THE CREATION OF A MUSICAL ÉLITE IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

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When we try to make historical sense of events that took place in the distant past, we are bound to make use of metaphors, and must live with their problems and limitations. There are several provocative metaphors in the title of this *Arbeitsgespräch*, and at the beginning of my contribution I would like to take a closer look at three of them.

The first is institutionalisation. Literally the word means: putting something into place, establishing it, setting it on a firm and secure footing. Institutionalisation implies a single foundational act, completed in a short time-span, and the desired result is at least in principle meant to be permanent and unchanging. Institutionalisation necessarily implies the agency of a *person* who is doing the instituting.

The second term, process, does not imply agency of this kind. A process is what evolves over time, gradually and continuously, seemingly of its own accord. We may initiate a process by creating favorable conditions for it to happen, or by setting off the trigger, as it were, but the result will not be permanent until the process has fully come to an end. Nor can we influence those results once the process has been set in motion – our interference would cause it to be no longer a process.

So what do we mean when we mix these contradictory metaphors, and say that institutionalisation can be viewed as a process? One answer could be that institutions need not always be secure – that they may require continuous maintenance and upkeep, and that this inevitably involves change and perhaps growth. In this way, one imagines, modest foundations could indeed have grown to full-blown institutions. And if there is something inevitable about such developments, if individual human beings are merely instrumental to their coming about, then yes, it may make sense to speak of institutionalisation as a process having a life of its own.

The third metaphor, finally, is élite. The word refers literally to a person, or persons, who have been elected, chosen out of many. This concept is

harder to apply to early modern musical culture. Strictly speaking, the Elect were those chosen by God for some special purpose – and this was a group that in principle included all members of the Christian church. The modern idea of social and political power being concentrated in a select group, in expressions like »the ruling élite«, would have been foreign to early modern ways of thinking. It was God who had chosen *all* Christians to their respective stations in life, and it was not for them to question or defy that choice, lest they be guilty of the capital sin of pride. Those who belonged to the aristocracy were no more *chosen* for their role in society than those who belonged to the clergy or the working class. In this sense everybody was just as »elite« as everybody else, provided they were not infidels or excommunicates.

It may seem, at this point, that my contribution is going to be a pedantic exercise in linguistic hair-splitting, but let me assure you that this is not my intention. If we are bound to use metaphors in historical interpretation, and if all metaphors inevitably have their problems, then of course there is no need to demonstrate this for one set of metaphors in particular. My point is in fact the opposite: metaphors *need* to be provocative, even problematic, if we are to use them critically but resourcefully. In the present case, there are two useful observations that emerge from the foregoing reflections.

First, we have seen that early modern society was egalitarian in ways that ours is not. If salvation was open to all members of the church, then nobody could be excluded from institutions that were set up to promote salvation – no matter how wealthy and powerful their benefactors. To put it concretely, there was no altar, however richly endowed with ornaments and musical services, at which even the humblest Christian was unwelcome, or to which he or she could not contribute. And if church music was performed with a view to promoting salvation, then no faithful Christian could be barred from that institution either. Stated differently, if every choral foundation was, in the last resort, for the benefit of *all souls*, there could be no élites, musical or otherwise. Everybody could hear the music, and its benefits were available to all. This point has important ramifications to which I will return later.

Second, institutionalisation may take the form of a process when the institution itself is not secure, when there are pressures threatening its continued health or existence. Institutionalisation can be a defensive endeavor, an

effort at protection, preservation, or consolidation. This underlines the axiom that institutions are not typically called into existence unless there are *interests* at stake – salvation being an obvious example. Perhaps it is also possible to suggest the opposite: that when interests are somehow seen to be under threat, there will typically be an effort to bolster them in institutions. Things that can be taken for granted do not require institutionalisation.

Bearing these two introductory observations in mind, let me now move on to the underlying premise of this paper. Yes, it is possible to see the emergence of musical élitism in early modern Europe – at least if élite is understood in its specific modern sense of a group claiming an exclusive privilege, a privilege denied to everybody else. The formation of this musical élite was at bottom a defensive manoeuver, and it did take the form of institutionalisation. Yet the kind of institutionalisation that was needed could not be achieved through a single foundational act. It was an ongoing process, taking shape, not in buildings or permanent legal provisions, but in the propagation of ideas. This, paradoxically, made it a far more powerful development than institutionalisation in the narrow technical sense. Foundations can be annulled, buildings can be toppled. But ideas cannot be attacked effectively unless you engage with their underlying premises, and are thus locked in a dialectical relationship with them. And when ideas are enshrined in institutions, indeed when they have *become* institutions, they may be well-nigh sacrosanct. No idea is more firmly established than the one that is most vulnerable to attack.

