*, quoted below] is to present unwritten and written composition or counterpoint as stages in a continuous line of endeavor, based on the same training, rather than as the separate elements implied by our written-versus-improvised antithesis." It seems doubtful, however, that this antithesis is necessarily ours. Rather, Bent's own perception of a "continuous line of endeavor" seems to be the modern view, as articulated, for instance, by Jean-Jacques Nattiez: "There is a continuum of possible cases, running from strict reproduction (but does that ever exist?) to completely free improvisation (does that, also, ever exist?)"; see his *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 88. Reservations about Bent's interpretation have been expressed by Klaus-Jürgen Sachs, "Arten improvisierter Mehrstimmigkeit nach Lehrtexten des 14. bis 16. Jahrhunderts," *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* 7 (1983): 166–83, at 181–83; and Blackburn, "On Compositional Process," 248–51.

written composition, on the other hand, presupposed such independent initiative and responsibility on the part of singers as we would associate with improvisation. These points are incontestable, of course, yet they do not affect the empirical distinction between "notated work" and "musical event" with which Tinctoris is concerned. Qualities such as coordination, prior planning, responsibility, and initiative cannot be empirically observed, although they may be inferred from what can. Tinctoris, however, is not interested in making such inferences: his concern is to distinguish two perceptible phenomena, and he qualifies the distinction only to the extent that both are to be governed by the same rules—no matter what thought processes it takes to realize these.

"Improvisation" would indeed be an inappropriate term if, as Bent suggested, it "includes the notion of spontaneous, unpremeditated music-making."[102] And it does seem uncharacteristic of Tinctoris to concede that dissonances are almost inevitable when two or more are singing upon the book; even if all singers individually succeeded in making consonances with the written melody, there could very easily arise dissonant clashes between them:

> However, *res facta* differs from counterpoint [in the absolute sense, that is, oral] above all in this respect, that all the parts of a *res facta*, be they three, four or more, should be mutually bound to each other, so that the order

[102] Bent, "*Resfacta* and *Cantare Super Librum*," 374. It seems doubtful, however, that the expression "improvised counterpoint" must necessarily imply "a haphazard procedure that would mock the very principles [Tinctoris's] treatise is devoted to setting out," as Bent asserts (ibid., 375). Improvisation in oral traditions almost always involves well-defined models (thematic material, formulas, schemes, cantus firmi) and agreed rules of realizing the performance, even if these are not verbally articulated or codified in writing; see Bernard Lortat-Jacob, "Improvisation: Le Modèle et ses réalisations," in *L'Improvisation dans les musiques de tradition orale*, ed. B. Lortat-Jacob (Paris: SELAF, 1987), 45–59. For this reason I hesitate to agree with Reinhard Strohm, who appears to deny the existence of improvisation altogether by insisting on the greater historical plausibility of memorization of relatively fixed "works": "We should abandon two misconceptions of our technological civilization. One of them is that music which has not come down to us was always 'unwritten' (as if all the written music of the time were preserved), and that 'unwritten music' was always 'improvised' (as if it were forbidden to carry a tune in your head). With our short memories, we tend to think that medieval musicians who performed without written music must have been improvising when they were just playing from memory" (Strohm, *The Rise of European Music*, 358; see also 557). Of course, neither "misconception" would be hard to abandon if stated in such terms, yet it seems open to question that improvisation must be so categorically understood as a practice innocent of memorization of any sort, whether of models, rules, or even tunes. The modern perception of improvisation as the opposite of anything that is fixed, memorized, and premeditated may impose a historically inappropriate dialectic on discussions of fifteenth-century music.

> and law of concords of any part should be observed with respect to each single and all [parts]. . . . But with two or three, four or more singing together upon the book, one is not subject to the other. For indeed, it suffices that each of them sound together with the tenor with respect to those [matters] that pertain to the law and ordering of concords. I do not however judge it blameworthy but rather very laudable if those singing together should prudently avoid similarity between each other in the choice and ordering of concords. Thus indeed they shall make their singing together much more full and suave.[103]

In the last two sentences Tinctoris makes it clear that singing unwritten counterpoint, on an advanced level, was a practice which was almost impossible to legislate. He could codify the basic rules for singers individually, yet how they coordinated their consonances amongst themselves was up to them. On the other hand, he clearly encouraged them to minimize the "important distinction" between written and extemporized counterpoint—the consequence being, ultimately, that the only distinction left was the rather trivial one between writing and absence of writing.

### *6. The Tenorist*

How would singers "upon the book" have been able collectively to meet Tinctoris's recommendation that they minimize the distinction with *res facta*? In the absence of surviving practical suggestions it is only fair to admit our basic nescience, yet we may not be entirely in the dark. First, it is evident from contemporary depictions that gestures and eye contact played an important part in polyphonic singing; the only medieval theorist I know who specifically recommends this, Elias Salomon in 1274, does so with reference to an improvisatory practice known then as *cantus super librum*, yet the precepts of that practice had hardly anything in common with those of the later counterpoint tradition.[104] Moreover, one cannot rule out the possi-

[103] *C* II.xx.5–9; trans. after Blackburn, "On Compositional Process," 249.

[104] Edmund A. Bowles, *Musikleben im 15. Jahrhundert*, Musikgeschichte in Bildern, III/8 (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1977), 103 and 109. Salomon described the practice of *cantus super librum* in four parts, which was to be led by a conductor (*rector*), who could be either one of the four singers or a fifth participant, and in which the singers were required to be in contact with and see each other ("notandum, quod inter se habeant notitiam vocum suarum et quod alter alterum viderit cantare"); see Ernst (*sic*) T. Ferand, *Die Improvisation in der Musik* (Zürich: Rhein Verlag, 1939), 136–38; idem, "The 'Howling in Seconds' of the Lombards: A Contribution to the Early History of Polyphony," *The Musical Quarterly* 25 (1939): 313–24, at 315; and Joseph Smits van Waesberghe, "Singen und Dirigieren der

bility that the gestures found in fifteenth-century pictorial evidence might simply represent collective time beating in the performance of written music. Even so, in combination with the quite noteworthy eye contact and facial expressions they may equally well, and perhaps more plausibly, point to the kind of mutual understanding and coordination that Tinctoris's recommendation would have presupposed in any case.

Second, and more important, there is compelling evidence to suggest that one type of musician, known as tenorist, carried musical responsibilities quite different from those required for the execution of a voice part in a written composition. While the evidence is fragmentary and anecdotal, its accumulated weight would seem to favor the hypothesis that tenorists played a central, coordinating role in extemporized polyphonic singing, and that it was they who would have been responsible for assuring counterpoint approaching *res facta* in richness and control. To begin with, there are indications that tenorists were indispensable in a way that performers of written polyphony would not ordinarily have been. For instance, on 8 July 1481 three sopranos and two "contras" were dismissed from Siena cathedral when the tenorist, Nicholo di Lore, had failed to return from a leave of absence—the reason being that "senza tenorista non si può cantare."[105] As David Fallows has noted, such a categorical statement seems strange if one considers that in written polyphony the "contra" normally occupied a range identical to or lower than the tenor: plainly there was no shortage of singers in that range.[106] Yet the puzzle may be resolved by documentation from Florence: in the late 1480s Nicholo di Lore is listed in the accounts of San Giovanni as a bass, two other singers being mentioned as "tenorista."[107] It would appear from this that "tenorist" denoted a *function* rather than a voice range, and

mehrstimmigen Musik im Mittelalter," in *Diapason de omnibus: Ausgewählte Aufsätze von Joseph Smits van Waesberghe*, ed. C. J. Maas (Buren: Frits Knuf, 1976), 165–87.

[105] Frank A. D'Accone, "The Performance of Sacred Music in Italy During Josquin's Time, c. 1475–1525," in *Josquin des Prez: Proceedings of the International Josquin Festival-Conference*, ed. Edward E. Lowinsky with Bonnie J. Blackburn (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 601–18, at 604.

[106] David Fallows, "Specific Information on the Ensembles for Composed Polyphony, 1400–1474," in *Studies in the Performance of Late Mediaeval Music*, ed. Stanley Boorman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 109–59, at 116.

[107] Frank A. D'Accone, "The Singers of San Giovanni in Florence During the Fifteenth Century," this JOURNAL 14 (1961): 307–58, at 341. For an example in Bruges, see Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges*, 27: Johannes de Vos, singer at St. Donatian's, was described in 1484 as "tenorista . . . habens vocem profundam." At Notre-Dame, Paris, it was decided in 1557 that tenorists should have a larger pension to assure "fortes et bonnes voix pour bassescontre"; Wright, *Music and Ceremony*, 323–24.

the Siena document indicates that this function was indispensable. If it was the tenorist who was to be in charge of five or six "singing upon the book," irrespective of his actual range, then certainly "one cannot sing without a tenorist." That this was true for the Burgundian court chapel as well is suggested by an entry in the court accounts, dated July 1482, in which the tenorist Chrétien de Vos, from the church of Our Lady at Louvain, received payment for having sung in the chapel "during the time that [Jean] Cordier, tenorist of the said chapel, was ill."[108] Since the chapel could scarcely have been short-staffed in the tenor-bass range, and since the parts labeled "tenor" in its choirbooks could hardly have required specialist musical skills, one assumes that the apparent emergency created by Cordier's illness was of a different kind—one not dissimilar, in all likelihood, to the emergency at Siena twelve months previously.

Payment lists of musical establishments in the Low Countries usually leave no doubt which singers are the tenorists—although they often specify the voice types of their colleagues as well ("bovensengher," "basconter," "hooghconter," and so on). What is unique about the title "tenorist," however, is that it also occurs as a professional designation in fiscal and legal sources: contracts, court cases, title deeds, and tax registers—documents that fastidiously identify individuals by their proper social position and trade. For instance, we learn from the yearbooks of the Ghent by-law that on 10 June 1472, Gregorius Bourgois, "tenorist of the King of Naples," sued a local citizen for selling him an intractable horse.[109] The city accounts of Ghent reveal that in 1479/80 Philippe du Passaige, "tenorist in the chapel of our valiant and redoubtable lord and prince [the duke of Burgundy]" paid tax on possessions he had taken out of the town.[110] Mathias Cocquiel, who had sung in the French royal chapel under

[108] Lille, Archives départementales du Nord, Registre de la Chambre des Comptes, B 2127, fol. 225v (July 1482). I am grateful to Paula Higgins for drawing my attention to this document, which is published, though without explicit date, call number, or foliation, in Edmond Vander Straeten, *La Musique aux Pays-Bas avant le XIXe siècle*, 8 vols. (Brussels, 1867–88; reprint, New York: Dover, 1969), 7:302. For more on De Vos see Van Doorslaer, "La Chapelle musicale," 143.

[109] Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 67–68 ("tenoriste sConincx van Napels").

[110] Ghent, Stadsarchief (hereafter SAG), 400.27, fol. 35r: "Philips du Passage, tenoriste in de cappelle ons harde gheduchts heeren ende princhen, van zekere catteylen hem toebehorende, die hij uter stede dede voeren, iij sc. iiij den. gr." See more on Du Passaige in Paula Higgins, "*In hydraulis* Revisited: New Light on the Career of Antoine Busnois," this JOURNAL 39 (1986): 36–86, at 62 and 67; Weinmann, *Johannes Tinctoris*, 33 ("natione Cyprius sed eruditione Brabantinus"); Marix, *Histoire de la musique et des musiciens*, 214; and particularly Van Doorslaer, "La Chapelle musicale de Philippe le Beau," 32.

