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'Musical understanding' in the 15th century

For Christopher Page

WHEN the celebrated Bach conductor Helmuth Rilling was asked, some time in the 1970s, what he thought of the vogue for authentic performance practice on original instruments, he is said to have replied: 'It is very interesting, but we have no original listeners.'¹ Rilling put his finger on a critical issue. Music historians disagree to this day whether we might ever be able to hear like original listeners, and indeed whether that is even a desirable thing. Still, setting aside that issue, scholars have made great progress in recent years in tackling the more straightforward question of how people in the past did listen to music.² The underlying premise of such research is well known: however important it may be to establish, analyse and perform musical texts, it is no less important to understand the musical sensibilities that conditioned their appreciation, and perhaps their composition.

In 1998 I contributed a methodological statement on this question, in the special issue 'Music as heard' of *Musical quarterly*.³ Building on that work, I propose to offer a historical case study in the present article. I shall argue that there was a significant change in the way music was heard, a change that seems to have occurred after about 1480. This change had something to do with musical understanding, yet I believe it had also something to do with the valuation of consonant sound. The article is structured in three sections: the first deals with understanding, the second with consonant sound, and the third with their historical interrelationships.

'Better than I can understand'

On 7 June 1484 the Dutch humanist Rudolph

Agricola (c.1443–85) wrote a letter from Heidelberg to a young musician with humanist aspirations. In it, he outlined a programme of literary self-education for his recipient, a programme so comprehensive that the text would circulate for decades as a treatise in its own right. It was to become famous under the title *De formando studio*. There were few personal remarks in the letter, yet one of these is of particular interest. Near the conclusion Agricola writes:⁴

Please send me one of your vocal compositions, something carefully crafted, that you want to be performed to acclaim. We have singers here [in Heidelberg], too, and I often mention your name to them. Their master composes music for nine and even 12 parts, but among those of his works that were sung in three or four parts, I have not heard any which pleased me very much. However, I do not treat my opinion [or: feeling] as a judgement: after all, it is possible that they are better than I can understand.

The unnamed master who is reported to have written music in three, four, nine and even 12 parts can be identified as the German composer Johann von Soest (1448–1506). This intriguing figure is best known to music historians for his rhymed autobiography, which describes in colourful and sometimes disarming detail his training and early career as a musician in Germany and the Low Countries.⁵ Unfortunately, none of his compositions have survived (or at least not under his name), and so we shall probably never know why Rudolph Agricola did not like them very much.

Yet it is not because of Johann von Soest that I have quoted this passage. Rather, I am intrigued by the remark that Agricola makes about himself: 'I do not treat my opinion as a judgement: after all, it is

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2 *Mary, Queen of Heaven*, by the Master of the St Lucy Legend (late 15th century) (Kress Collection, Washington DC, USA / Bridgeman Art Library). The angels to the left and right of the Virgin's head sing the cantus and tenor of an unidentified *Ave regina celorum*, reading from voice-parts notated on single sheets.

possible that [his compositions] are better than I can understand.' To be sure, one suspects that there may be a touch of false modesty here. Rudolph Agricola was not exactly a dilettante; on the contrary, he seems to have been quite knowledgeable in the art of music.⁶ If posthumous reports are to be believed, he possessed such extraordinary skills in organ playing that he could challenge anyone to a contest. There may well be truth to those reports. During his years as a doctoral student at the University of Ferrara, in the late 1470s, Agricola had been employed as organist in one of the most prestigious musical establishments in Europe, the court chapel of Duke Ercole d'Este. So one is bound to wonder: if a skilled musician like him could not presume to judge the quality of contemporary compositions, then who could? Why would a man of his experience profess such extraordinary diffidence?