There is of course nothing new or especially provocative about any of this. I have examined the relevant historical trends in a number of publications, most recently in the monograph *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe*[1]. And many other scholars, several of them also having contributed to the present volume, have studied them with greater subtlety and erudition than I could hope to claim. I am referring, of course, to such developments as the professionalisation of the composer, the paradigm of the musical work, the postulate of musical understanding, and the social prestige of the expert listener. These four developments have »privilege« written all over

1 Rob C. WEGMANN, *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe, 1470–1530,* New York 2005. Additions and corrections to this monograph can be found on http://www.princeton.edu/~rwegman/CRISIS-ADDITIONS.pdf.

them, and, as I have argued in the final chapter of *The Crisis of Music*, they favored the emergence of a kind of musical élite. So why do I find myself coming back to those issues in this paper?

One potential problem is that these developments are only too recognizable to us today, perhaps deceptively so. The professional composer, the musical work, musical understanding, and the expert listener: they have all become cornerstones in élite musical life as we have come to know it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The danger with things that are self-evident in our own society is that they may seem just as self-evident when we look for them in the past. They require no explanation, it is enough simply to recognize them. Yet there have to be checks to such recognition, otherwise we may end up projecting the modern state of affairs onto all of history. Leo Treitler once argued, for example, that the concept of the musical work can be recognized already in the songs of Landini.[2] And Ludwig Finscher signalled the birth of the modern composer in the palaeography of the Squarcialupi Codex.[3] Maybe these eminent scholars were both right, and maybe we can trace these developments as far back as this, perhaps even further. But at some point we may be in danger of perpetuating the so-called »rising middle class syndrome«: the oft-noted tendency for historians to claim for every period that the middle classes were undergoing a dramatic rise.[4]

It is here, I think, that we may sometimes become the prisoners of our own metaphors, our conceptual tools. At some point it becomes necessary to ask what it means for middle classes to rise, and more importantly, what

2 Leo TREITLER, *On Patricia Carpenter's ›The Musical Object‹,* in: Current musicology 5, 1967, pp. 87–93: 89ff. The problem with Treitler's observation is that he sees the »work« as a set of qualities immanent in the musical composition itself (what the Germans call *Werkhaftigkeit*), rather than an interpretive paradigm that may or may not have informed the musical experience of contemporary listeners. One can project the paradigm, with varying degrees of success, onto music of the remote past, but even if that produces an apparently satisfactory analysis (as it undeniably does in the case of Landini), that does not prove that contemporary listeners necessarily applied that paradigm when hearing music.

3 Ludwig FINSCHER, *Die ›Entstehung des Komponisten‹: Zum Problem Komponisten-Individualität und Individualstil in der Musik des 14. Jahrhunderts*, in: International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music 6, 1975, pp. 135–142.

4 For the interpretive fallacy in question, see David Hackett FISCHER, *Historians's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought,* New York NY 1970, pp. 149–50.

would have kept them from rising earlier on. Similarly, just because we are familiar with musical élitism in the modern period, and just because musicology has traditionally aligned itself with musical élites, doesn't mean that we should take their existence for granted in every historical period. To give an example, for many of us the idea of an élite musical institution may have been shaped, consciously or subconsciously, by the nineteenth-century symphony halls and opera theaters that were established by American philanthropes in cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City. In the Gilded Age, the mere act of attending a musical performance in those buildings meant to exercise a very exclusive social privilege. But a royal foundation in the Middle Ages – say, the Sainte Chapelle at Paris – was not an élite musical institution in this sense. Such foundations were, at bottom, »good works«, and as such there could not be anything exclusive about them. Why bar anyone from your chapel who might pray for your soul? Was it not precisely the poor whose prayers were known to be most efficacious? Even private chapels could be called »private« only in the sense that this included the entire household, and any guests or visitors that a prince might wish to entertain. So the question is: what does musical élitism actually mean in the late medieval and early modern periods, if indeed we are to use this metaphor at all?

Perhaps we could clarify the term as follows. If someone did not belong to the nobility, it meant, positively, that he or she had been chosen to a different estate – that is, the clergy or the working class. But if someone does not belong to an élite in the modern sense, it means, negatively, that he or she has not been chosen at all. There is only one group to which that individual could have been elected, but he or she has not been elected at all. By medieval standards, exclusion of this kind would have been manifestly unjust, and the only way to rationalize the existence of such injustice within God's creation was to attribute it to Fortune. Perhaps this is how we could think of musical élitism in this period: Fortune had favored some musicians with exceptional talent, and had showered them with riches and honors. On the other hand, if Fortune did indeed make it possible for some musicians to claim élite status for themselves, then they were merely guilty of the capital sin of pride. In a well-ordered society, there ought to be no élites, no select groups, of any kind.

