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Musical offerings in the Renaissance

THE exchanging of gifts, between friends, family or members of the same community is among the most common cultural practices in human societies. Ever since the publication of Marcel Mauss's ground-breaking study *Essai sur le don* in 1923[1] that practice has invited intensive study and analysis, from anthropologists, historians and sociologists alike. In many cultures, as their work has demonstrated, gift exchange is the principal mode by which goods are distributed and circulated in society. When communities live from what is mutually shared and received, without the use of money, anthropologists speak of *gift economies*—to distinguish these from market economies, in which the typical mode of exchange is the commercial transaction, the sale.

The distinction between gift economies and market economies cannot be a hard and fast one, of course. Even in today's consumer society, which is capable of marketing and commodifying just about everything, gift exchange is still a significant cultural practice—on birthdays, baby showers, weddings, as well as other rites of passage such as first communion, bar mitzvah, graduation or retirement.

In the 1970s the writer Lewis Hyde made a compelling case that modern scholarship still operates fundamentally on the principles of the gift economy.[2] For example, this article was originally 'given' as a conference paper, not sold in order to become rich. In delivering the text, I pass on and acknowledge ideas I have freely received—not purchased—from other scholars. Those ideas may have little or no economic value, yet they do have value of a different order, and this is what ensures their circulation. Even unpublished ideas and discoveries are freely shared between scholars as a matter of course, without expectation of payment or, necessarily, of a return gesture. In a gift society, it is just what you do, and you give it no further thought, unless perhaps someone were to violate the spirit of gift exchange. The best reward is that someone else will become as excited about your ideas as you are, while acknowledging them as yours.

In a broader sense, musicology would not flourish as it does if Western governments did not encourage the impulse to share and give away, by making donations to non-profit organizations tax-deductible.[3] Indeed, the very concept of 'non-profit' implies that we still recognize the importance of gift-giving even in an economy dedicated to maximizing wealth and profit. Gift exchanges can in fact arise quite spontaneously even now. Motorcyclists stop to help each other out along the highway (or at least they do in Holland), and smokers bum cigarettes on the understanding that they themselves will not refuse a desperate request from somebody else. When it comes to music, it might also be interesting to reflect whether and how the practice of file-sharing on the internet is creating a new kind of gift society in cyberspace.[4]

All this may seem a strange introduction to a paper about Renaissance music, yet comparisons with our own society may help us to appreciate the much greater significance of gift-giving in early modern Europe. The idea that compositions were written and circulated as gifts, which is the central claim of this article, may initially seem a paradoxical one. For there are many good reasons why we are interested in discovering precisely the opposite: the origins of music as a marketable commodity, protected by printer's privileges and early conceptions of private property. Those origins have been traced to the decades around 1500, and they are widely agreed to mark a paradigm shift in the perception and appreciation of music. It was during these

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decades that the musical 'work' came to be viewed as an object, a thing, to be produced, bought, sold, owned, protected, contemplated and talked about.[5]

Economically, this development has been described as one of *commodification*: musical works began to be treated as marketable goods, and composers regarded themselves as entrepreneurs operating in the market place.[6] Conceptually one could speak of *reification*: the musical work came to be defined in terms of its durability, its capacity to transcend the immediate decay of musical sound.[7] Aesthetically, one could describe the development as one of *objectification*: the appropriate response to the musical work—whether it was heard, studied, or talked about—involved aesthetic distance, and allowed it to be mapped and contemplated as a totality.[8]

Yet if all this amounted to a paradigm shift, then what had been the existing paradigm? In recent years I have spent much thought on precisely this question. Although I cannot give a full answer, I shall propose here that the concept of the *gift* was a defining aspect of that paradigm. I arrived at this idea through a rather circuitous route. Several years ago I became intrigued by the question what it meant to *publish* a musical work before the age of printing. For instance, the Swiss theorist Heinrich Glarean wrote in 1547 that Josquin des Prez kept his works to himself for years, revising and polishing them until he was ready to make them public:[9]