Ockeghem as far back as 1451–55, must have been a respectable figure in Ghent, where legal and fiscal documents refer to him consistently as "tenorist in the chapel of our redoubtable lord [of Burgundy]."[111] Other professional designations in terms of vocal musicianship do not appear anywhere in these Ghent documents—not even "singer," although one does sometimes encounter the ecclesiastical title *cantor*. Even the internationally famous composer Jacob Obrecht was simply identified, in 1488 and 1492, as master of arts and priest.[112] Similarly, when the well-known singer Pierre Basin sold a house in Ghent in 1485, he was described in the records of the by-law as "priest and canon of St. Donatian's at Bruges." It would appear from this that the title tenorist, although seemingly a merely technical term for "those who sing the parts in music that are called tenor,"[113] carried genuine social dignity and status. And this, in turn, would be hard to explain unless tenorists held special responsibilities that were highly valued and appreciated in society.

Finally, many choral foundations paid their tenorists substantially higher salaries than the other singers. For instance, when the city magistrates of Bergen op Zoom established a daily Salve in the chapel of the Guild of Our Lady, on 24 December 1470, they devoted one clause to the duties and rewards of the choirmaster, one to the payment of singers in general (up to five), and one to the payment of the *opperste tenoriste* (foremost or principal tenorist), specifying that the latter was to receive one-third more in salary than every other

[111] Leeman L. Perkins, "Musical Patronage at the Royal Court of France under Charles VII and Louis XI (1422–83)," this JOURNAL 37 (1984): 507–66, at 520–22 and 553. For his Burgundian activities, see Van Doorslaer, "La Chapelle musicale de Philippe le Beau," 23; and Marix, *Histoire de la musique et des musiciens*, 211–12 and 255–62. When appearing before the Ghent by-law, on 9 January 1476, he was described there as "Mathijs Coquiel, dienare ende tenoriste inde capelle van onsen heer de gheduchte heer" (SAG 301.53, 1475/76, fol. 45v). He is mentioned with the same professional designation in several documents pertaining to rents, both drawn from his house in Lille and paid to the city of Ghent (e.g., SAG 400.22, 1468/69, fol. 27v; SAG 406.8, 1474–77; SAG 20.4, 1488/89; for the title deeds of his Lille house, see SAG FP 1377, 23 March 1468). In 1481, he founded a Mass in the church of St. Nicholas for himself and his wife, the damsel Lysbette de Peystere (or sPeysters; SAG 301.56, 1480/81, fol. 82v). Lysbette is mentioned as his widow by 11 August 1487 (SAG 301.59, 1486/87, fol. 204v).

[112] Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 150, 153, and 154. For the next sentence, see ibid., 154 n. 64.

[113] Weinmann, *Johannes Tinctoris*, 33; see also Tinctoris, *Terminorum musicae diffinitorium:* "Tenor est cuiusque cantus compositi fundamentum relationis. Tenorista est ille qui tenorem canit."

singer.[114] Similar evidence has been discovered in the archives of Notre-Dame at Paris by Craig Wright. He concluded that "the term *tenorista*, at least at Paris, did not denote a vocal part or a range, but rather a function," although the documents did not allow him to establish more than that "a tenor was one who assured a slow, steady, forceful rendering of the plainsong."[115] The crucial importance of a dependable rendering of plainsong in oral counterpoint is confirmed by a complaint, made at a visitation to Southwell Minster in 1484, that "Dominus Thomas Cartwright cantat faburdon tali extraneo modo quod ceteri chorales nequeunt cum eo concordare."[116] The specific function of the tenorist could even include the sole responsibility for text enunciation: according to Johannes Herbenus of Maastricht, writing in 1496, one difference between *concinare ad librum* and *compositus cantus* (as he called them) was that in the former, singers could leave the "words" to the tenorist alone—which presumably meant that they themselves vocalized wordless counterpoints around the plainchant.[117] Herbenus's comment is interesting not only because he adopts and affirms the distinction formulated by Tinctoris, but especially because he defines that distinction in terms of the tenorist's special responsibility.

All this is not to deny, of course, that tenorists would also have participated in the execution of written music. Men like Cordier, Cocquiel, and Du Passaige all worked at court chapels whose surviving choirbooks show us what compositions they would have sung. Even so, it is difficult to see how their singing of notated polyphony alone could account for the musical status and social respect associated with the title of tenorist. If, as I have suggested, the tenorist ensured that

[114] Rob C. Wegman, "Music and Musicians at the Guild of Our Lady in Bergen op Zoom, *c.*1470–1510," *Early Music History* 9 (1989): 175–249, at 185.

[115] Wright, *Music and Ceremony at Notre Dame of Paris*, 322–24. For the next sentence, see ibid., 322. See also Haggh, "Music, Liturgy, and Ceremony," 1:189–91, for similar evidence from Brussels and elsewhere in the Low Countries. Haggh notes: "That the tenor held a privileged place is evident, for in the chapel at the court of Burgundy, during the last half of the fifteenth century, when tenors were designated as such in the accounts, they advanced in rank more quickly than the other singers" (p. 190).

[116] Harrison, *Music in Medieval Britain*, 174–75. Conversely, Tinctoris stresses that if the plainchant is sung unmeasured, the singers of the counterpoints need "a good ear . . . in order that they may notice most attentively the line of the tenorists, lest, while these are singing one note, they sing upon another" (*C* II.xxi.8).

[117] "Secus autem, ubi multis 'ad librum' (ut aiunt) concinentibus, tenorista verba explicans pro omnibus satisfacit"; after Joseph Smits van Waesberghe, ed., *Herbeni Traiectensis De natura cantus ac miraculis vocis*, Beiträge zur rheinischen Musikgeschichte 22 (Cologne: Arno Volk Verlag, 1957), 58.

singers upon the book "prudently avoid similarity between each other in the choice and ordering of concords" (as Tinctoris recommended), then his position as mastermind must have been close to that of a composer—at least in the present-day sense of conceiving new music, not the medieval sense of "making" it. It would have been he who, as far as feasible, coordinated the various consonances around his own, written melody. His conception of the total counterpoint, at any moment, would literally have been one of simultaneity, of simultaneously sounding consonances—at least so long as he was able to communicate his intended distributions of consonances during the performance. Yet even if such an overall conception might have to be "heard in the mind" during the compositional process, that mental conception itself could never amount to a *res facta*. For this it literally needed to be "made," concretized as a material "thing," not just thought out or performed.[118] However, all evidence suggests that the process of making, technically as well as culturally, did not have the tremendous significance that it acquired later.

### 7. *Simultaneous Singing and Successive Writing*

It might seem, at this point, that the distinction between *res facta* and *cantare super librum* is a purely theoretical or philosophical one. Yet, inasmuch as it involves writing, the distinction has important cultural and aesthetic overtones. Today's writing-dependent culture tends to construe musical events in terms of their notation (that is, as spatial, two-dimensional form),[119] and notation, consequently, is thought to provide a graphic representation of musical reality. As a result, sound and notation tend to become assimilated conceptually, to the extent that both are seen to manifest the composer's conception, that both partake in the "work." What is most difficult, from this point

[118] For the "nonmade" nature of the artist's conception, known as the exemplary form or idea, see Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 107–11; and idem, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 166–72. Bent, however, argues implausibly that *res facta* is "usually but not necessarily written" ("*Resfacta* and *Cantare Super Librum*," 380 and 391).

[119] Carl Dahlhaus points out that retrospective reflection upon a musical event inevitably involves some form of spatial perception (*Esthetics of Music*, 11–12). For the late Middle Ages, however, it is doubtful that music was socially valued as a focus of reflection, rather than as a fleeting phenomenon that was useful, beneficial, and enjoyable precisely in its immediacy (see below). Dahlhaus elsewhere calls into question the perception of music in spatial terms based on notation, pointing out that this "is not so obvious as some naive listener may suppose, for whom the terminology and notation of European music have come to be second nature in his way of perceiving tones" (ibid., 79).

of view, is to empathize with modes of musical thought that are shaped not so much by constant reference to notation as by on-the-spot creation of music.[120] And it is especially difficult with late medieval music, most of which is accessible to us only in notated form, and usually our modern score notation as well.

To insist, as Tinctoris does, on the purely empirical distinction between music as sound and music as object is to undo that assimilation. As far as the much-debated issue of "simultaneous conception" is concerned,[121] it is to recognize that there are in fact two such conceptions, one in sound and one in writing. Simultaneity, in its literal sense of "at the same time" (*simul*), can apply only to sounds, since these are evolving in time. For fifteenth-century singers of counterpoint such sounding simultaneity was an everyday experience, and for none more clearly than those in the central position that I attribute to the tenorist. The latter, if experienced in coordinating the moment-to-moment decisions of several other singers, should have had little difficulty in conceiving entire polyphonic complexes by hearing them as so many decisions in his mind.

Simultaneity, however, cannot strictly speaking apply to the written work, since it is an *object*, its parts extending in space not time. Even in score, it can be seen to represent simultaneity only by virtue

[120] See, in general, Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, which deals with many of the issues discussed here. As far as vocal polyphony is concerned, the notion of contrapuntal "correctness," for instance, may have more relevance on paper than in the actual practice of extemporizing counterpoint (and hence perhaps more to us than to many singers and listeners in the Middle Ages). It seems typical that a Renaissance theorist like Gioseffo Zarlino, in his *Istitutioni harmoniche* (1558), denounced the "erroneous" ways of contemporary singers with reference to notation—that is, by imagining how their extemporized counterpoints would look if they were written down, irrespective of whether contemporary listeners enjoyed them or not: "[This practice] may sound well to those who do not know better, but they would judge the singers quite differently *could they see the added part written the way it was sung*. They would discover a thousand errors committed against the common rules, and could see all the endless dissonances of which those parts are replete" (Ernest T. Ferand, "Improvised Vocal Counterpoint in the Late Renaissance and Early Baroque," *Annales musicologiques* 4 [1956]: 129–74, at 154–55). Evidently, for Zarlino authority resided principally in "the common rules," for which reason even improvisations needed to be imagined as if written down as "works." By contrast, for a late medieval theorist like Tinctoris authority resided principally in the human ear, for which reason even compositions needed to be imagined as if heard in sound. This might explain his permissive attitude to parallel fifths and octaves in certain contexts (Wegman, "Sense and Sensibility," 312 n. 4), and his willingness to accept that what sometimes looks incorrect on paper may still sound pleasing to many listeners (as in Ockeghem's lost *Missa la belle se siet; C* II.xxxii.5–6).

[121] See especially Crocker, "Discant, Counterpoint, and Harmony," and Blackburn, "On Compositional Process."

of an act of reading in which some spatial relationships are taken as successive, and others as simultaneous. Simultaneity in this visual sense was unknown to fifteenth-century singers. They had no need for it: their perception of sounding simultaneity did not depend on an act of reading but one of singing and hearing. Their notation could not accommodate it: as Margaret Bent has pointed out, "late-medieval notation, with respect to both pitch and rhythm, was conceptually unsuited for use in score . . . composers neither had nor needed the visual control of simultaneities that modern scores give us."[122] Notation neither represented nor embodied the "work," but served the purely utilitarian purpose of providing instructions for performing counterpoint. Hence, simultaneity was not graphically represented unless it was specifically needed as a practical "instruction"—as was the case, for instance, in *ad hoc* keyboard arrangements.[123]

To keep sound and notation distinct conceptually may be to clarify a number of issues. Simultaneous conception must have existed, yet by definition it was heard (mentally or actually), not visualized: it did not find expression in the mensural instructions for realizing the conception. The notation itself had no aesthetic status: it was perceived either in an empirical sense, as "made thing," or in a practical sense, as a set of abstract "signs" enabling performance decisions (see section 8 below). The notation followed its own logic on paper, a logic unrelated to sounding reality; what we might describe as, say, measure 45 in a four-part motet was in effect four different places in a choirbook, not destined ever to come together except in actual sound. Hence we cannot infer from the nature of the notation, or its logic, how polyphony was mentally conceived. At most we can infer from them how the conception was to be translated most efficiently for the practical use of performers.