This, I think, is the underlying reasoning behind assertions of class and status among medieval musicians. Take for example the famous saying of Guido of Arezzo: »Great is the difference between *musici* and *cantores*: the latter perform, but the former understand, what music consists of. For he who fashions what he does not know is termed a beast.«[5] Note that Guido is not claiming élite status for *musici*. On the contrary, he is affirming the dignity that is due to them because of the nature of their work, which is speculation. *Cantores* are entitled to *their* professional dignity as well: they offer unceasing praise to the Creator, a hard but important labor in which *musici* are not required to join. Clearly, there would have been no need for Guido to compose this verse if *cantores* had known their place. But they do not. The fame has gone to their heads, and now they imagine that they are somehow the worthiest of all musicians. So it is time to call them what they really are: beasts. Mere mouth-pieces. I imagine that our own response might not be dissimilar if, say, some amateur historian made a fortune, and became a public celebrity, by popularizing music history in best-sellers that were riddled with errors, while we musicologists were engaged in the hard labor of gathering and sorting evidence. Great is the difference indeed – let it not be forgotten.

There is a similar example in the early fifteenth century treatise on musicians by Arnulf of Saint Ghislain, recently translated by Christopher Page.[6] Arnulf offers a description of the court of Lady Music. She is the sovereign ruler of her domain, and everything is well and good. Three classes of musician are admitted to residence at her court, and each has its rightful and proper place. No special privileges for anyone. But of course, that is not why Arnulf is writing the treatise. There is a fourth class of musician which is irrevocably exiled from Lady Music's retinue: these are the proud, arrogant, and disdainful singers who imagine that they know it all, when in fact they know nothing. Now, one is bound to wonder, what could have led them to

5 Guido of AREZZO, *Regulae rhythmicae*, eds. Joseph Smits van Waesberghe and Eduard Vetter, Buren 1985 (Divitiae musicae artis, A/IV), p. 95 (»Musicorum et cantorum magna est distantia. Isti dicunt, illi sciunt quae componit Musica. Nam quid facit quod non sapit deffinitur bestia«).

6 Christopher PAGE, *A Treatise on Musicians **from ?c. 1400:** The* Tractatulus de differentiis et gradibus cantorum *by Arnulf de St Ghislain*, in: Journal of the Royal Musical Association 117, 1992, pp. 1–21.

such ridiculous presumption? Arnulf does not tell us, but it is not hard to guess: they are the ones who have the richly-paid jobs, who get the prebends, who are sought after by kings, princes, and prelates, and who now think themselves superior to every other kind of musician.

It would not be hard to find other examples, but the point here is this: if the existence of a musical élite meant that the natural order of society was somehow destabilized, if certain individuals swelled with pride above their station, merely because Fortune had favored them, then élitism was certainly not a good thing. All humans must accept the station allotted to them by birth and inheritance, and not aspire to more. There are more fundamental reasons for this as well, and to address those reasons we must now make a short detour, and step into the battlefield of musical élitism that has recently opened up in fourteenth-century studies.

At the heart of this battle lies the Ars nova motet, a genre of great compositional and literary complexity, and one, accordingly, that would seem to have required discerning appreciation of that complexity. Margaret Bent has forcefully argued that the Ars nova motet called for »informed and prepared listening«, otherwise the subtleties of counterpoint, tenor construction, and literary composition, would be lost on the hearer.[7] So in a sense the genre presupposed a musical élite, that is, listeners who had the requisite training and education to appreciate the inherent qualities of these settings. The motets would have been wasted on others, no matter how much delight they might take from other qualities. This is undeniably a compelling argument. It allows us to claim a status for motets analogous to that of string quartets in the eighteenth century – a kind of *Kenner und Liebhaber* distinction. And it holds the promise of a kind of musical appreciation that might be more in tune with what the settings themselves seem to call for.

Problems arise when we try to find evidence for the existence of such an audience outside the notes and words of the motet itself. Treatises do not provide such evidence, for although they tell us how to sing counterpoint, or how to construct a motet, they never come close to claiming that knowledge

7 Margaret BENT, *Polyphony of Texts and Music in the Fourteenth-Century Motet: Tribum que non abhorruit/Quoniam secta latronum/Merito hec patimur and Its 'Quotations'*, in: Hearing the Motet: Essays on the Motet of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, ed. Dolores Pesce, New York NY 1997, pp. 82–103: 100, notes 1 and 82.

of composition is a prerequisite for proper musical delight. Undoubtedly it is possible, with sufficient training, to hear a motet with the expert ears of the fourteenth-century composer, just as one might appreciate a mansion with the expert eyes of the architect. But what is unclear is whether those ears were a *sine qua non* for everybody, including those who happened not to be composers. To put the matter more critically, that those who lacked such ears were somehow excluded from the inner circle of true motet connoisseurs.