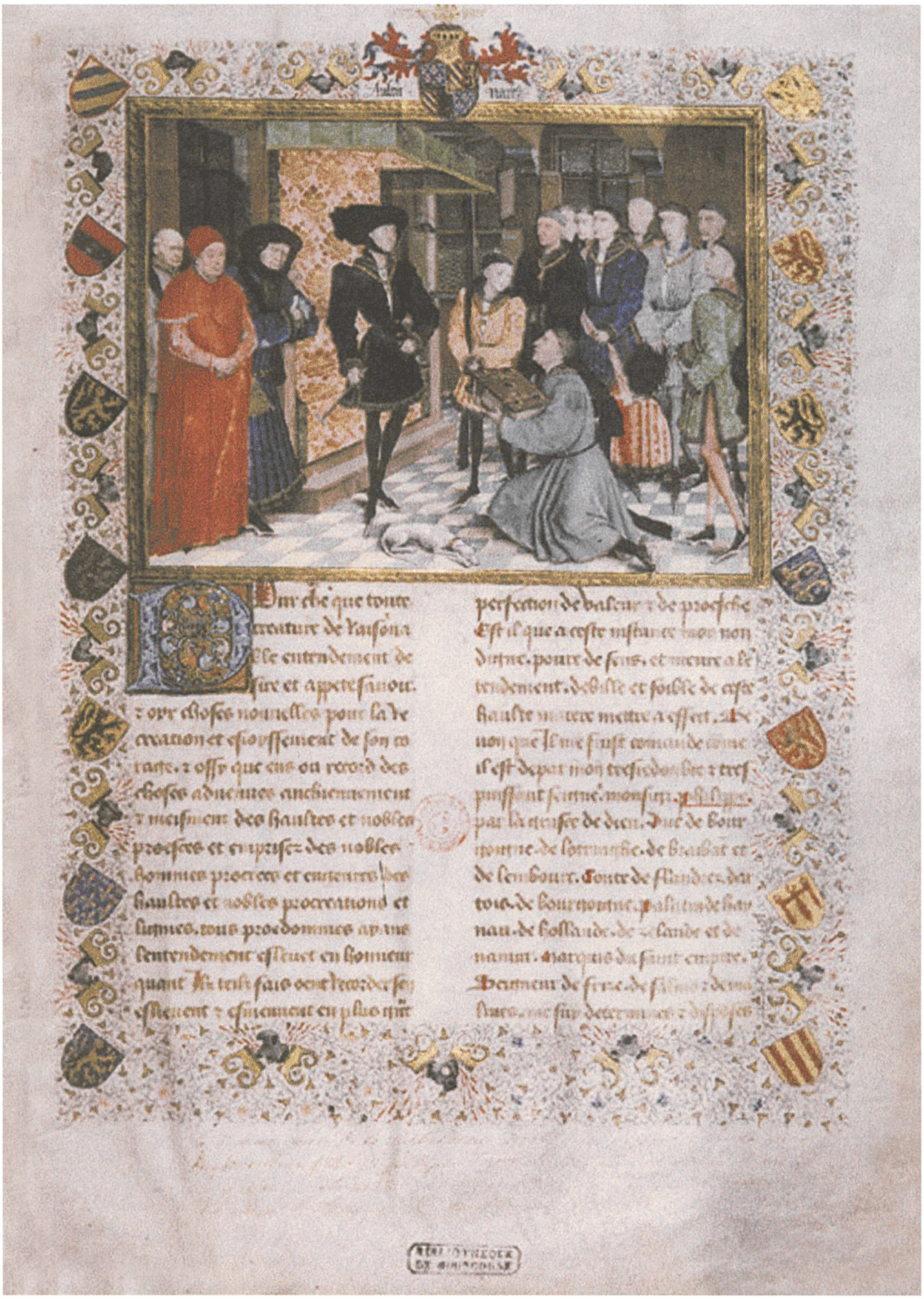
> For those who knew him say that he published [*edidisse*] his works after much deliberation and with manifold corrections; neither that he released [*emisisse*] a song to the public unless he had kept it to himself for some years . . .

Yet once Josquin had reached that point, once he knew that his works were in perfect shape, how did he actually launch them into the public sphere? How did people know that a new setting by Josquin was in the making, and about to come out? Was there such a thing as advance publicity? Was publication the equivalent of a ceremonial unveiling, a world première, or some other ritual? Was there indeed any conception of 'publication' before the emergence of commercial book markets?