The compositional process, in its literal sense of "putting together," was that process of translation: from simultaneously sung consonances to successively written parts. The notion of successiveness, in other words, is inherent in the notation, not necessarily in the conception. Only if one makes the modern assumption that musical notation must *represent* a conception, rather than provide instructions

[122] Bent, "*Resfacta* and *Cantare Super Librum*," 376–77. Bent further explored this issue in "Editing Early Music: The Dilemma of Translation," *Early Music* 22 (1994): 373–92.

[123] For a good example, see Theodor Göllner, "Notationsfragmente aus einer Organistenwerkstatt des 15. Jahrhunderts," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 24 (1967): 170–77, at 172–74 and pl. 2. As the plate shows, scoring inevitably involves violations of the rules of mensural notation (ibid., 173–74).

for realizing it in sound, can one postulate a process called "successive composition" (in the modern sense of successive invention) or posit the necessity of scores for its perceived antithesis, "simultaneous conception." Counterpoint is simultaneous singing; composition is successive writing out.[124]

If I am correct in suggesting that the *tenorista* normally coordinated the singing of unwritten counterpoint, then a *compositor* would have been different from him only to the extent that he converted similar "coordinations" into mensural notation. It is entirely possible that they often were the same person—though curiously, I have found no evidence as yet to prove this for any individual in particular. In the best musical centers, moreover, the difference between written and unwritten counterpoint might have been negligible (as far as the sounding end result was concerned), and such differences as could be heard need not, by any means, have been valued in favor of the composition. To all practical intents and purposes, the distinction may have come down to the purely empirical one made by Tinctoris: between writing and absence of writing.

## *8. Meaning and Effect in Music*

All evidence presented so far points to the same conclusion: that *compositor* and *compositio* were principally technical terms, like their vernacular synonyms "maker" and "made thing," and that they lacked the social and aesthetic overtones they acquired later on. I will shortly turn to evidence that suggests the piecemeal accumulation of such overtones around 1500, yet for the moment it is necessary to explore two important ramifications of that conclusion.

As observed earlier, fifteenth-century musical culture placed more

[124] The only place where Tinctoris gives some intimation of what is involved in "putting together" comes not in his *Liber de arte contrapuncti*, but in a curious excursion in the *Proportionale musices* to which Sean Gallagher has kindly drawn my attention (*P* III.iv.3–10). Here the theorist speaks of the "primary part of a whole composed song," defined as the "foundation of relationships, which, having been made first (*primo facta*) as the principal one, the others are dependent upon." Clearly this primary part is the first to be written out (*facta*) in its entirety. Yet although this is "almost always" the tenor, Tinctoris adds that "occasionally" it is the top voice, "rarely or never" the contratenor. Beyond the *primaria pars* he does not establish any order of composition: all other parts are lumped together as the *secundariae partes*, defined equally by their subservience to the primary one. The act of adding a secondary part is described as "to produce a new part" ("novam partem edere") or "to work something" ("aliquid operari") upon the primary part. If a melody is precomposed (*praecompositum*, evidently within another polyphonic context), "we [can] make it primary" ("primariam efficiemus").

aesthetic significance in the musical event, and the act of hearing it, than in its notation, or the act of reading it.[125] It follows from this that no qualities could be attributed to musical sound that are essentially textual or visual. (Here, again, the Aristotelian distinction between object and motion conditioned the very framework of musical perception.) One of those qualities is *form*, of course, a term which Tinctoris associated exclusively with notation, not sound. Another, as we have seen, is a *spatial perception* of consonant simultaneities. And yet another, as I will suggest in this section, is *meaning*.

It is perhaps indicative of our writing-dependent culture that music, in the current critical climate, should have come to be perceived primarily as text, and that the question of its meaning has consequently become paramount. This semiotic perception would not have been self-evident in late medieval musical thought. In Tinctoris's writings we look in vain for statements about what music means or signifies. Not that he lacks interest in meaning altogether: the words *signum* and *significare* are frequently encountered in his theory. Yet Tinctoris associates these terms primarily with things written on paper: words and notational symbols. And insofar as notational symbols are signifiers, what they signify is sounding reality—or at least the information needed to produce it.[126] But what does sounding reality signify?

Tinctoris cannot answer that question because musical sound, from his Aristotelian perspective, is not an object but motion. And what can be stated categorically of physical motion is not so much that it has meaning, but rather that it springs from a cause and produces an effect. The cause of sound was widely known to be "percussion of air," as Boethius had authoritatively defined it.[127] And its effects were

[125] See Wegman, "Sense and Sensibility."

[126] Thus, a note is a *signum* of *vox*, which itself is "a naturally or artificially produced sound" (*Terminorum musicae diffinitorium*). The tangible, physical nature of *notae* is confirmed by Tinctoris's description of them as "corpora musicales . . . vocum significativa" (*P* I.i.3). Every other notational element is similarly a *signum:* clefs (of the "site" of the *vox*), rests (of silence), coloration, dots of division and ligatures (of imperfection), and so on (*M* iii.2, *NP* II.1.3, and *I* I.iii.39). Even a manner of composing, if perpetuated for too long, can become "a *signum* of poorest invention" (*P* Prologus 12). For *significare*, *designare*, or *habere significatum* in connection with words, see, for instance, Tinctoris's definitions of diapason, diapente, and diatessaron (*Terminorum musicae diffinitorium*). Meaning in the sense of "subject matter" is expressed by the word *materia*, as in the definitions of *cantilena* and *motetum* (ibid.).

[127] Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, 11: "Sound is not produced (*redditur*) without some pulsation and percussion; and pulsation and percussion cannot exist by any means unless motion precedes them . . . if all things remained still and motion was absent, it would be a necessary consequence that no sound would be made (*fieri*)." See

traditionally known to be manifold. Tinctoris, in fact, devoted an entire treatise to enumerating the twenty effects of music, and it is clear from his *Complexus effectuum musices* that the art was thought to bring real benefits to Church, society, and individual.[128] Among others: music pleases God, adorns his praises, chases away the devil, exalts to ecstacy or pious contemplation, banishes melancholy, softens a hard heart, cures those who are ill, and adds to the pleasure of a banquet. If one wishes to remove the modernist presumption of musical autonomy from late medieval music, the key lies not in extramusical meaning, but in musical effect.[129]

And yet, was music then never enjoyed for its own sake, for the sake of its consonant "sweetness" alone? Almost certainly it was, and very intensely, but we can discern this mainly from prohibitions, or at least from a distinct sense of unease with "sweetness" on the part of contemporary writers. The overriding fear in medieval aesthetics was that beauty might indeed be enjoyed for its own sake, that it might "distract" from its devotional or functional purposes.[130] This commonplace runs throughout medieval thought; in the fifteenth century it was associated with church polyphony by Denis the Carthusian, who interestingly (yet disapprovingly) ascribed a special musical sensibility to women.[131] Umberto Eco, however, has underscored that such

---

also Tinctoris's definitions of *instrumentum* ("corpus naturaliter aut artificialiter *soni causativum*") and *musica organica* ("illa quae fit in instrumentis flatu *sonum causantibus*"; *Terminorum musicae diffinitorium*).

[128] Tinctoris, *Opera theoretica* 2:159–77. In a fragmentary source for the *Complexus effectuum musices*, surviving at Cambrai, the list was expanded from twenty to twenty-seven effects; see Ronald Woodley, "The Printing and Scope of Tinctoris's Fragmentary Treatise *De inuentione et usu musice*," *Early Music History* 5 (1985): 239–68, at 251–54 and 263–66. The treatise is also discussed, edited, and translated (in Italian and German, respectively) in Luisa Zanoncelli, *Sulla estetica di Johannes Tinctoris* (Bologna: Forni, 1979), and Thomas A. Schmid, "Der *Complexus effectuum musices* des Johannes Tinctoris," *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* 10 (1986): 121–60. For other evidence concerning the effects popularly attributed to music, see Isabelle Cazeaux, *French Music in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 81–88.

[129] A concrete example is Jacob Obrecht's motet *Mille quingentis;* see Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 12–13.

[130] See Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 6–9; idem, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 6–15 and 134–36; and Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 1955), 253–61.

[131] Denis's comments are summarized in Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, 256. The following translation is based on Jan A. Bank, "Uit het verleden van de Nederlandsche kerkmuziek," *Sint-Gregorius-Blad* 64 (Feb. 1939): no pagination: "Some, who were wont to sing [polyphony] from time to time, confess that there is pride and a certain lasciviousness of mind in such song. If, therefore, it should be excused in any way, then it would not seem permissible or commendable unless it

comments confirm rather than disprove the existence of an aesthetic sensibility: "The thing that is repudiated is recognized to be an object of pleasure and desire. It is one thing to maintain that aesthetic pleasure is in some circumstances out of place; it is quite another to have no aesthetic sensibility in the first place."[132] For those in the fifteenth century who were deeply moved by the sweetness of polyphony, the respectable way of putting it was to say that the sounds seemed "not human but angelic."[133] Tinctoris, on his part, stressed that aural apprehension should never go without mental comprehension.[134]

Still, the central point remains that music, as a sounding phenomenon, could only produce effects *beyond* itself. Its consonant sweetness might be seductive while it lasted, yet could be legitimized by identifying the resultant aesthetic pleasure in terms of the "external" effects itemized by Tinctoris. On the other hand, active musical reflection after the event—although strictly speaking a distraction—could scarcely have constituted a temptation. How, for a start, could one verbally articulate the aural perception of complex polyphonic sounds? Not surprisingly, there was very little critical vocabulary available for music as such (other than "sweet" or "angelic"), nor was notation meant to enable visual perception of (and reflection upon) "the work" as a closed whole (see above). The only specifically musical contemplation that sounds provoked concerned precisely their transitory nature, and this, if anything, intensified the sensibility to sweetness. As Eco observed, "the loss by rejection or by nature of sensible beauty evoked a profound regret. The transience of earthly beauty did not make it inferior, but produced instead a sharp feeling of sadness."[135]

In this respect, music was a powerful metaphor of human life. When Adam von Fulda, in 1490, conceived music as a *meditatio mortis* because of its perishable, fleeting nature, he was not merely invoking

served and was practiced to inspire devotion. For melodies do provoke some people most strongly to contemplation and piety. That is why the church allows organs. Yet if it is practiced to please the hearing, and to divert those present, the women in particular, then it is undoubtedly objectionable. . . . Finally, although discant does inspire some people to devotion and to a contemplation of the heavenly things, it would seem to distract the senses too much from attention to actual prayer."

[132] Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 10.

[133] For examples of this expression (itself a widely reiterated commonplace), see, for example, Harrison, *Music in Medieval Britain*, 171 ("more divine than human"); and Schuler, "Die Musik in Konstanz," 159 ("angelically sweet singing").