Undoubtedly it was because of the recipient of his letter. As it happens, Agricola was writing to one of the most gifted composers of his time—Jacobus Barbireau, choirmaster at the Church of Our Lady at Antwerp. So perhaps his diffidence was understandable. However much he might have liked or disliked the music of Johann von Soest, Agricola was obviously concerned not to trespass on the expertise of composers. This apparent gesture of deference is, of course, quite interesting historically. It ties in with a development that I have explored in some detail elsewhere: the professionalization of the composer in the late 15th century.⁷ Within less than two decades of this letter, a composer like Josquin could positively demand such deference on the part of fellow-musicians and even patrons—or so the anecdotes about him would have us believe.⁸

Agricola's letter reflects this development in another important respect: his listening is rigorously work- and author-centred. When he admits that 'it is possible that [the compositions] are better than I can understand', he clearly assumes that musical quality (or the lack of it) is *intrinsic* in the work itself, waiting to be discerned by listeners equipped with the requisite understanding. A mere opinion, a mere feeling, could never amount to such discernment. It is one thing to experience a performance as agreeable, but quite another to pass informed judgement on the work being performed. It is precisely in this

respect that Agricola defers to the authority of professional composers. Maybe the compositions *are* good, he admits, and he is just unable to understand them properly.

This kind of response may be only too recognizable to us today, but for the 15th century it was actually quite unusual. There are numerous eyewitness descriptions of musical events in contemporary chronicles, travel accounts, memorial narratives and letters, yet these seem to reflect a very different aesthetic sensibility. On the whole, writers in this period were interested more in the *sound quality* of a musical performance than in the identity of the composer or the work. When they used such terms as 'harmonious', 'sweet' or 'angelic', as is frequently the case, they typically referred not to compositions (which they seldom even bothered to identify), but to the voices they actually heard. Consider the following example:⁹

... they conducted [Galeazzo Maria Sforza] and the rest of us into the room of the Arsenal where they had arranged an elegant luncheon of confections of many different types. And to ensure that he had even greater pleasure, they arranged for the arrival of some most notable singers, among whom there was a young English woman who sang so sweetly and pleasantly that it seemed not a human voice, but divine. Then, with the arrival of evening, they accompanied us to the house with great honour and kindness, striving continuously, besides the company they offered, to give us all those pleasures which were possible.

This is a passage from a letter of 1455 describing a state visit to Venice by the future Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza of Milan. Significantly, the eyewitness was struck not by any composition in particular, but rather by the voice of one singer in particular. It was the otherwise unknown English woman whose voice impressed him as 'sweet', 'pleasant' and even 'divine'.

The chief aesthetic criterion, in descriptions like this, was the effectiveness of the performance in terms of what the occasion required. For instance, music might often be praised as 'triumphant' in a festive procession, 'solemn' in High Mass, 'mournful' in a service for the dead, or 'joyous' at a banquet. There is seldom any self-consciousness about such aesthetic appraisals: music is assumed to be good when it is suited to the purpose at hand. Certainly no writer ever wonders if a particular piece might be

better than he is able to understand. The very thought would probably have struck one as paradoxical. If a work turned out to be unimpressive, even in the best performance, then the last thing that might redeem it would be a quality that only composers could understand. After all, what would be the use of such music?

The key issue here, clearly, is musical understanding. For Rudolph Agricola one cannot confidently qualify a musical composition as 'good', or 'less than good', unless one is able to understand it as a composer would. In context, that is a remarkable claim. Consider, for example, the following comment by Carl Dahlhaus, on the early reception of Beethoven's music:¹⁰

... the extent to which [Beethoven's] music was comprehended by his contemporaries was at least as essential to music history, as the degree to which listeners realized in the first place that his music was capable of being 'understood', like a work of literature or philosophy. The thought that music can be destined to be 'understood' had probably arisen a few decades earlier, around 1800; but only in connection with the reception of Beethoven did it have a significant impact on music history—a significance which then grew steadily throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In this later development we may recognize a possible parallel to Agricola's deference towards professional composers. One is reminded, for example, of Hoffmann's famous retort to Beethoven's critics, in 1813: 'What if it were your fault alone that you do not understand the master's language, [which is] intelligible only to the initiated?'¹¹ Agricola seems to have asked that very question about himself. Of course, one is bound to ask what such an apparent parallel actually proves. Did Agricola's letter truly anticipate, by a span of more than three centuries, ideas about musical understanding that became influential only in the reception of Beethoven?