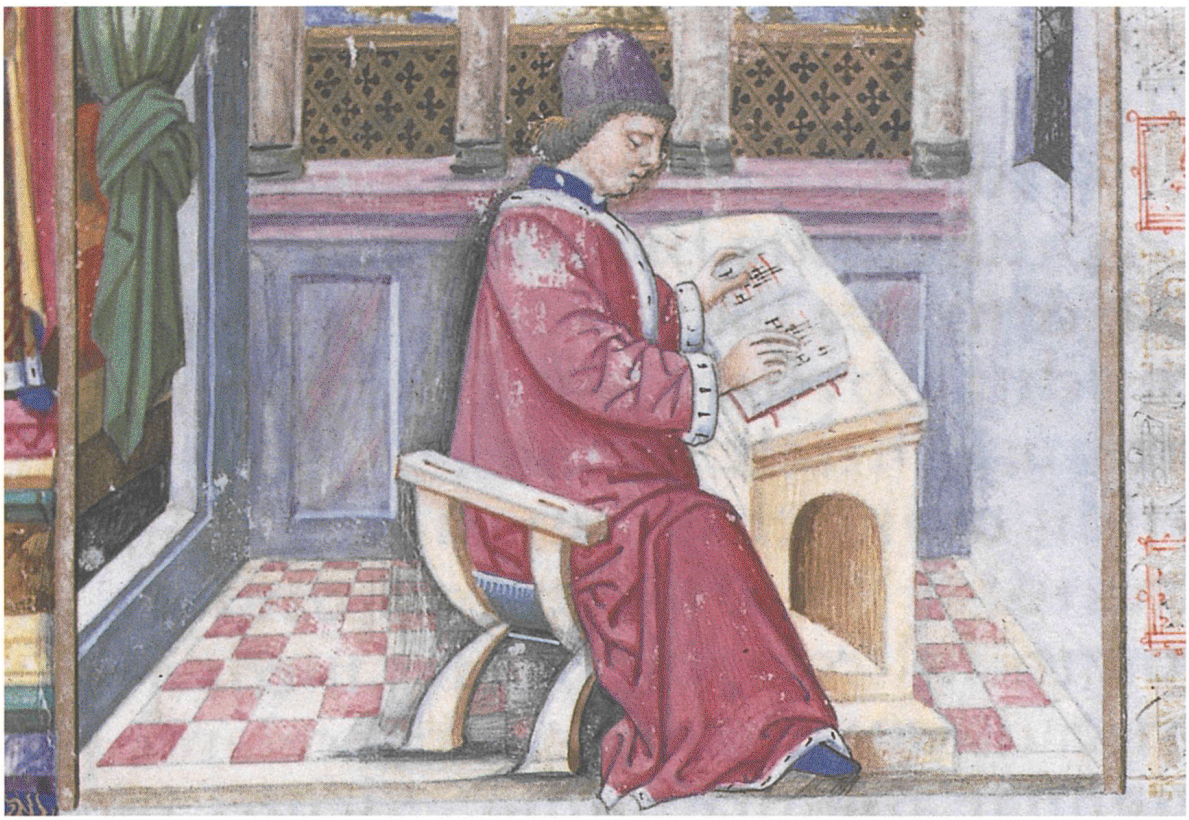
This question led me to an obscure article by the literary scholar Robert K. Root, published in 1913, which was entitled—promisingly—'Publication before printing'.[10] In it Root argued that the principal modes of book publication in the Middle Ages had been twofold: either a formal reading before an invited audience, or, more commonly, a formal presentation of the book as a gift to its dedicatee. The cultural significance of this latter practice is illustrated by numerous medieval book illuminations in which the author kneels before the patron, and the latter graciously condescends to accept the gift (illus.1). This kind of illumination is to be distinguished from a type of authorial portrait that became current towards 1500, one in which the writer is working in blissful solitude in his study—an image not of feudal submission, but rather one of creative sovereignty (illus.2). As Cynthia Brown has argued, the difference between these two types of illumination seems to reflect a change in the dignity and status of contemporary authors.[11] It is hard not to suspect a parallel here with similar changes in the status of composers during this period. As I have argued elsewhere, it was in the decades around 1500 that composers developed a new sense of professional identity and self-esteem—indeed, that the profession of composer could be said to have been born.[12]

Since the earlier of the two types of author portraits captures the moment of publication in the very gesture of the formal gift presentation, it seemed worthwhile to explore the practice of gift exchange in medieval and Renaissance society. This led me to a fascinating study by Natalie Zemon Davis, *The gift in sixteenth-century France* (2000).[13] Davis devoted an entire chapter to the changing status of books as gifts in early modern print culture, and her observations made me realize that many similar issues can in fact be witnessed in the history of music.

BEFORE addressing those issues, I would like to devote a few words to the gift as a cultural phenomenon in general. As a mode of exchange, it could hardly be more different from its counterpart, the commercial transaction or business deal. The latter tends to be a relatively utilitarian and impersonal affair. I pay you the sum agreed in advance; you deliver the product in good order; and unless there are grounds for complaint, we may be, and



1 The presentation scene, from *Chroniques de Hainaut* from the atelier of Jean Wauqelin (Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, Ms.9242, f.1)



2 A portrait of Tinctoris (possibly taken from life) in a late 15th-century manuscript collection of his treatises (Valencia, Biblioteca Universitaria, Ms.835)

may forever remain, total strangers. The exchange is, literally, businesslike. Gifts, on the other hand, tend to be gestures full of meaning, and are typically surrounded by elaborate social customs and ceremonials. Think only of the modern practice of gift wrapping, which serves no practical or commercial purpose, yet is clearly essential to the gesture. Or consider the practice of removing the price-tag, which gift shops nowadays offer to do as a matter of course. Or the gift card, or the personal dedication.

The decision to offer something as a gift has direct implications for the value of the object, the status of the individuals between whom it is exchanged, and the conduct that is expected of them. Gifts are tokens of friendship and goodwill, not commodities to be traded for money. They communicate a personal intention, not a market value. Goods or services that would be considered debased if they carried a price tag are often more highly valued when they are offered as gifts—even if, as is almost always the case, there is the expectation of reciprocity. We still speak today of things that money cannot buy, not because no one can afford them, but because they can only be given, not sold.

Gifts bring status to the donor. They attest to his or her liberality, which literally means the *freedom* to give or not to give. They are inherently more dignified than goods produced and sold for profit, out of necessity, or under obligation. Gifts must be carefully chosen in keeping with the social rank of the donor and the recipient. They call for an appropriate response. This means, in the first instance, an acknowledgement of their status as gifts. In many societies, including our own, it would be considered an affront to refuse a gift, to receive it without thanks, or to treat it as though it were a sale, for instance, by responding with an offer of repayment. Acceptance and gratitude must be expressed immediately, but reciprocal gestures should be made

only after a discreet interval of time, to avoid the appearance of a vulgar *quid pro quo*. And it must be in proportion to the original gift. I patiently await your birthday in order to return your gesture, and I make sure my present will be in the same price-range as yours. All this is necessarily a matter of tacit understanding: we are not going to compare and appraise our mutual presents, at least not if we expect them to serve as genuine tokens of friendship and goodwill. Indeed, we remove price-tags precisely because these might invite such appraisals. Failure to observe these and other unwritten conventions may cause embarrassment, and even amount to insult. Amicable relationships require thoughtful cultivation through gifts, and may become seriously strained by breaches of decorum.