[134] Wegman, "Sense and Sensibility," 301–6.

[135] Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 10; see also idem, *Art and Beauty*, 9.

a poetic or religious cliché.[136] Music seemed to be the very image of mortality. As Leonardo da Vinci observed: "Music has two ills, the one mortal, the other wasting; the mortal is ever allied with the instant which follows that of the music's utterance, the wasting lies in its repetition, making it seem contemptible and mean."[137] The knowledge that human life is "short and miserable"—reiterated again and again in sermons and devotional treatises,[138] and deeply impregnated in the medieval outlook—provoked a sense of regret which in turn led to an obsession with physical decay and decomposition. The most common representation of death was the half-decomposed corpse or *transi*, depicted in numerous books of hours for devout laymen, and circulating independently as an image for contemplation and devotion.[139] Philippe Ariès has pointed out that the medieval images of death and decomposition

> do not signify fear of death or of the beyond, although they have been utilized to that end. They are the sign of a passionate love for this world and a painful awareness of the failure to which each human life is condemned. . . . The truth is that probably at no time has man so loved life as he did at the end of the Middle Ages. . . . The love of life found expression in a passionate attachment to things, an attachment that resisted the annihilation of death and changed our vision of the world and of nature.[140]

"In the background of the *danse macabre*, the triumph of death," Eco has noted, "we find in various forms a melancholy sense of the beauty

[136] Adam von Fulda, *Musica* (1490): "Nam musica est etiam philosophia, sed vera philosophia, meditatio mortis continua"; Martin Gerbert, ed., *Scriptores ecclesiastici de musica sacra*, iii (Saint-Blaise, 1784), 335.

[137] Edward MacCurdy, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* (London: Duckworth, 1954), 2:401.

[138] For instance, in the widely copied *Livre de bonnes meurs* by Jacques Legrand (of which Dufay, incidentally, possessed a copy in his library): "Tousjours nostre vie s'abrege et apetisse [like the sounding musical work], et riens ne nous prouffite le temps passé fors en tant comme nous avons bien fait et acquis la grace de Dieu et vertus. . . . Oultre plus enquerons et demandons que sont devenuz ceulx qui ont vesqu si plaisement au monde [the well-known theme of *ubi sunt*]." See Jacques Legrand, *Archiloge sophie—Livre de bonnes meurs*, ed. Erencio Beltran, Bibliothèque du XV^e siècle 49 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1986), 383–84; Craig Wright, "Dufay at Cambrai: Discoveries and Revisions," this JOURNAL 28 (1975): 175–229, at 216 and 228.

[139] Guillaume Dufay possessed such an image; see his executors' account, Lille, Archives du Nord, 4G 1313, pp. 9 ("Item, j. drap de painture en le cambre qui fu Sainte Alexandre, iij s. ensamble et *le figure d'un mort* xviij d.") and 21 ("Item, a maistre Gobert le Mannier dit Gobin fu fait legat de *le figure de le mort*, estimee xviij d.").

[140] Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 130 and 132.

that passes."[141] And this melancholy sense was nowhere more poignant than in music, whose sounds were always destined to die out and (literally) decay immediately. It was only in Heaven that the angels were singing without ceasing (Rev 4.8). Musical sweetness on earth was considered all the more precious precisely because of its fleeting, transitory nature. Could we perhaps paraphrase Ariès and say that at no time have men and women so loved consonant "sweetness" as they did at the end of the Middle Ages? Contemporary reports, many of which have been cited in this article, would seem to suggest so.

It is clear in any case, and not surprising, that composition came to be seen at least partly as an art of "searching" for sweetness (*exquirere*). Tinctoris, for instance, described Ockeghem as an "excellent composer and careful seeker-out of sweetness" (*optimus compositor ac dulcedinis accuratus exquisitor*), suggesting, as I have argued elsewhere, that the compositional process was really one of cultivating the most subtle shades of sonority and tone color.[142] And, to paraphrase Tinctoris's comments on *res facta* (quoted earlier), that process differed from oral counterpoint above all in this respect, that sweetness could be absolutely guaranteed by the opportunity to adjust the various parts to each other, rather than relate them of necessity to the tenor alone. For the inevitable adjustments and revisions we do not need to assume the use of scores, but rather repeated tryouts: sound always was paramount. A late (and probably apocryphal) account of Josquin's compositional process, given by Johannes Manlius in 1562, may give us an impression of how the most careful "seekers-out of sweetness" might have worked:

> Whenever he had composed a new song, he gave it to the singers to be sung, and meanwhile he walked around, listening attentively whether the concordant sound (*harmonia*) came together well. If he was dissatisfied, he stepped in: "Be silent," he said, "I will change it!"[143]

Still, beyond sweetness and music's general effects, what authorial intentions could the composer realize in the "made thing"? To be sure, ideologies of authorship had traditionally been foreign to medieval aesthetics. As Aquinas put it, "An artist as such is not commend-

[141] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 9.

[142] *C* II.xxxii.6 ("dulcedinis" was accidentally omitted in the *Opera theoretica* edition); Wegman, "Sense and Sensibility," 307. See also the description of Ockeghem's Requiem Mass as "*exquise* et très-parfaicte" in Cretin, *Déploration*, ed. Thoinan, 34.

[143] Trans. after Osthoff, *Josquin Desprez* 1:222.

able for the will (*voluntas*) with which he makes a work, but for its quality."[144] Even three centuries later, at the very end of the Middle Ages, the thought of scrutinizing a composition for the "will" of its author did not come naturally to those who sang and heard polyphony. For instance, a polyphonic *Salve regina*, beyond offering praise and worship to the Virgin, invited meditation on its text, aided by the "sweetness" of the music ("vita, *dulcedo*, et spes nostra").[145] Why should the composer, as a historic individual, wish to interfere in that private devotion, thus depriving music of one of its most prized effects? Authorial intentions, or even a composer's name, could not rescue a composition that had lost its usefulness or had become out of date.[146] As studies in textual criticism show time and again, authorial intentions were of little relevance in the process of transmission and adaptation—at least if they conflicted with users' intentions—and composers' names were frequently omitted altogether.[147]

Only once does Tinctoris recognize that composers and singers may intentionally endow their music with a certain affective quality, and in that quality we may perhaps perceive something akin to our "musical meaning." The relevant passage comes in the treatise on the modes (*De natura et proprietate tonorum*), when the theorist qualifies the ancient Greek view—reiterated throughout the Middle Ages—that modes possess intrinsic affective powers (*T* i.26–27):

> To be sure, it will be possible for a song in one and the same mode to be plaintive, cheerful, stern and neutral, not only in regard to composers and singers, but instruments and instrumental performers as well. For what person learned in this art does not know how to compose, to sing or to perform some [songs] plaintively, others cheerfully, some sternly, others

[144] Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 185. For the modernist aesthetic of the author, see Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," and Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London and New York: Longman, 1988), 166–72 and 196–210. The gradual emergence of a medieval sense of authorship in prologues to glosses and commentaries, in the period 1100–1400, is traced in Alastair J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 2d ed. (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1988).

[145] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 223.

[146] An interesting exception is the chapter decision, made at Cambrai cathedral on 8 January 1515, that "henceforth the motet which is usually sung at the feast of Epiphany is to be removed and in its place is to be sung another one suitable for this season taken from the works [*opera*] of the late Dufay"; Wright, "Dufay at Cambrai," 220 and 229.

[147] See Rob C. Wegman, "*Miserere supplicanti Dufay:* The Creation and Transmission of Guillaume Dufay's *Missa Ave regina celorum*," *The Journal of Musicology* 13 (1995): 18–54, esp. 50–54.

> neutrally—even though their composing, singing and performing are done in the same mode?

It was thus possible to regard the sounding musical work as plaintive, cheerful, stern, or neutral, *because* the composer or performer had made it so. Very rarely indeed do we find statements by contemporaries about the affective qualities of sacred polyphony, statements that go beyond "sweet" and "angelic." For instance, on 24 January 1501 the Mantuan ambassador Niccolò Frigio, having heard a performance of Dufay's (lost) Requiem, reported that the setting was "flebile, mesta e suave molto": mournful, sad and very sweet.[148] If, however, such qualities come close to what we might call meaning, it is interesting to observe that Tinctoris (like poststructuralists today) sees such "meaning" as dispersed between listener, performer, and composer—without placing interpretive authority exclusively in the latter. The passage cited above clearly implies that a skilled performer can render the same work in different moods. Moreover, Tinctoris seems to recognize that perceived moods depend at least partly upon the predisposition of the listener, and cannot therefore be assumed to be equal for each individual, let alone for all "ages and customs" (*T* i.30–31):

> Certain of these particular harmonies agree, are fitting, and are useful for various ages and customs. There is not the same delight or a similar judgement to all people. A cheerful soul is delighted by cheerful harmonies and conversely stern ones are accepted by a stern soul.

This statement obviously contradicts Tinctoris's claim, made in the *Complexus effectuum musices*, that music banishes melancholy, makes people joyful, and softens a hard heart. For how can a stern soul be turned into a cheerful one if it does not take the same delight in "cheerful harmonies" as someone else does? Plainly there are limits to the affective powers of music, limits defined by the prior disposition of the listener. And that, in turn, means that whatever intentions a composer may have had, in the end they can only interact with the intentions of listeners as well as performers.

[148] William F. Prizer, "Music and Ceremonial in the Low Countries: Philip the Fair and the Order of the Golden Fleece," *Early Music History* 5 (1985): 113–53, at 133, 142, and 150. At the Feast of the Pheasant, at Lille in 1454, a lady representing the Church sang a lamentation on the fall of Constantinople "a voix piteuze et femmenine"; Marix, *Histoire de la musique et des musiciens*, 40. For similar reports elsewhere, see Cazeaux, *French Music in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, 58.

From this point of view the present section, which might have seemed a mere digression into general musical aesthetics, has really highlighted another facet of the same, integrated picture. The thought of a composer exercising authorial control over the performance and interpretation of his work was virtually unknown to late medieval musical culture: he provided only the "made thing," a set of notational instructions "signifying" the performance. It was the performance that really mattered, that benefactors paid for—and generously—to be realized. The notated work itself, significantly, was not an economic commodity: it constituted freeware, copied widely so long as it was deemed useful, but discarded as soon as it had passed beyond its stylistic sell-by date. Not even in writing was the composer able to overcome music's perishable nature. As Roger Bowers observed, "The architect's buildings, the artist's paintings, the poet's verses, the illuminator's miniatures would last for generations; but the church composer wrote music which he himself would have been surprised to hear sung even thirty years later."[149]

Church composition in the fifteenth century was practiced in a relative social, economic, and administrative vacuum, yet this circumstance may actually have had a positive influence on the development of the art. Again it was Bowers who observed that "the manner in which composers and performers of polyphonic music were left to go about their business as best they could meant, in fact, that they were being left with a quite unusual degree of initiative and artistic freedom."[150] Paradoxically, fifteenth-century church composers could write new music when they wanted to, not when others wanted them to. As far as ecclesiastical authorities were concerned, they might equally well choose to write morality plays—as, for instance, the composer Aliamus de Groote did during his choirmastership at St. Donatian's, Bruges, in 1475–85.[151]

Yet why should any musician wish to exercise artistic freedom? Why go to the labor of "searching out" sweetness and aspire to artistic

[149] Bowers, "Obligation, Agency, and *Laissez-faire*," 13. Bowers may have somewhat overstated the case: there are of course many exceptions to the rapid turnover of repertory (e.g., Busnoys's *Missa L'homme armé*, or Pulloys's *Flos de spina*), yet it is also true that the historical significance of such "classics" derives precisely from their being exceptions, of a rule they thus in fact confirm.