I can think of at least two reasons why one might be inclined to doubt this. First of all, the notion of musical understanding had of course a long history in medieval theory, notably in connection with the definition of consonance. As every university student knew from his Boethius, a consonance is perceived as agreeable by the ears, but it can also be *understood* as a numerical proportion by the faculty of reason.¹² It was such understanding, and such

understanding alone, that distinguished knowledgeable musicians from mere performers. Perhaps it was this age-old doctrine of the primacy of reason over sense, mind over body, whose influence can still be felt in Agricola's letter.

On the other hand, there is also an obvious difference. It is one thing to know that consonant sound has certain mathematical properties. It is quite another to determine the artistic quality of a composition—which is what Agricola is concerned about. Both require and indeed privilege the role of reason and understanding. Yet they differ with regard to the object of understanding. In the medieval scheme of things, to determine the numerical ratio underlying a particular consonance was to discover God's creative purpose in designing the universe—including the physical properties of musical sound. As medieval authors were fond of quoting from the apocryphal Book of Wisdom (11:20): 'Thou hast ordered all things in measure and number and weight.' On the other hand, to determine the artistic quality of a composition was to discover the composer's creative purpose in designing a work of art—and this was of course a different matter altogether.

To illustrate this difference, let us turn to an earlier 15th-century comment on musical understanding. In the following passage, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–60), the famous cardinal, mathematician, experimental scientist and philosopher, 'tries to explain why it is so rewarding for human beings to listen to vocal polyphony. As we can tell at once, however, the only model he is equipped with is the medieval epistemology of consonance, as he had learned it from Boethius. Not surprisingly, Cusa ends up invoking musical experience as a paradigm of scientific discovery:¹³

When we hear voices singing together we arrive at this through the sense. But we measure differences and consonances through reason and study. We do not find this power in beasts, for they do not have the power of numbering and of making proportions. And for that reason they are incapable of the art of music, although they hear sounds through the sense as we do, and are moved to delight [*delectatio*] by the consonance of sounds. Therefore our soul is deservedly called rational, because it is the power of calculating or numbering (or of discerning and proportioning), enfolding all [numbers] in itself. Without this rational power perfect distinction cannot be made. For when the listener is moved by

the sense of hearing to delight, on account of a sweet harmonious consonance, and discovers within himself that the reason of consonance is founded in numerical proportion, he discovers the art of calculating musical consonances through number.

Like Agricola, Cusa claimed that the faculty of understanding played a major role in the perception of polyphonic music. Yet his explanation does strike one as narrow and reductive. Since he is at bottom concerned with numerical ratios, his account does not imply a fundamental distinction between hearing a single consonance and a finished composition. If his comments are anything to go by, the mind's intellectual grasp on a Mass or motet extends only as far as the individual consonances of which it is made up. And these reflect God's creative design, not the composer's. The artful compositional arrangement of consonances is beyond Cusa's terms of reference altogether.

It may be easier now to appreciate the apparent novelty of Agricola's letter. Agricola wrote about the understanding of composed music, the craftsmanship of the artist—just as Beethoven's advocates were to do in the early 19th century. If his letter seems to anticipate those later developments, then, we cannot explain this away by pointing to the traditional medieval teachings on consonance—no matter how influential they may have been in other respects.

Yet perhaps there is something else that could account for it, and this brings me to the second reason for doubt. Agricola was a humanist of immense erudition, and so it was perhaps inevitable that he would bring humanist ideals to bear on music. Chief among those ideals would have been the critical appreciation of Latin prose style and composition—with which the rest of his letter was concerned. Conceivably this is where his idea of musical understanding came from. Perhaps he simply meant to pay the recipient of his letter, Barbireau, a compliment—by implying that the art of musical composition had reached such well-nigh Ciceronian heights, of elegance in diction and design, that it could conceivably elude the comprehension of a mere organist like himself. If that were the case, then of course his remark would have been little more than a rhetorical gesture, the kind of thing a humanist was bound

to say to a like-minded spirit. Surely such a gesture could not be taken to herald a new aesthetic sensibility.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that there was a composer and music theorist who had expressed very similar views only a few years before Agricola's letter. I am referring now to Johannes Tinctoris (c.1435–1511), and the well-known 13th chapter of his *Complexus effectuum musices*, a treatise on the effects of music written in the early 1480s.¹⁴ Music gives joy to human beings, he writes there, but not everybody derives equal joy from it. The reason is that some people do not properly understand music, whereas others do. This is what he writes (*italics mine*; see the appendix for the full text and translation):