Medieval musicians were acutely aware of all this. They had to make a living from their professional skills, yet they were more than mere wage-earners. It made a huge difference to them whether they were hired to perform for an agreed salary or received the more meaningful reward of a patron's gratitude and largesse. The latter implied a personal bond, conceivably one of familiarity and friendship—in the medieval sense of those words. The former, by contrast, implied a relationship of mere material advantage, one that left the musician with money but without professional dignity or security. In the late Middle Ages singers or instrumentalists in permanent employment were normally rewarded through a combination of the two: daily allowances as well as gifts. The latter included the patron's hospitality, the privilege to live, eat and worship as a member of his household, as well as any favours and presents that might be awarded on an *ad hoc* basis.

Let me illustrate the difference with a few examples. The first example is a Burgundian court memorandum from October 1495. It reveals that the singers of Duke Maximilian I—a ruler notorious for his financial difficulties—had not received their wages for nearly three years:[14]

> To [all the singers in the chapel] 6,209 pounds, 17 shillings and 6 deniers, in payment of what is due to them in wages, considering that they have received nothing from the rolls of the regular household expenses since 17 November 1492, and that the King of the Romans has retained them in his service until 30 September 1495 . . .

Contrary to what one might expect, however, none of the musicians had left the court to seek employment elsewhere. The reason is that the memorandum illuminates only one aspect of their conditions of service—namely the mercenary part. True, Maximilian was unable to free up the cash to pay his personnel. Yet he could still display the magnificence befitting a ruler of his status by *giving* them what was within his power to give: his hospitality, benefices, privileges, and miscellaneous gifts and favours—all of which were tokens of his goodwill and liberality, and bound his servants in loyalty and affection. A patron's honour was not necessarily compromised by financial troubles, wars or other misfortunes—provided, of course, that he would pay his servants as soon as he could, as Maximilian certainly intended to. Lack of generosity, on the other hand, was a blemish on his character and reputation.

This provides an important clue to the well-known anecdotes about Josquin and his dealings with the proverbial niggardly patrons. Here is one of those anecdotes, as related by Heinrich Glarean in his treatise *Dodecachordon*:[15]

> When Josquin sought a favour [*beneficium*] from some important personage, and when that man, a procrastinator, said over and over in the mutilated French language, 'Laise faire moy', that is, 'Leave it to me', then without delay Josquin composed, to these same words, a complete and very elegant *Missa La sol fa re mi*.

What was at stake here was not the wealth or solvency of Josquin's patron, but his liberality. Glarean is at pains to stress, not only in this anecdote but also in others, that it was a *favour* that had been withheld. What we are dealing with, in other words, is a gift, or at least a kindness, not a contractual obligation. That is why the patron was so vulnerable to the composer's response: the title of the Mass drew pointed attention to his lack of generosity—a much graver fault than the inability to meet one's financial obligations without delay. This does not mean that Josquin's gesture amounted to a personal insult. Although Glarean does not say it in so many words, his Mass setting was conceived, and undoubtedly presented, as a gift to the patron. As such, it could not honourably be refused or taken in the wrong way. It is, of course, impossible to know whether the

anecdote has a basis in historical truth. Yet there can be no doubt that Glarean's readers immediately understood the nature of Josquin's gesture: he used, indeed manipulated, the gift system to his moral advantage.

The gift relationship between musicians and their employers worked both ways. As we have seen, a patron unworthy of his singers' loyalty and affection was one reluctant to bestow favours on them, not one unable to pay their salary. By the same token, a singer unworthy of his lord's good graces was a man disinclined to go out of his way to serve him, or to anticipate his pleasure, not necessarily a servant unable to fulfil his duties as agreed. Herein lies one of the key features of gift exchanges. If properly maintained, they consolidated a bond of mutual loyalty which continued even if either of the parties ran into difficulties—a circumstance that could well have justified the termination of a purely mercenary relationship, one based on mutual self-interest alone. Singers who deserted a generous patron merely because he could not pay their wages would have been considered ingrates. But so would employers who abandoned loyal musicians incapable of serving them. At the root of the relationship was the willingness of both parties to give freely and without calculation, and to be appropriately thankful for what they received.

Once again there are plenty of examples. In 1496 the Guild of Our Lady in Bergen op Zoom decided that Willem van Hondswijck, a singer who had faithfully served the guild for 20 years, should receive an annual bonus on top of his regular salary 'because he became old and slow, and is an old singer'.[16] At the Italian courts a musician of his age would have been unable to survive in the cut-throat competition between star singers, and he might at best have expected to work for a pittance. At Bergen op Zoom, by contrast, he received a bonus precisely because of his old age and poor voice, in gratitude for his lifelong loyalty and dedication.

Here is another example. In August 1500 Jacob Obrecht resigned his position as choirmaster of St Donatian's in Bruges, not because he was disloyal or had been offered a better salary elsewhere, but because he was suffering from a debilitating illness.[17] Two months later, the canons of the church awarded him three benefices in four days, on the grounds that the composer 'has contributed to this church in the instruction of the choirboys and with many other agreeable services'. Although the services are not specified, it is evident that Obrecht had offered them without expectation of payment, literally *pro Deo*, for God. There can be no doubt that these services included the many Masses and motets that he had composed for the church. The composer had been generous to his employers, and they reciprocated the gesture, even though he could not be expected ever to work for them again.