One of the most eloquent opponents of this idea of elitism – a word that Margaret Bent does not use, incidentally – has been Christopher Page in his book *Discarding Images*.[8] He looked at another piece of evidence that might suggest a privileged circle of motet connoisseurs, namely, Johannes de Grocheo's well-known classification of Parisian musical genres around 1300. Grocheo's comments on the motet certainly seem to smack of élitism. He writes, and I quote:

> This kind of song ought not to be propagated among the laity, since they do not notice its refinement nor do they delight in hearing it, but it should be performed for the clergy, and for those who seek the refinements in any branch of study. And it is normally performed for the adornment of their feasts.

Christopher Page was at pains to stress that the laity – the people who ought *not* to be listening to motets – included not just humble peasants but kings, princes, knights, and merchants.[9] Motets were nearly strictly for clerics and scholars – by no means a socially privileged group. Certainly clerics not claim any social distinction because of their appreciation of motets, since subtlety was their trade. It would not have accorded with the dignity of a king to listen to music for clerics. Indeed it might have been an affront to offer such music to him, or to require him to do the work of a cleric to appreciate it. It is not that the king was unable to understand subtleties, but rather that His Majesty would not condescend to take particular notice of them – Grocheo's verb is *advertere*, not *intelligere*. Nor would he condescend to express delight, or even admit it to His Royal Self, if the music was

8 Christopher PAGE, *Discarding Images: Reflections on Music and Culture in Medieval France,* Oxford 1993, esp. pp. 43–111, and, for the Grocheo quotation, p. 81.

9 Idem, pp. 81–84.

appropriate for clerical rather than royal ears. What is decisive in all this is the principle of decorum, not anything smacking of élitism or privilege.

What Grocheo describes is a kind of musical segregation in medieval Paris that recalls the rigorous segregation of radio stations in the American South of the 1950s. Blacks didn't listen to white music, whites didn't listen to black music, and neither was going to appreciate music that didn't define them – unless of course they were rebellious white teenagers, in which case they would appropriate black music to define a social constituency of their own. But cross-over of that kind, in the fourteenth century, would have amounted to the sin of pride, and would have been subject to keen social control if not, in some cases, sumptuary legislation.

If the notion of élitism is problematic already in the realm of the secular motet, it is far more so in the realm of church polyphony. Church music was the great social leveller in this period, because it was appropriate for every class in society to listen to it, appreciate it, and benefit from it. A Flemish conversation booklet from the 1540s has four Brussels citizens praising the singers of the chapel of Emperor Charles V, singers whom they have just heard in their local parish church.[10] These Flemings may never come anywhere near the imperial court, and they may lack the social grace and education of clerics, but they nevertheless assume, quite unselfconsciously, that the music performed by the Emperor's chapel is for their ears as much as it is for the Emperor and his retinue. How can this be the case if there is nothing to suggest that they had any knowledge of counterpoint? The answer is provided in the dialogue, and it can be stated in a general point.

The point is this: so far as we can tell from contemporary eyewitness account, listeners appreciated church music in the same way that modern opera lovers appreciate Kiri Te Kanawa, Jessye Norman, or Janet Baker, or eighteenth-century audiences appreciated the celebrated castrati – they listened for the quality of the voice (which in the fifteenth century was invariably praised as sweet) rather than the work, or its composer. The only real difference was that the consonant sweetness mediated by the voice was a

10 Rob C. WEGMAN, *From Maker to Composer: Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450-1500*, in: Journal of the American Musicological Society 49, 1996, pp. 409–479: 409ff.

tribute less to the singer personally than a quality originating somewhere else: it was routinely said to be divine, heavenly, or angelic.

It will not be necessary here to rehearse the medieval commonplace that one of the things that distinguishes humans – *all* humans – from animals, is their ability to understand the mathematical reasons for why consonance is agreeable and sweet. One does wonder why they made such a fuss over it, though, for to claim this is no more sophisticated than to argue that humans have a richer appreciation of strawberries because they have the ability to understand the chemical composition of sugar. But the answer to *that* question need not be rehearsed either: because the mathematical rationes were known to reflect God's creative design, and were expressive of harmony as a cosmic principle. Understanding this, or at least the ability to understand it, had profound implications for musical experience. (Perhaps, to invoke a different analogy, it is like having a richer appreciation of life on earth knowing the structural beauty and simplicity of the DNA double helix.)