[150] Ibid., 15.

[151] Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges*, 35–36; A.-C. De Schrevel, *Histoire du séminaire de Bruges*, 2 vols. (Bruges: Louis de Plancke, 1895), 1:158–59 (15 March 1485: "unam moralitatem quam ipse succentor *composuit*"). A new polyphonic mass composed (*facta*) by De Groote was copied at St. Donatian's in 1476; Dewitte, "Boeken bibliotheekwezen," 93.

perfection? What incentives were there to compose, when there was so little direct encouragement or pressure coming from society? The answer lies precisely in the effects listed by Tinctoris: music pleases God, adorns his praises, chases away the devil, exalts to ecstacy or pious contemplation, banishes melancholy, softens a hard heart, cures those who are ill, adds to the pleasure of a banquet, and many other things. That, in a sense, was all the incentive medieval composers would have needed—even if their "making" alone brought no financial rewards, let alone secured them a livelihood. It made composition as worthwhile and rewarding an activity for musicians as the singing of discant would have been for citizens—and in terms of sheer musical delight and convivial enjoyment, the boundary line between them may not have been too sharply drawn.

### 9. *The Emergence of the "Modern" Composer*

And yet, among the twenty effects listed by Tinctoris, there is one that seems out of place, that intrudes into his framework of thought as an anomaly: *musica peritos in ea glorificat*, it glorifies those skilled in it. Citing several classical examples to exemplify this point, the theorist continues:

> In our time we have experienced how very many musicians (*musici*) have been endowed with glory. For who does not know Iohannes Dunstaple, Guillelmus Dufay, Egidius Binchois, Iohannes Okeghem, Anthonius Busnois, Iohannes Regis, Firminus Caron, Iacobus Carlerii, Robertus Morton, Iacobus Obrechts? Who does not accord them the highest praises, whose compositions, spread throughout the whole world, fill God's churches, kings' palaces, and private men's houses, with the utmost sweetness (*dulcedo*)? I say nothing of the very many distinguished musicians who have been presented with outstanding wealth and dignities, for although they have obtained honours from them, these are not at all to be compared with the immortal fame that the first composers have prolonged for themselves. The former belongs to fortune, but the latter to virtue. Whence Virgil, in the tenth book of the Aeneid: "Each has his appointed day; short and irretrievable is the span of life for all; but to lengthen fame by deeds—that is the task of virtue."[152]

What is immediately striking about this passage is its secular tone: this is a far cry from the conventional devotional wisdom that life is "short

[152] *E* xix.6–12; trans. based on the passage as given in Ronald Woodley, "Tinctoris's Italian Translations of the Golden Fleece Statutes: A Text and a (Possible) Context," *Early Music History* 8 (1988): 173–244, at 192.

and miserable," and that it profits a believer to give thought to death. *Glorificare*, in this connection, was a loaded word, for as an ecclesiastic, Tinctoris would have known only too well that "Nul ne se doit de son estat glorifier: car . . . la vie de l'omme est brieve et plaine de miseres et de povretéz."[153] Virgil had captured that painful sense of transitoriness, as well as the longing for permanence and immortality. Yet it is remarkable that Tinctoris associated music—by nature the most transitory of all arts—not with the brevity of life but rather with the prolongation of fame by deeds (*facta*, lit. things made). Indeed he went so far as to speak of "immortal fame"—when devotional treatises everywhere kept repeating that nothing done in this life is of lasting profit unless it can rescue the soul from eternal damnation, at the Last Judgment. Next to all the effects that allowed composers to be integrally functioning members of medieval society, in all its aspects, this one seems to lift them out, as it were, and to carry them into posterity.

More than anything else, however, Tinctoris's comments draw attention to the unusual nature of the treatise itself. Although ancient Greek statements on the affective powers of music were rehearsed by every respectable music theorist in the Middle Ages, the *Complexus*, as a book specially devoted to these and other effects, has no real counterpart in fifteenth-century theory and (significantly for a music treatise) serves no obvious practical purpose. The *Complexus* is, in effect, an *apologia* of music, not as a liberal art (its scientific status had never been in question) but as a sounding phenomenon, practiced in and for the Church and society. Composers are singled out for the glory, praises, and immortal fame they have earned—over and above celebrated singers like Jean Cordier or Cornelio di Lorenzo, who had accumulated their riches merely by fortune.[154]

That Tinctoris included Dunstable and Binchois, most of whose

[153] Legrand, *Archiloge sophie—Livre de bonnes meurs*, 383. On the connection between authorship and immortality, see also Foucault, "What Is an Author?" 198.

[154] For Cornelio di Lorenzo, see Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara*, 161–67, 318, and 320–26; and D'Accone, "The Singers of San Giovanni," 334, 337, and 341–43. For Jean Cordier, see the (probably exaggerated) report that he received one hundred ducats per month at Milan (Evelyn S. Welch, "Sight, Sound and Ceremony in the Chapel of Galeazzo Maria Sforza," *Early Music History* 12 [1993]: 151–90, at 152); also Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges*, 37–38 and 183; De Schrevel, *Histoire du séminaire de Bruges* 1:160, 167–75, 179, and 181; D'Accone, "The Singers of San Giovanni," 323–24; Atlas, *Music at the Aragonese Court of Naples*, 41, 52, and 91; Van Doorslaer, "La Chapelle musicale," 30–31; Franz Xaver Haberl, "Die römische 'schola cantorum' und die päpstlichen Kapellsänger bis zur Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts," *Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 3 (1887): 189–296, at 230; and Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara*, 326.

music would scarcely have been heard by the time he was writing his treatise (ca. 1480), draws attention to another remarkable feature of his writings: the concern to record the recent history of composition, and to construct a lineage of renowned predecessors, from *fons et origo* to *moderni*.[155] It is true, of course, that the theorist's historical awareness hardly extended beyond living memory (elsewhere he speaks of a "new art" which, by 1477, was not older than forty years). Yet this should not necessarily lead us to locate the dawn of a new historical epoch in the 1430s. From a sociological perspective, what is more interesting is the emergence of a historiographical sense itself. Bram Kempers has outlined the typical process by which painters "professionalized" in the course of the late Middle Ages, a process that evolved along similar lines for goldsmiths, mosaic workers, sculptors, architects, and even clergymen:

> Specialist skills were passed on from master to apprentice, gradually broadening in range as a result of work executed on commission or sold on the market. Those practising the same profession banded together in organizations that aimed to supervise training, the practices in workshops, quality assessment, modes of conduct and participation in collective rituals. After several generations, writings started to appear that discussed the skills acquired and went on to formulate certain generalizations or theories. A few successful individuals recorded the history of their profession, emphasizing their renowned predecessors.[156]

In the latter development one can recognize a parallel with Tinctoris's observations on the recent history of composition and the beneficial effects of music, both giving pride of place to the most famous

[155] On Tinctoris's sense of history, see Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, pp. v–vi and 5; for the next sentence, see *C* Prologus 15 and *P* Prologus 11. The increasing cultural and economic valuation of musical works as products, and hence of the expert skills needed to produce them, necessitated not only a fraternal solidarity to protect those skills (as emphasized in the present article), but also their patrilineal preservation across successive generations, as pointed out by Paula Higgins ("Musical 'Parents' and Their 'Progeny' "). She demonstrates with a wealth of examples how the passing on of musical skills as "inheritance" promoted a discourse grounded in the feudal model of the family as a lineage of successive male heirs. This is most readily apparent from the literary *topos* of the music teacher as father (which Higgins traces back to the 1460s), but it also involved such interconnected aspects as ancestral memory, genealogical awareness and the construction of a founder of the "house," the exclusion of women from inheritance, and the "dowry" motivation of such musical instruction as girls did receive. Higgins will elaborate on these issues further in her forthcoming *Parents and Preceptors* (see n. 4 above).

[156] Bram Kempers, *Painting, Power, and Patronage: The Rise of the Professional Artist in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Beverley Jackson (London: Penguin, 1994), 6–7.

composers of the age. Music theorists in the sixteenth century were to articulate and develop this historiographical awareness more and more (frequently using the stereotyped "three ages" model also employed in art theory), although it continued to be rare for them to make historically accurate (let alone favorable) observations about developments in composition preceding living memory.[157] Even the "immortal fame" of Tinctoris's predecessors and contemporaries proved mortal in the end.

Still, although the fact that Tinctoris made these observations seems historically more significant than what he was observing, one swallow does not make a Renaissance. By definition, shifts in mentalities, sensibilities, and attitudes are traced mostly in isolated and often anecdotal pieces of evidence, accumulating to clear historical patterns after periods that could well have exceeded collective memory. By some coincidence, however, such pieces of evidence do begin to appear in the 1470s, the very decade in which Tinctoris gave music theory the coherent and comprehensive formulation that has made his treatises a landmark in intellectual history.

Initially the evidence comes from aristocratic courts—whose rulers were praised already by Tinctoris for the "honor, glory, and riches" which they bestowed on their musicians.[158] A particularly interesting figure is Duke Ercole d'Este of Ferrara. It is at his court, in 1474, that Johannes Martini is appointed (and thereafter consistently referred to) as *cantadore compositore*.[159] The social significance of this designation may as yet be limited, since it arguably specifies only servant status (like, say, dog handler), yet it is the first real evidence of composition being recognized and valued in employment terms. Similar valuation is evident in a request to the church of St. Donatian at Bruges, made by Ercole in 1487, that Jacob Obrecht be given six months' leave of absence to travel to Ferrara. When the chapter discussed the request on 2 October, Jean Cordier reported "that the same duke takes much delight in the art of music, favors the musical composition of the said *magister* Jacob above other compositions, and has long wished to see

[157] On the emergence and development of Renaissance music historiography, see Jessie Ann Owens, "Music Historiography and the Definition of the 'Renaissance,' " *Notes* 47 (1990): 305–30.

[158] *P* Prologus 10. Interestingly, Ludwig Finscher traces the "prehistory" of the composer at the north Italian courts of the late trecento; see his important essay "Die 'Entstehung des Komponisten.' "

[159] Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara*, 154–55.

him."[160] Here, a musician in a distant country is valued (and fetched at considerable expense) not as a singer but specifically as a composer.

In such circumstances it is not surprising that Ercole's diplomatic agents were on the lookout for "new things" (*nove cose*) throughout Europe—nor that written polyphony, in due course, would cease to be regarded as "freeware." If musicians like Martini and Obrecht were paid to compose for the court, then their products did, in a sense, constitute economic commodities. So perhaps we need not be surprised to learn that Ercole, in 1498, had expressly forbidden any music of the court to be sent out of the city: the court singer Gian de Artiganova needed special permission from the duke to send even a single motet to Milan.[161]

Only one year previously, in Innsbruck on 3 April 1497, Heinrich Isaac had signed a contract that almost certainly marks the beginning of professional composition in the proper sense.[162] In it, he declared that

> the most illustrious and powerful prince and lord Maximilian . . . has appointed me composer to his royal majesty at a salary of one hundred gulden . . . I promise his royal majesty by this letter that I will use my art for the needs of his royal chapel, and will do all that a true composer and servant is obliged to do.