There are also examples of gift relationships gone sour. As Craig Wright has shown, Antoine Brumel resigned his position as choirmaster at Nôtre Dame of Paris in 1500 not just because the cathedral had been unable to pay his wages for months (something about which he complained repeatedly), but because he had not been awarded any benefices during his two and a half years of service.[18] This, along with several other vexations, told him that the canons of the cathedral were not properly appreciative of his hard work—and there is no doubt that he had proved himself an able organizer and musician. In fact, as Wright demonstrated, he had composed a three-part *Ave Maria* for one of the many votive services held in the church. Despite his time and effort in proving himself a dependable and eager servant, Brumel and the cathedral seem to have parted on bad terms: shortly after his departure, a benefice earmarked for the composer became available, yet the canons decided not to award it to him, for undisclosed reasons. Evidently they felt him to have been unduly impatient and ungrateful, and concluded that they owed him no gratitude either.

The gift relationship between composer and employer is beautifully illustrated by the following report about Jean Mouton. Heinrich Glarean had spoken with the ageing composer at Paris in the late 1510s, and he writes that Mouton, 'being mindful especially of the favour of King François, by whom he had been properly honoured, composed psalms and some secular songs; this regard is shown in the song *Domine salvum fac regem*'.[19] Mouton did not compose this and other settings for money, or under contractual obligation, but as a personal gesture towards the King of France, one meant to

acknowledge and return the favours and honours he had received. Here, just as in the case of Josquin's *Missa La sol fa re mi*, the gift relationship provided the direct incentive for the creation of new musical works.[20]

Gift societies are dynamic in ways that market economies are not. Economic property may be held on to and accumulated, but gifts must move; they must be passed along. The underlying principle is not just one of reciprocation, but also, to invoke the title of a recent motion picture about random acts of kindness, of 'paying it forward'. This dynamism can be seen in the chains of gift exchanges that are typical of gift societies. The benefices which the church of St Donatian bestowed as favours on Obrecht had themselves originated as gifts—that is what the Latin word *beneficium* literally means. The capital or property from which Obrecht, as incumbent, drew his income had once been donated to the church by private benefactors. And these benefactors in turn had considered their riches, like all human possessions in general, as gifts from God. The essential point about riches was that you could not take them with you in the afterlife; the merits earned by acts of generosity and charity, however, would stay with you even after death. That is why you had to give as generously as you received. Undoubtedly these were also the terms on which Obrecht perceived his compositional vocation. His creative gift, the *ingenium* with which he was endowed at birth, was literally the gift of God. It was no more than fitting and proper for a talented composer like him to pass on that gift, instead of exploiting it for personal gain.

Various chains of gift exchanges thus intersected in Obrecht's career: God had bestowed wealth on private benefactors; these donated their wealth to the church in the form of benefices; the church awarded such benefices to Obrecht; and Obrecht, as priest and musician in their service, worshipped God with prayer, music and ritual. God had bestowed musical talent on Obrecht, he composed his music freely for the church, and through manuscript transmission his works would serve in the *opus Dei* throughout the Christian world. Ultimately, and ideally, each chain would come full circle, originating and returning to the Creator.

That the chain of gift exchanges extended into Heaven, and thus assumed a broad cosmological significance, was not merely an abstract idea. In the late Middle Ages the saints were commonly regarded as personal friends: they were patron saints, in the literal sense of providing patronage. You could count on them to intercede on your behalf—as genuine friends would—provided you had cultivated their friendship through pilgrimages, candles in church, votive offerings and, not least, votive services. All these were the kinds of gifts that would earn you friendship in Heaven. Thus, just as a composer might earn the good graces of a worldly ruler or of a church in this life, so he might earn the good graces of one or two chosen friends among the heavenly company. For Busnoys, as I argued a few years ago, this provided the incentive to compose a motet in honour of St Anthony Abbot, entitled *Anthoni usque limina*, in which he incorporated his own name lest the gesture might pass unnoticed.[21] For Dufay, similarly, it provided the incentive to compose a Mass setting for St Anthony of Padua, a saint whom he undoubtedly regarded as his patron, and for whom the Mass was to be performed annually from money endowed by the composer himself.[22] Those unable to compose might donate money to the church in order that musicians would offer worship to saints on their behalf. This practice, too, is known to have resulted in many new compositions. The point is that patron saints were musical patrons in exactly the same sense as secular rulers, because they received music as a gift, and responded with return favours of their own.

The chains of gift exchanges were not meant to be broken. For us today such a break would be against the spirit of gift-giving; in the Middle Ages it would have amounted to the sin of avarice. It would not necessarily be an affront if I gave your birthday present away in order to make someone else happy; but if I sold it to the highest bidder, you would have every reason to feel offended. To give another example, the rock group Grateful Dead have warmly encouraged the practice of tape- and file-trading among Deadheads, but on the express condition that participants will not seek commercial gain.[23] In this kind of free exchange it would be unethical, to say the least, to speculate on the demand for some rare recording, or to make tapes available above cost price.