To modern scholars it may seem sometimes musically uninformed or technically illiterate when medieval writers praise musical sweetness in vague poetic terms. But why should anyone have *preferred* to engage in a technical appreciation of the composer's handiwork? The latter was a mere mechanical effort, the work of a skilled artisan, equivalent to the expert construction of a house. It amounted merely to the arranging of consonances whose divine sweetness was not of the composer's making in any case. What would have been the use of such technical appreciation, indeed what would have been the use of motets if such appreciation was the only response they could evoke in listeners?

Appreciation of consonant sweetness, on the other hand, was rooted in the objective truth of mathematical ratios, and in this sense constituted certain and true knowledge. This would have been preferable by far to appreciation of the composer's artistry, artistry which like all human endeavors was subject to changes in style and taste, and would in any case be of very limited value if it could only be understood properly by those initiated in the art.

This brings us to the crucial point. If my appreciation of polyphony is centered in consonant sweetness, which in turn is rooted in metaphysical truth, then my appreciation is necessarily common to all listeners. For if I hear objective truth, then it can be no more true for me than it is for you,

and hence you will appreciate it exactly as I do. There can be no »private« musical experience, no experience that sets me apart from others, or that qualifies me for admission to some select musical élite, for the truth I hear is by definition universal. It is a truth that knows no insiders and outsiders, but can be heard and appreciated by all. This is essential if church music is to be of benefit to all Christian believers, and it would be lost if its appreciation was contingent on specialist knowledge available to a few.

It is in this sense, I think, that medieval eye-witnesses could so often assume, without a moment's hesitation, that if they were carried away by the music they heard, then everybody else must have been as well. The notion of a private musical experience, as something that sets you apart from everybody else, would have been hard to value in this period, if only because no-one could positively wish to be isolated and alone. The earliest evidence that I'm aware of is Johannes Tinctoris's famous account of the blind Fernandes brothers whose viol playing he heard in Bruges—a document whose historical significance I will explore in another context.[11] Like so many other texts indicative of the great paradigm shift that transformed early modern musical life, it was written in the 1470s or slightly later.

That a musical élite of some sort should nevertheless have emerged in early modern Europe, against such historical odds, may seem little short of miraculous. But it may not be so miraculous if we consider the root cause, not only for this development, but for other closely related developments as well. As I have argued in *The Crisis of Music*, it is the strangely philistine objection (which starts to be heard in the 1470s) that consonant sweetness amounts to »nothing more than sound«, and that it leaves the listener without profit of any kind. This was an attack not just against polyphony, but against the very basis of the musical egalitarianism that I have outlined. If listeners were discouraged from appreciating consonant sweetness *per se*, if they could no longer have the assurance that it represented objective God-given truth, then polyphony could be defended only by postulating some *other* core of intellectual or moral value. This is where I see the origins of the split between élite and vulgar: the newly-postulated core of value required, from the beginning, an appreciation of compositional quality grounded in experience and education. There will indeed emerge an élite claiming

11 In a forthcoming article entitled *Tinctoris and the Art of Listening*.

such appreciation and defining itself against the vulgar who are thought merely to indulge in pleasurable but empty aural sensations.[12] This self-definition, along with the defense of polyphony, is what will require institutionalisation, by means of a propaganda machine that keeps hammering away at the same themes.

I will not go into the details of these developments, since I have covered them at some length in *The Crisis of Music*. The point I have tried to make here is a different one: that recognizing the familiar in history, and claiming historical significance for it, requires us first to defamiliarize the familiar. This allows us to understand where people at the time were coming from, as opposed to where we have ended up. If a familiar and now perhaps self-evident paradigm can be seen to have come in the place of an older one, it is the older paradigm that we need to understand, if we are to explain how and why it was replaced. A metaphor like »élite« forces us to do so if we look critically at what it may properly apply to, and what it may not. Personally I have not found particular use for it in late-medieval musical culture, for reasons explained earlier. In fact the creation of a musical élite in the early modern period seems significant to me precisely because it comes after a period in which musical élitism of any kind was frowned upon. As I find myself so often concluding at the end of essays on this topic, the change brought both gains and losses. I wonder if any kind of Western music could ever be as sophisticated and yet socially inclusive as the church polyphony of the fifteenth century. As I have said elsewhere, this truly was a golden age of music.

12 WEGMAN, *The Crisis of Music* (see note 1), pp. 168–174.