[160] "Quod idem dux cum valde delectetur arte musica, et compositionem musicalem [note the qualifying adjective] dicti magistri Jacobi preter ceteras compositiones magnipendat, dudum affectaverit ipsum videre"; De Schrevel, *Histoire du séminaire de Bruges* 1:160, trans. after Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 141.

[161] Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara*, 201. A curious case of musical "theft" at the church of St. Andrew at Grenoble in 1501, involving a work by Jean Mouton, illustrates what employers were beginning to expect from composed polyphony, and how they sought to protect it. Mouton, as *magister cantus*, had composed (*factus et notatus*) a new composition called *Noe*, for St. Andrew, and reserved it for performance on the feast-day of the church's patron saint (30 November). However, two priest-singers of the church, Pierre Venoud and Ennemond Grimaud, betrayed his confidence and sang the very piece at the parish church of St. John "in front of all the people" two days before St. Andrew. For this they were severely disciplined by the chapter of the church, on 1 December 1501. See Louis Royer, "Les Musiciens et la musique à l'ancienne collégiale Saint-André de Grenoble du XV$^{e}$ au XVIII$^{e}$ siècle," *Humanisme et Renaissance* 4 (1938): 237–73, at 241–42 and 260–61. The relevant chapter decision illustrates an awareness, not so much of author's rights (the *magister cantus* was not asked for his opinion, nor would the chapter have had any need for it), as of compositional *novelty* (defined here as the employer's privilege to hear a work first) and implicitly of musical *property*. The articulation of such values and concerns around 1500 illustrates the widening gulf between composition and improvisation: "novelty" and "property" are meaningful in connection with the former practice, but hardly with the latter.

[162] Staehelin, *Die Messen Heinrich Isaacs* 2:46–47.

"Use the art," "servant," "obliged": what a fateful day in the history of composition, if one recalls only Mozart's trials under Archbishop Colloredo! Eleven years later, on 18 May 1508, Isaac set a further precedent in that history, undertaking a paid commission to write a complete year cycle of Mass Propers for Constance cathedral (surviving today as the *Choralis Constantinus*).[163] Isaac had become a professional composer, and was now described as such, not only in the court accounts of Maximilian ("Hainrich Ysacc, componist") or the chapter acts of Constance cathedral ("der Ysaac componist"), but even in the correspondence of a politician like Niccolò Macchiavelli, who wrote back to Florence in December 1507 that he had spoken with "Arrigo compositore" during a half-day stay at Constance.

Still, while it was Heinrich Isaac who became the first professional composer in music history (followed hard on the heels by Jacob Obrecht, appointed at Ferrara in 1504 as "compositore de canto"), the man who was to become associated with a newly emerging aesthetic of the composer was Josquin des Prez. In a sense that is ironic, for the following well-known comparison between Josquin and Isaac, made in 1502 by an agent of Ercole d'Este when the latter was looking for a new chapelmaster, shows the real tensions inherent in the process of professionalization:

> I must notify Your Lordship that Isach the singer has been in Ferrara, and has made a motet on a fantasy entitled "La mi la so la so la mi" which is very good, and he made it in two days. From this one can only judge that he is very rapid in the art of composition; besides, he is good-natured and easy to get along with, and it seems to me that he is the right man for Your Lordship. Signor Don Alphonso bade me ask him if he would like to join Your Lordship's service (*servizij*), and he replied that he would rather be in your service than in that of any other lord whom he knows, and that he does not reject your proposal. . . . To me he seems well suited to serve Your Lordship (*apto a servir*), more so than Josquin, because he is of a better disposition among his companions (*compagnî*), and he will compose new works (*cose nove*) more often. It is true that Josquin composes better, but he composes when he wants to, and not when one wants him to, and he is asking 200 ducats in salary while Isach will come for 120—but Your Lordship will decide.[164]

[163] Ibid., 65–68. For the next sentence, see ibid., 66–67. See also Pietzsch, *Zur Pflege der Musik*, 144, for a slightly later example of "composer" being used as a professional designation outside court documents: the matriculation registers of the University of Tübingen record the enrollment, in 1519, of "Johannes Siess componista principis Vdalrici [of Württemberg]."

[164] Quoted after Lewis Lockwood, "Josquin at Ferrara: New Documents and Letters," in *Josquin des Prez*, ed. Lowinsky with Blackburn, 103–37, at 132–33, with a

The obvious keyword in this letter is *service:* the writer presumes that Duke Ercole wants his chapelmaster to be dependable, productive, and amenable. Isaac, who had been a professional for five years, knew exactly what was expected of him, and eagerly offered it. That Josquin reserved the right to compose "when he wants to" does not necessarily make him a prototypical Renaissance genius, breaking free from the suffocating bonds of medieval craftsmanship in order to assert his artistic freedom. The opposite seems the case: during the late fifteenth century, as we have seen, composition had been perceived in craftsmanlike terms only technically, not socially, that is, as a protected and regulated trade. With few exceptions, Josquin would not have needed to assert his right to compose "whenever he wants to" in any northern church. At the same time, however, he would never have been able to negotiate an astronomic salary with any northern church either. As a rule, the remuneration of musicians in northwestern European choral foundations was fixed by the financial terms of endowments, and unless a private benefactor stepped in (or benefices could be promised), there was little a church could do to meet such unprecedented financial demands as Josquin made at Ferrara.[165] Which is a different way of saying that Josquin, to put it crudely, wanted to have it both ways: "artistic freedom" as well as the freedom to negotiate his salary. And the truly significant outcome, at least in terms of Josquin's biography, is that he eventually got it both ways: by mid April 1503, payment registers of the Ferrarese court list Josquin as *cantore* and *maestro di cappella*, not *compositore de canto* (like Obrecht in 1504), receiving a salary of two hundred ducats per annum.[166]

Yet although Josquin successfully resisted the Renaissance court "domestication" of the composer, it was he, more than any of his contemporaries, who in the eyes of posterity (up to the present day) was to become associated with a new aesthetic of the work and of the composer. Anecdotes like the following (which could easily be multiplied) may well be fictional and virtually useless for Josquin's biography, yet from the viewpoint of cultural history they are highly significant:

> Then again, when a motet was sung in the presence of the Duchess [of Urbino], it pleased no one [among the courtiers] and was considered

few changes after the original document (published in Osthoff, *Josquin Desprez* 1:211–12). My interpretation of this document differs substantially from those put forward by Lockwood, and by Lowinsky in his "Musical Genius," 479–91.

[165] For an excellent case study, see Craig Wright, "Antoine Brumel and Patronage at Paris," in *Music in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Fenlon, 37–60.

[166] See Lockwood, "Josquin at Ferrara," 114–15 and 137.

> worthless, until it became known that it had been composed by Josquin des Prez (written 1516–18, but event situated in or before 1507).[167]

> When Josquin was living at Cambrai [*sic*] and someone wanted to apply ornaments (*colores seu coloraturas*) in his music which he had not composed, he walked into the choir and berated him in front of the others, saying: "You ass, why do you add ornamentation? If it had pleased me, I would have inserted it myself! If you wish to amend properly composed songs, make your own, but leave mine unamended" (1562).[168]

Again, these and similar anecdotes may well be apocryphal, but what really matters is the aesthetic that contemporaries projected on Josquin. In the first anecdote we can detect the emergence of a sense of musical *taste* that differs from Tinctoris's *iudicium* in that it places a high valuation on authorship.[169] In the second anecdote, the composer is seen to exercise authorial control over his work—evidently a projection of the humanist ideals of textual integrity, faithfulness to the original, and the related concern to remove nonauthorial "corruptions." There is an unmistakable shift here to the personality of the artist: the work is principally seen to be its author's creation. The composer moves to the forefront: singers must respect his intentions, because they are his. The acute social embarrassment of misjudging a Josquin motet shows that authorship had become an *aesthetic* criterion—a development, paradoxically, which may have caused more misattributions than the relative indifference of the fifteenth century.

The two developments described here, court "domestication" and the ideal of creative sovereignty, are intimately connected. They constitute a tension, a polarity, which, although unknown to the Middle Ages, became a defining condition of composition in the modern period. The Renaissance idea of the artistic genius who treats his employers badly, or at least associates with them as friends (as in

[167] Baldessare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (London: Penguin, 1967), 145.

[168] Trans. after Osthoff, *Josquin Desprez* 1:222 (Johannes Manlius, *Locorum communium collectanea* [Basel, 1562], 542).

[169] The difference is neatly summed up by Dahlhaus's observation that "a judgment of art [*iudicium*] concerns the formal and technical perfection or imperfection of a structure, while a judgment of taste proclaims an object beautiful or ugly" (*Esthetics of Music*, 35). An extremely interesting early source for the connection between judgments of taste and authorship is Paolo Cortese's *De cardinalatu libri tres* (Castel Cortesiano, 1510); see Nino Pirrotta, "Music and Cultural Tendencies in Fifteenth-Century Italy," this JOURNAL 19 (1966): 127–61, at 142–44, 147–61, and esp. 154–55. For the later conceptualization and critical valuation of *Personalstil*, see James Haar, "A Sixteenth-Century Attempt at Music Criticism," this JOURNAL 36 (1983): 191–209, at 194.

the case of Orlando di Lasso),[170] could not have emerged unless a simultaneous threat was perceived to it, a threat coming from those very employers. Artistic freedom, in other words, became culturally recognized and valued in a polarity with social constraints. Thus, while fifteenth-century church composers may have enjoyed some degree of artistic freedom, as Roger Bowers suggested, the concept itself could have had little meaning or value in the absence of any real antithesis.

### *10. The Death of the Medieval Composer*

As the emergence of this polarity illustrates, the professionalization of the modern composer should not necessarily be interpreted in positive terms: in the Ferrarese letter of 1502, as we have seen, it is Josquin who seems to represent a medieval attitude to composition, and Isaac who represents the "modern" professional attitude. Nor should the successive stages of the process, as identified by Bram Kempers, be seen as a teleology by which to measure historical progress. It is true that we need to step back several stages when returning to late fifteenth-century Flanders, yet this is not to imply that the final stages evolved there as quickly, or even in the same way, as in Italy. (For one thing, the Reformation was to strike at the very foundations, devotional as well as financial, of institutionalized church polyphony.) On the contrary, it is probably fair to say that in northwestern Europe, church composition "professionalized" along a quite different trajectory, one in which the *compositor* became ever more closely associated with the *musicus*, and (if they were not the same person) aspired to the latter's social dignity. This development is most clearly visible in early Tudor England, where composition became a formal part of university examinations for degrees in music. Roger Bray has observed that

> the appearance by 1500 of a route to a degree and to academic respectability was alluring, not least because this avenue was not available to painters and the like. Composers were academically respectable, and they had developed a complex, private craft known only to themselves, a

[170] It is surely significant that anecdotes about Josquin's relationships with aristocratic employers (Louis XII, and the *magnatus* who kept fobbing him off saying "Laise faire moy") became an integral part of the sixteenth-century Josquin "legend"; see Osthoff, *Josquin Desprez* 1:36, 41–42, and, for the perpetuation of that legend, 80–81. See also for the issues discussed here, Lowinsky's pioneering study "Musical Genius."