The paradox is that once you have received a gift, it is yours to keep and yours to share, but emphatically not yours to exchange for money. That is what keeps the chain of gift exchanges going. If you break the chain—whether you are a profit-seeking Deadhead or a medieval usurer—you remove yourself from the gift society, and end up being alone. As Lewis Hyde put it, the mark of self-gratification is isolation.[24] Or as medievals would have quoted from scripture (Matthew xvi:26): 'What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and lose his soul, or be cast away?' A rich man could not enter Heaven as a rich man, but only as a rich man who had shared and donated his wealth in a spirit of charity, if only in his last will. In such a society, as historians have often observed, the modern conception of private property was slow to develop: everything was transitory because you were certain to lose it one day. That made it easier to share and give away, and it also ensured freedom from attachment to material wealth and status—an ideal that has attracted many modern Westerners to Buddhism.

Bearing all this in mind, one would expect that the transmission of music in the late Middle Ages operated essentially along these lines. That is to say, copies of individual works would have circulated as gifts between friends and colleagues, or between servants and patrons, but not sold as marketable goods. All the evidence we have—and it is admittedly far less than we would like to have—suggests that precisely this was the case. The account books of 15th-century rulers record numerous gifts, often jugs of wine, in return for copies of musical works presented to them by individuals—including composers who offered their own works as gifts.[25] If the gesture was not made in person, music could be sent by messenger, in which case it was invariably accompanied by a letter in which the sender recommended himself to the recipient. Many such letters have survived.[26]

Indeed, some compositions were themselves conceived as letters, notably Obrecht's motet *Inter preclarissimas virtutes*.[27] This work is addressed to an anonymous patron, presumably a pope, and in the text Obrecht recommends himself to his good graces, evidently hoping to secure a musical position. A similar example is Dufay's ballade *Mon chier amy*, a song whose text is cast as a letter to someone who is grieving over the loss of his best friend. Dufay's song was sent together with a gift of three hats as consolation—or that, at any rate, is what its text tells us. Recently Reinhard Strohm has discovered a humanist poem addressed to Ockeghem, offering consolation after the death of the composer's best friend Michael: one wonders if Dufay addressed his song to Ockeghem on this occasion as well.[28]

All this may explain why many surviving 15th-century choirbooks are compilations of gatherings written in different hands on different types of paper—'fascicle-manuscripts' as Charles Hamm called them.[29] Every major musical centre was bound to accumulate, in the course of the years, a pile of gatherings donated by various individuals, a pile that would sooner or later be bound together in a single volume.

Sometimes the individual gatherings still bear traces of their origins as gifts. Vienna 11883 is a fascicle-manuscript in which one cluster, containing two Masses by Matthaeus Pipelare, bears the inscription: 'This copy is to be given to Master Heinric of Louvain, and to no one else.'[30] Although I cannot prove it, I suspect that these copies were among the effects of the composer himself, and that he had earmarked them during his lifetime as bequests to an esteemed colleague. We know for a fact that Dufay did this with his copy of the *Missa Ave regina celorum*, which was delivered as a gift to the Duke of Burgundy after his death, as directed in the composer's testament.[31] Interestingly, among Dufay's effects was a knife that he had received as a gift from the King of Naples, undoubtedly in return for a similar gesture by the composer. Perhaps that gesture consisted of the lamentations which Dufay composed in the 1450s on texts sent to him from Naples.

Sometimes an entire manuscript might be presented as a gift. A well-known example is NapBN 40, a codex with a set of six anonymous *L'homme armé* Masses, which was presented to Queen Beatrice of Naples by a donor whose identity remains unknown.[32] There is a long poem of dedication on the first page of the manuscript: an expensive gift, undoubtedly made during a diplomatic encounter or state visit. Examples could easily be multiplied. But, to sum up,

what we witness here is a practice of repertory-sharing analogous to file-sharing or tape-trading in our own time. It reveals a musical culture that was dynamic in every sense of the word, yet whose dynamism was not premised on commercial gain or monetary value.

Who owned the music? Everybody did—at least, everybody who was willing to make copies for others. Music was a gift of God, and as such it enjoyed a status equivalent to that of a natural resource or a public good, not to be monopolized by anyone in particular. Of course, this did not stop individual musicians from seeking recompense for their professional labours—whether composing, performing or copying. Yet it was inherently more dignified to reserve the freedom to offer those labours as gifts to whomever they chose. This may perhaps explain the famous letter about Josquin and Isaac, written by a Ferrarese agent in 1502, when both composers were being considered for the position of *maestro di cappella* at the court of Ferrara. The agent clearly favoured Isaac, and this is how he recommended him to the duke:[33]

> To me he seems well suited to serve Your Lordship, more so than Josquin, because he is of a better disposition among his companions, and he will compose new works 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 Isaac will come for 120.

There is unmistakably a mercenary element in all of this: Josquin demanded a huge salary, and undoubtedly he was willing to do the work for it. But composition, for him, was not the kind of work to be covered by a salary. No doubt he was willing to write music for the Duke of Ferrara—the *Missa Hercules Dux Ferrarie* proves that he did—but only to offer it as a personal gesture, not to deliver it as a product in order to earn his pay-cheque. Perhaps we might translate the relevant sentence as follows: he will offer gifts only when he chooses to, not when one wants him to. This was partly a matter of motivation. Music conceived as a gift is written with the dedicatee in mind, and that in itself is enough reason to give it your best. Recognition will come to you in the form of the recipient's gratitude, and perhaps a return favour at a later stage. Music conceived and sold as a commercial product, on the other hand, must be guaranteed to be free of defects, or else you will not be paid at all. Recognition comes to you in the form of customer satisfaction, but your work on the composition will bring no benefits that will outlast the money you have been paid. It is a one-time deal.

A good example of a composer willing to undertake this kind of deal is Heinrich Isaac. In 1508 he accepted a commission from Constance Cathedral to compose a cycle of Mass Proper settings (published eventually under the title *Choralis Constantinus*) for an unknown sum of money. This was strictly a business transaction. What was at stake was not a personal relationship to be cemented through the exchange, but rather a contract to be completed on terms agreed in advance. If Isaac and the canons had been comparative strangers before the deal, they would again become so after it—unless of course they decided to do business again. About the terms themselves there was no confusion. A chapter decision of 29 November 1509, shortly after Isaac had delivered his settings, shows that the canons acknowledged their obligation to pay him, but reserved the right to have the music examined for possible faults or defects. Here is the text of that decision:[34]

> On 29 November the chapter concluded that the singers should inspect and sing through the songbook, and to the extent that they judge the same to be complete and in good order, the procurators of the fabric should fairly disburse Isaac, the scribe, and the messengers of the copy that was sent [to us], etc., considering that he had been commanded and hired to make the same.

What is striking about this decision is how calculating and impersonal it all seems. Isaac may be one of the greatest composers of Europe, yet his music still needs to be looked over, just to make sure that he had properly kept his side of the bargain. The composer is treated as a virtual stranger, not as a man you can trust like a friend. For all his reputation and credentials, the canons appear to take no personal interest in the settings: they leave the assessment of quality to their musical staff, and are content to authorize payment subject to their recommendation. They do not even have to deal with the composer in person if they do not want to: all Isaac will need to do is report at the office of the procurators of the fabric, count the money, and sign the

receipt. What self-respecting composer would voluntarily submit to such degrading treatment, merely in order to earn some cash to pay the bills? Surely not Josquin, who might well have felt that this was tantamount to prostituting his God-given talents.

Consider, by comparison, how a composition as gift was likely to be received. In 1492 Johannes Tinctoris composed a motet in praise of Pope Alexander VI, a motet of which unfortunately only the text survives: it was entitled *Gaude Roma vetus*.[35] The writing of this work was a personal gesture, from a reputed composer and theorist who was active in Naples, and who of course had much to gain from being on good terms with the pope. Tinctoris sent his motet to Rome, and in December 1492 the singers of the papal choir proposed to perform it during the celebration of Mass in the Sistine Chapel. Yet Pope Alexander, the recipient of the gift, decided otherwise: he wanted to hear the work on some other day in his private chambers. At the least, then, the sender of a new composition would be assured of an attentive hearing. Had Tinctoris gone to Rome to present his motet in person, he would undoubtedly have been granted an audience.

GIVEN this historical background, which I have necessarily sketched here only in its broad outlines, you may wonder, as indeed I have, why did it all change? Why did music become a marketable commodity? Why did composers begin to operate as entrepreneurs in the marketplace, selling their works to whoever hired them for the purpose? It may make perfect sense to us to explore the origins of copyright, of the concept of the musical work, of composition as a recognized trade, because we live in a market economy, and are used to these things. But as I pointed out at the beginning, we are also familiar with gift exchange in various realms of our society—and the paradox about such exchange is that it actually works, however informally.

Why then did it all change for Renaissance composers? I cannot pretend to give a definitive answer to that question, yet I suspect it has something to do with the aesthetic implications of gift exchange *vis-à-vis* market exchange. Lewis Hyde has made the important point that *the gift is property that perishes.* He went on to explain this as follows:[36]

> To say that the gift is used up, consumed and eaten sometimes means that it is truly destroyed as in [some non-Western societies], but more simply and accurately it means that the gift perishes *for the person who gives it away.* In gift exchange the transaction itself consumes the object. Now, it is true that something often comes back when a gift is given, but if this were made an explicit condition of the exchange, it wouldn't be a gift. . . . This, then, is how I use 'consume' to speak of a gift—a gift is consumed when it moves from one hand to another with no assurance of anything in return. There is little difference, therefore, between its consumption and its movement. A market exchange has an equilibrium or stasis: you pay to balance the scale. But when you give a gift there is momentum, and the weight shifts from body to body.

What is interesting here is that gift economies discourage a mindset all too common in market economies: the hoarding of possessions, the accumulation of wealth and property, and the consumption of goods to gratify the narcissistic cravings of the ego. In a gift society the principle that property must perish, that you cannot hold on to it indefinitely, is not so much regretted, or denied by trying to hold on to it anyway, but actively celebrated and used to advantage—by giving away to friends and neighbours, and by being thankful for what you receive, even if it will turn out to be less than what you have given.