> theoretical base to complement the physics of sound, and a specific reason to set Music apart from the other arts.[171]

Bray identified several "academic" masses in England, not least Robert Fayrfax's *Missa O quam glorifica*, written for the composer's doctorate at Cambridge University in 1504—but also other works that are conspicuous for their puzzles, obscure notations, and cryptic canons. In northern France and the Low Countries, composition did not become formally incorporated in the university curriculum, yet we can detect signs of a development closely paralleling that in Tudor England. Church composition—beyond aspiring to "sweetness," beyond aiming to produce "effects"—could become a vehicle for the display of learning, and of course nowhere more obviously and famously than in the works of Busnoys and Obrecht. A mass or motet with Latin-Greek verbal canons, complex proportions, and unusual mensuration signs was (if nothing else) a *social* statement, an attempt to elevate composition to a point where the "tricks of the trade" became inaccessible to outsiders, who needed to be spoon-fed with *resolutiones* instead.[172]

For every medieval craft the idea of secrecy was, of course, closely bound up with professional demarcation and protection. Tinctoris defined *canon* as "a rule that shows the will of the composer (*voluntas compositoris*) under a certain obscurity."[173] In many cases one gets the impression that the composer's will concerned the obscurity itself more than what it obscured. No less significant than the frequent observations that "all and sundry can compose" (as in Tinctoris's sneers at the *indoctri* and *minime litterati*) is the evident disapproval that inspired such comments—as if the art of composition ought to be reserved only for those who were sufficiently trained. We may perhaps recognize here the typical social tensions and economic frictions that lay at the root of trade regulation and organization throughout the late Middle Ages.

Ironically, these quintessentially medieval developments actually favored the emergence of an aesthetic of the composer and of the

[171] Roger Bray, "Music and the Quadrivium in Early Tudor England," *Music & Letters* 76 (1995): 1–18, at 9. For the next sentence, see ibid., 12–14.

[172] A good example from Busnoys's environment is the anonymous *Missa L'ardant desir;* see Rob C. Wegman, "Another Mass by Busnoys?" *Music & Letters* 71 (1990): 1–19; and idem, "Mensural Intertextuality in the Sacred Music of Antoine Busnoys," in *Antoine Busnoys*, ed. Higgins (forthcoming).

[173] *Terminorum musicae diffinitorium.* On the sense of secrecy and mystery surrounding musical expertise, especially in the sixteenth century, see Ferand, "Improvised Vocal Counterpoint," 144–45.

work, albeit one entirely different from that in Italy. The emphasis on learning and notational obscurity not only shifted attention to the written artifact and its calligraphy (which consequently began to be seen as representing or partaking in the "work" in an important way), but also on the *voluntas compositoris*—even if its encoded expression emphasized his social and professional status more than his creative individuality.

In the Middle Ages, professional demarcation almost inevitably meant social organization. Yet how do we envisage something like this for an activity such as composition? The important point to make here is that a sense of professional solidarity could exist even when it did not find formal expression in the shape of confraternities and guilds.[174] For the carillonneurs of Ghent, for example, it took a fatal accident, in 1473, before they decided to establish a professional guild in honor of St. Margaret (based in a chapel in the local church of St. Nicholas).[175] One can hardly suppose, however, that the carillonneurs did not socialize and engage in communal activities before this date. This point needs emphasizing, for although I have noted earlier that guilds of professional singers are not documented in the Low Countries before 1498, there is clear evidence that singers did regard themselves as members of a corporate body. Almost everywhere in the Low Countries, church musicians were commonly called "companions of music" (*ghezellen vanden muzike*, *socii de musica*), an expression that clearly implies the existence of some kind of "company" or "society" (*ghezelscepe*, *societas*). At the church of Our Lady in Bruges, the *socii de musica* were indeed unofficially organized in a *societas*, headed by a "provost of the companions of music" who served as administrator and receiver, and was assisted by a "council of senior companions."[176]

One obvious reason why composers, unlike painters, could not give formal expression to a sense of professional solidarity is that there were rarely more than one or two composers active in the same city. And in the late Middle Ages, no guild was conceivable without a chapel in a local church where members could worship as a body, or

[174] As Eamon Duffy observes, guilds "were often more or less informal parts of the structure of the parish, contributing in a variety of ways to its worship and social life, and often growing naturally out of *ad hoc* arrangements to meet specific parochial needs. . . . As gilds might come almost casually into existence, so they might melt away once again into the body of the parish at large" (Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 149).

[175] Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 51.

[176] Dewitte, "De geestelijkheid van de Brugse Lieve-Vrouwkerk," 123.

without venues for regular communal activities. Yet this does not mean that composers could not have sought informal ways of expression that were inspired by the model of trade guilds. All one needs to do is to keep that model in mind and look for possible parallels in the world of composition, even if they reach us in incidental or anecdotal evidence. In this connection it is important to emphasize that guilds had more functions and dimensions than trade protection alone.[177] First and foremost, perhaps, they were communities in which members exercised and relied on "neighborly" charity. Second, they were invariably devoted to the worship of patron saints, who could be called upon to intercede on behalf of members and their relatives, and to protect them from misfortune (professional or otherwise). Finally, members typically convened annually on the feast-day of the patron saint, celebrated Mass, held a festive dinner, and elected the new dean and councillors for the next year.

Celebratory meals among singers are amply documented in the Low Countries, since it was common for choral establishments to pay for the wine. The accounts of the confraternity of Our Lady in 's-Hertogenbosch, for instance, contain numerous payments "for the singers . . . to be merry amongst themselves," usually after the arrival of newly appointed colleagues, or during visits of other chapels or groups of singers.[178] (When the composer Mattheus Pipelare arrived at 's-Hertogenbosch in 1498 to take up his appointment as choirmaster, one of the singers had run off with the drinks money, "and did not come back.") The 's-Hertogenbosch choir, in its turn, visited Obrecht at Antwerp in February 1493: the latter received money from the church of Our Lady to host and entertain them—as he did during similar visits by "singers from elsewhere" and "the singers of Bruges" in 1493/94.[179] The most detailed document concerning such festive musical meetings is to be found in the chapter acts for 1484 of St. Donatian's at Bruges:

> My lords [of the chapter] consent with the payment made by the treasury for six jugs of wine, for the support of the *socii de musica* in a dinner held some time ago [15 August] for the Lord Treasurer of Tours, *dominus*

[177] For an excellent introduction, see the chapter "Corporate Christians" in Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 131–54.

[178] Smijers, *De Illustre Lieve Vrouwebroederschap*, 182 (1486/87: "ons sengeren . . . om vrolyck met malcanderen te wesen"). For the next sentence, see ibid., 206.

[179] Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 294–95. For the next sentence, see ibid., 84.

> Johannes Ockeghem, first chaplain of the king of France [and] most excellent *musicus*, and those with him.[180]

This was a dinner exclusively among singers, among professional "companions," to celebrate the visit of an eminent *musicus*. Yet beyond providing evidence on forms of professional "fraternization" in the late fifteenth century, the Bruges document gives us another potentially significant clue: the dinner had been held on 15 August, the Assumption of Our Lady. That the Virgin was sometimes regarded as the patron saint of singers is evident from a sentence in Josquin's Marian motet *Illibata Dei Virgo nutrix:* "Hail to thee alone, as *only friend*, console those who are singing 'la mi la' in thy praise" ("Salve tu sola, cum sola amica, consola la mi la canentes in tua laude"). Although there is an obvious allusion here to the "amica mea" of the Song of Songs, as well as elaborate wordplay on solmization syllables, to speak of the Virgin as the "only friend" who is to "console those singing 'la mi la' in thy praise" is unmistakably to address her as a patron saint.[181] As a singers' motet addressed to the Virgin, *Illibata* could well have been intended for communal veneration by "companions of music" during a formal meeting that would also have included a festive dinner.

A far more significant document, however, is Loyset Compère's *Omnium bonorum plena*,[182] which implores the Virgin to "offer prayers to [thy] Son, for the salvation of those who sing" ("funde preces ad filium pro salute canentium"). This, again, is a typical address to a patron saint. What is particularly interesting, however, is that the *canentes* are this time listed by name. They are headed by Guillaume Dufay, who, as *primus inter pares*, seems to be thought of as a kind of informal dean or provost. He is followed by the "masters of songs" (*magistri cantilenarum*): Jean du Sart, Antoine Busnoys, Firminus Caron, Georget de Brelles, Johannes Tinctoris, Johannes Ockeghem, Des Prez, Courbet, Jean Hemart, Guillaume Faugues, Jean Molinet, and, lastly, Compère himself. Several of these musicians do not carry the academic title "magister" in contemporary documents, and four of

[180] See n. 78.

[181] On the late medieval perception of saints as friends, helpers, indeed "kynd neyghbours," see Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 160–61. For Josquin's motet, see Josquin des Prez, *Werken*, Motetten, Bundel 5, Aflevering 14, 140; and Richard Sherr, "*Illibata Dei Virgo Nutrix* and Josquin's Roman Style," this JOURNAL 41 (1988): 434–64, esp. 451–52.

[182] See Loyset Compère, *Opera omnia*, ed. Ludwig Finscher, Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae 15 (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1958–72), 4:32.

them (Regis, Caron, Faugues, and Courbet) were in fact singled out by another, Tinctoris, as composers who were *minime litterati* (see above). Plainly, *magister* is to be understood in a broader sense as indicating recognized mastership, in what is specified here as *cantilenae*, secular songs.[183] The preponderance of *composers* in Compère's list is indeed striking, even if one allows that "Des Prez" is probably not Josquin but the singer Pasquier des Prez, active at Bruges and the Burgundian court in 1459–81.[184] Apart from him, only Georget de Brelles is not positively known to have engaged in compositional activities.

Also striking is the preponderance of musicians with known Cambrai connections.[185] This, and the prominence given to Dufay, would suggest a professional meeting among "master song composers" at Cambrai some time in the years around 1470, involving communal veneration of the Virgin (in which Compère's motet would have been sung), and no doubt a festive dinner, perhaps followed by the singing of new *cantilenae*. Still, several "brothers" would have had to travel from elsewhere: Faugues from Bourges, Ockeghem from Tours, Regis from Soignies, and Molinet, Busnoys, and Des Prez from the Burgundian court. Of course, every corporate organization had members who lived abroad but who would nevertheless attend annual meetings. Another parallel, however, may be the phenomenon known as "minstrel schools"—which could almost be described as the fifteenth-century equivalent of national conventions.[186] Given that Tinctoris's *Proportionale musices*, finished in 1472–73, contains rather strident comments about Ockeghem, Busnoys, Faugues, Regis, Caron, and

[183] For similar titles among minstrels and instrumental performers, recorded at the court of Savoy, see Auguste Dufour and François Rabut, *Les Musiciens, la musique et les instruments de musique en Savoie du XIII^e au XIX^e siècle* (Chambéry, 1878; reprint, Geneva: Minkoff, 1972), 23 (1414: *magister citare*), 30 (1446: *magister citharizatorum*), 34 (1440: *magister strimie alias yspaludie*). In 1423 the duke of Savoy had made a financial contribution toward the formation of a "confratria" of his minstrels (ibid., 27).

[184] Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges*, 187; Van Doorslaer, "La Chapelle musicale," 23; Marix, *Histoire de la musique et des musiciens*, 214 and 257–62.

[185] Cf. Fallows, *Dufay*, 77–78: Dufay, Du Sart, Georget de Brelles, and Hemart were active at Cambrai in the 1460s and early 1470s, Regis maintained close connections with Dufay, and Tinctoris had been a singer in the cathedral for a brief period in 1460.