This is an interesting point, for among the most obvious things that perish in this life, at least in the medieval view of the world, is music. Sounds perish—'Soni pereunt', as St Isidore famously wrote—because you cannot hold on to them.[37] St Isidore's remark was widely quoted in the Middle Ages, but until the late 15th century there is little evidence that people actually found this to be a cause for regret. Everything perishes, so what choice is there but to be thankful for whatever you enjoy while it lasts? It does not stop music from being a priceless gift. Indeed, for Adam of Fulda, writing in the 1490s, it elevated music to the status of philosophy: music is the true philosophy, he claimed, because it is a meditation on death.[38]

The moment one starts blaming the art of music for the immediate decay of sound, the response is not one of thankfulness but rather of frustration—music cannot gratify the listener, or benefit her, as much as one would like. The sounds are undeniably sweet, and one would like to hold on to them forever if possible, but they die away before you know it.

Just this is the response we begin to find towards the end of the 15th century. As I have argued elsewhere, polyphonic music, and especially the sweetness of polyphonic sound, became the target of intense criticism around 1500.[39] What was at stake was the intrinsic worth, the profitability of musical sound, given that its very decay seemed to reduce it to a mere idle pleasure—like food, drink and other objects of gluttonous pursuit. We are all familiar with Leonardo da Vinci's complaint that music, unlike painting, dies the instant it is born. As he famously observed:[40]

> 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 contemptible and mean.

Erasmus uttered the same complaint in his diatribe against church music, printed in 1519: 'What do the people hear nowadays', he asked, comparing his own time with the early days of Christianity, 'but sounds devoid of all meaning?'[41] Not a single word can be understood, he complained, all one reaps from such clamouring of voices is 'trifling aural pleasures that die away instantly'. Similarly in 1479 Fra Giovanni Caroli of Florence denounced polyphony as vacuous and superficial, 'charming the ears of men and enticing the multitude with empty fodder', but leaving them without spiritual benefit. In the same spirit Johann Roth, bishop of Wrocław in Poland from 1482 to 1506, banned polyphony from his cathedral on the grounds that it is 'unfitting and profane in churches'. Giovanni Moroni, bishop of Modena, issued a similar prohibition in 1538, arguing that polyphony distracts and confuses the faithful, causes priests to chatter among themselves, and amounts, in the end, to nothing but 'useless superfluity'. Arguments like these were invoked in other contexts as well. In 1486 the town council of Görlitz proscribed the singing of polyphonic music in the local school, judging that 'people will be more drawn to intimate devotion if [the chants] are sung as they were laid down by the Holy Fathers than when they are turned into pretentious displays'. Even more damning was the reason given for a similar prohibition at Hall in 1514: four-part singing was bound to corrupt the minds of the students, and would amount to nothing but 'empty noise'.

In all these critiques, music is evaluated principally in terms of the *profit* it is expected to bring to the listener as a private individual. The unstated premise is that if music fails to bring spiritual profit, it cannot amount to anything more than empty gratification of the ears. The perceived danger, in other words, is that listeners may indulge their love for agreeable sounds in much the same way that modern consumers indulge their cravings for material goods. Without spiritual benefit, musical sounds are empty, meaningless, useless, precisely because they die away so quickly. The perspective adopted here is one of unabashed utilitarianism, indeed materialism: musical sound is so obviously an emblem of triviality and worldly vanity that only spiritual content can vindicate the art. And this criticism is voiced from the perspective of the individual listener: what use is the music to me, what material or spiritual benefit do I reap from it, if it is over so soon? This is the logic of the market exchange. The question is not 'What have I received as a gift, and how do I respond to the gesture?' but 'What do I get in return for my time and money?'

Of course, writers on music were bound to respond with counter-polemics of their own. Yet as I have emphasized elsewhere, they rebutted the charges while at the same time accepting their underlying premises. They could no longer resort to old certainties about the supreme status of music as a liberal art. Instead they conceded the point that sound in itself offers nothing but sensuous gratification. And they responded accordingly, by transferring the perceived worth of music from the sound-as-heard to an abstract conception-as-understood—that is: the work, its design, its formal properties, none of which was subject to immediate decay. For the same reason they began to insist that music invites intellectual understanding, and hence may yield significant benefit to the attentive listener. Precisely because music has more to offer than sounds alone, your time and money will not be wasted: the exchange is a profitable one after all. Composers deserve to be paid according to the intrinsic quality of their compositions, for it is their efforts that ensure that you will get more out of music than the throats of the singers can produce by themselves. Do not just indulge your ears, they

now warned, but listen for the craftsmanship of the composer, understand the logic and design of his music, and your money will be well spent.

The historical ramifications of this development are numerous, and I lack the space to address them all here. Suffice it to repeat a point which I have made elsewhere: that the development was as much a step forward as it marked an impoverishment.[42] A paradigm shift occurred, a shift which turned music conceptually into a very different kind of phenomenon. This did not necessarily amount to historic progress, nor did it necessarily obey any laws of historical necessity. It just happened, due to historical causes that are fascinating for us to explore. All there is left for us to do is to understand the paradigm on its own terms, while according the same dignity to the paradigm which it succeeded. Perhaps we may even draw lessons or implications from this for our own time. If so, I believe that we will have proved ourselves worthy of the gift, the priceless gift, which is the musical legacy of the Renaissance, and we will have responded with a fitting reciprocal gesture of our own.

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42 Wegman, ' "Musical understanding" in the fifteenth century'.