[186] Cf. Marix, *Histoire de la musique et des musiciens*, 96–98; Craig Wright, *Music at the Court of Burgundy, 1364–1419: A Documentary History*, Musicological Studies 28 (Henryville, Ottawa, and Binningen: Institute of Medieval Music, 1979), 32–34; and Lingbeek-Schalekamp, *Overheid en muziek*, 115–16.

Courbet, one assumes that any cordial meeting of the *magistri cantilenarum* at Cambrai should have taken place well before that date.[187]

Compère's *Omnium bonorum plena* thus suggests that the foremost composers of the 1460s and 1470s thought of themselves as a group defined by professional "mastership"—however unofficially—and that they created at least one opportunity for a meeting involving common veneration of a patron saint. Yet would there be more evidence? The answer is almost certainly yes. Apart from trade protection, corporate meetings, and patron saints, there is another important feature of guilds and confraternities: neighborly charity. This feature was in fact essential: medieval corporations were almost by definition devoted to works of mercy, for which reason they were often called *charités* in the north and west of France.[188] And among their activities, none was perhaps more important than intercession for deceased members, based on a broad interpretation of the seventh work of mercy, *mortuus sepelitur* (burying the dead). As Eamon Duffy has stressed, "the cult of the commemoration of the dead was inextricably bound up with the late medieval sense of community."[189] Any member of a guild or confraternity was assured of prayers for the salvation of his or her soul, provided that the required death fee had been bequeathed in the testament. Often it is only the reception of this death fee, adminis-

[187] Fallows, *Dufay*, 78, proposes a date in 1468 on different grounds.

[188] Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 183–88; Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990), 327–28.

[189] Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 139. A sense of brotherhood could also find expression in the wish for musicians to be buried at the same place, like next of kin or close friends (cf. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 74–77 and 288–92), evidently in the hope of being joined together in resurrection on the Last Day. The composer Johannes Lupi, master of the choirboys at Cambrai (1527–35 and 1537–39), requested three days before his death on 20 December 1539 that he be buried in the cathedral next to his predecessors Denis de Hollain (1485–1503) and Louis Vanpulaer (1503–7), a request that was granted as a special favor on the same day. See Bonnie J. Blackburn, "Johannes Lupi and Lupus Hellinck: A Double Portrait," *The Musical Quarterly* 59 (1973), 547–83, at 560. This example provides further corroboration of Paula Higgins's argument that "the trend around 1500 and beyond to acknowledge one's musical genealogy by claiming to have studied under a particular master mirrored the gradually evolving role of the master of the choirboys from that of skilled craftsman to creative mentor," a role expressed, significantly, in metaphors of kinship and lineage ("Musical 'Parents' and Their 'Progeny,' " 171). Higgins's and my conclusions intersect in the possibility for confraternities to have rulers designated, not as "dean" with sworn "councillors," as was most common, but as "father" with "children." For example, the confraternity of Sts. Peter and Paul in the church of St. Nicholas in Ghent, for citizens who had made a pilgrimage to Rome, was governed, at its foundation in July 1522, by a "vader" with twelve "kinderen." See Frans de Potter, *Gent, van den oudsten tijd tot heden*, 8 vols. (Ghent: C. Annoot-Braeckman, 1883–1901), 3:234–36.

tered in confraternity accounts, which tells us that professional musicians had been enrolled, and indeed in what year they died.[190]

From this point of view, musical laments should have been among the primary expressions of social cohesion among composers, giving voice to the grief of a bereaved "community," yet extending to the deceased the last work of charity, collective prayer for his soul. Both themes, community sense and corporate intercession, are clearly articulated in Ockeghem's well-known lament for Binchois:[191]

Son corps est plaint et lamenté
Qui gist soubs lame.
Helas! plaise vous en pitié:
*Priez pour l'ame.*
. . . . . .
Pleurez *hommes de feaulté;*
Vueillez vostre *université.*

The word *université*, of course, designated any sort of corporation or community. Its members are described here as *hommes de feaulté*, sworn in fidelity, and bound by their oath to pray for the deceased. It is not essential that this *université* should have been one of singers, or even composers, nor that Ockeghem should necessarily have been Binchois's apprentice—although intercession is indeed what parents and children, in particular, owed each other,[192] and Binchois is, after all, described as "le père de joieuseté." What really matters is that Ockeghem, in exercising the seventh work of mercy (broadly defined) for the deceased, publicly acknowledged and articulated their common bond. Yet *Mort tu as navré* is not a "merely" social statement: in fact,

[190] As in the case of Willem Obrecht's membership in the confraternity of Our Lady in the church of St. John, Ghent (Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 150 and 368), or Busnoys's membership in the confraternity of St. Saviour's, Bruges (Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges*, 54–55). Examples of deceased composers mentioned in the accounts of the confraternity at 's-Hertogenbosch are: Nicasius de Clibano (1497/98), Hieronymus de Clibano (1503/4), Pierre de La Rue (1511/12), and Paulus de Roda (1514); see Smijers, *De Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap*, 204; and idem, "De Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap te 's-Hertogenbosch [1500–1525]," *Tijdschrift van de Vereeniging voor Nederlandsche Muziekgeschiedenis* 14 (1932): 48–105, at 55, 74, and 82.

[191] Text edited with commentary in *The Musical Manuscript Montecassino 871: A Neapolitan Repertory of Sacred and Secular Music of the Late Fifteenth Century*, ed. Isabel Pope and Masakata Kanazawa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 635–36; and *Johannes Ockeghem Collected Works*, ed. Dragan Plamenac and Richard Wexler, 3 vols. (Boston: American Musicological Society, 1959–92), 3:lxxxiv–lxxxvi. For more on the piece see Higgins, "Antoine Busnois," 156–59; and idem, "Musical 'Parents' and their 'Progeny,' " 179.

[192] See, for example, Obrecht's motet *Mille quingentis*, written as a prayer for the salvation of his father Willem's soul; Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 12–13, 22–24, and 154–56.

the concept "social" would have had little significance unless Ockeghem had really and genuinely cared for the safety of Binchois's soul. The tenor's constant reiteration of the liturgical text (secured by the strophic form of the ballade) is itself a symbol of the incessant prayers that might secure eternal life for the deceased composer: "Have mercy, have mercy, gentle Jesus: Lord, grant him repose, whom thou redeemest on the cross with thy precious blood, gentle Jesus, Lord, grant him repose."

* * *

"God have his soul, he was a good man." The news of Lupus Hellinck's death, during the performance of his motet *In te Domine speravi*, was greeted by Hercules with what is effectively a prayer of intercession. His words, from the fictional conversation quoted at the beginning of this article, are a final reminder of the importance of intercession to any understanding of the communal dimension to late medieval musical culture. They are as much an expression of the social interaction between composers and their urban audience, at least in 1540s Brabant and Flanders, as Samson's reply, "I have spent a good time with him on many occasions." The professionalization of the composer, in the preceding three-quarters of a century, had been an essentially social phenomenon—if social is understood in its medieval, corporate sense. For the Low Countries the process did not mark a moment of epochal discontinuity, the elusive advent of the Renaissance, any more than the professionalization of other medieval trades had done: it can be understood, in the main, as a late expression of traditional and well-established modes of thought.

Even so, the development did involve a fundamental change in musical perception and understanding. One of the principal claims of this article has been that the concept of "the composer" emerged in direct conjunction with a perceived opposition between "composition" and "improvisation." It was in the decades around 1500 that new ideas began to be articulated, not only about musical authorship and the distinct professional identity of composers, but also about the difference between the composition as object, on the one hand, and improvisation as a practice, on the other. These ideas were not confined to the specialist realm of music theory, but had spread to, and to some extent perhaps originated in, the popular consciousness. It seems significant that the first author to dwell on the perceived opposition, Tinctoris in 1477, could already report the existence of vernacular expressions (*chose faite* and *chanter sur le livre*), suggesting that the perception was available to a lay audience well before theorists began to elaborate it as a doctrine.

Of course this is not to deny the existence, before that conceptual bifurcation, of musical practices that could be described today as "composition" or "improvisation." However, it is to suggest that the level on which these practices were different (and on which the composer necessarily operated, that of production) might have been considered less significant than the level on which, to all intents and purposes, they could be perceived to be the same (that of aural cognition). Until very late into the fifteenth century, archival documents, eyewitness reports, and treatises can be frustratingly ambiguous as to whether the "discant," "music," or "counterpoint" of which they speak was written or unwritten. As that apparent indifference gives way, in the decades around 1500, to the conceptual opposition described above, an image of "the composer" can also be seen to emerge with increasing clarity from contemporary discourse on music.

To assess perceptions of musical authorship as they prevailed before this major change, at least in urban musical culture in the Low Countries, it is important to accept the apparent indifference—however frustrating it may be for the modern scholar—as a positive musical outlook in its own right. If I have devoted a great deal of attention here to the pervasive and enduring presence of medieval traditions of oral polyphony, this was not to argue that "improvisation" was practiced much more widely, compared to "composition," than our history books might lead us to imagine. To claim this, after all, would merely be to affirm an opposition which the period itself was not at pains to articulate. Rather, it was to explore, on its own terms, a "writing-indifferent" musical aesthetic in which perceptions of authorship would necessarily have had to be very different from what they were to become later on.

Those earlier perceptions could be summed up, for the purposes of modern historical understanding, in the designation "maker." In normal fifteenth-century parlance, both Latin and vernacular, one can either "make" or "sing" discant or counterpoint, and a "maker," at bottom, is someone who writes down music that might just as well have been sung collectively. Conceptually this set of alternatives is worlds away from the seemingly synonymous pair of opposites that became widely current in the sixteenth century, "to compose" and "to improvise" (*sortisare*, *cantare alla mente*). A similar conceptual distance separates the concepts of "maker" and "composer," a distance much vaster, and much richer in its historical implications, than any single study could do justice to.

Needless to concede, a fifteenth-century *Ave Maria* "in discant" might well have been audibly different depending on whether it was

written or extemporized. Tinctoris, in fact, had conceded as much. Still, it is worth considering whether it would be historically appropriate to dwell only on such hypothetical differences; more often than not, this has resulted in the privileging of a contrapuntal correctness of which even the contemporary written repertory habitually falls short. The more challenging question might be whether we could critically evaluate fifteenth-century liturgical compositions as if it made no difference whether they had been written or extemporized. Even as a thought experiment, that question may lead one to wonder whether author-centered criteria such as individuality, personal style, and originality, or work-centered criteria such as structure, coherence, and formal symmetry, do not affirm the very opposition between "composition" and "improvisation" whose historical contingency it is our task to investigate. For the purposes of criticism and interpretation, the critique of musical authorship arises from the very concerns with historical appropriateness that have traditionally guided Renaissance musicology, and from the very source material it has rescued from oblivion.

Princeton University


## Abstract

The second half of the fifteenth century saw profound changes in the understanding and valuation of the concepts of "composer" and "composition." This article explores those changes, especially as they evolved in urban musical culture in the Low Countries in 1450–1500. Attention is given to oral traditions of popular and professional polyphony, the status of writing in musical instruction and practice, the emergence of a perceived opposition between "composition" and "improvisation," the technical and conceptual ramifications of that perception, the relative social and professional status implied in designations such as "singer," "composer," "*musicus*," and "tenorist," and, finally, the new understanding and valuation of musical authorship, around 1500, involving notions of personal style, artistic freedom, authorial intention, creative property, historical awareness, and professional organization, protection, and secrecy.