For the more one has attained perfection in [the art of music], the more is one delighted by it, since one apprehends its nature both inwardly and outwardly. Inwardly through the intellectual faculty, through which one *understands proper composition and performance*. And outwardly through the auditive power, through which one perceives the sweetness of consonances. Only such are truly able to judge and take delight in music ... However, music brings less joy to those who perceive in it nothing more than sound, and who are indeed delighted only through the external sense.



3 Tinctoris in his study, a miniature from a late 15th-century manuscript collection of his treatises (Valencia, Biblioteca Universitaria, Ms.835), f.2

Table 1 Key concepts in Tinctoris, *Complexus effectuum musices*, xiii

	<i>External (sense of hearing)</i>	<i>Internal (mind, reason)</i>
What are the faculties or skills involved?	auditive power (<i>potentia auditiva</i>) external sense (<i>sensus extrinsecus</i>)	intellective faculty (<i>virtus intellectiva</i>) perfect knowledge of music (<i>perfecta cognitio musicae</i>)
What do they do, or permit one to do?	to perceive (<i>percipere</i>) to be moved by sound (<i>sono affici</i>) to be delighted (<i>delectari</i>)	to understand (<i>intelligere</i>) to judge correctly (<i>recte/vere iudicare</i>)
What is being heard or judged?	the sweetness of consonances (<i>dulcedo concordantiarum</i>) nothing more than sound (<i>nihil penitus quam sonus</i>)	proper composition and performance (<i>debita compositio ac pronuntiatio</i>)

The key opposition here is summarized in table 1: the hearing is an external faculty, and it registers 'nothing more than sound'. However pleasing sound may be, for Tinctoris there ought to be more to musical experience than acoustic sensation alone—more even than the mathematical understanding of consonance. If one is to take true delight in music, then one must exercise the internal faculty of understanding, and appreciate 'proper composition and performance'. There is a close parallel here with the opposition implied by Agricola, illustrated in table 2. As Agricola affirms, merely to experience music as pleasurable does not qualify a listener to express anything more than an opinion. In order to pass informed judgement on the quality of a work, and the skill of its composer, one needs to exercise understanding.

So perhaps we are dealing with a historical phenomenon that truly does anticipate Beethoven reception in certain ways. For surely it cannot be a

coincidence that two erudite and accomplished musicians expressed nearly identical views within the space of less than five years. In context, those views are quite remarkable. The point by Dahlhaus, quoted earlier, is well taken: no matter how axiomatic the idea of musical understanding may have become in the modern period, it is far from self-evident that it would have been so in previous periods as well. When it comes to the 15th century, as I shall argue in the next section, it might be positively hazardous to assume that what was musically significant was also, necessarily, susceptible to understanding.

Incomprehensible sweetness

To place the comments by Agricola and Tinctoris into historical relief, it will be necessary now to focus a little more on the concept of consonant sweetness, and its significance in the 15th century.¹⁵ Let us think of a Mass or motet from this period: say, the *Missa*

Table 2 Key concepts in Agricola, *De formando studio* (1484)

	<i>External (sense of hearing)</i>	<i>Internal (mind, reason)</i>
What is the status of the response?	opinion, feeling (<i>animus</i>)	judgement (<i>iudicium</i>) as to intrinsic quality (<i>melior</i>)
How does the musical work elicit that response?	by pleasing, or not pleasing (<i>placere</i>)	by being understood (<i>intelligere</i>)

Alma redemptoris mater by Leonel Power (d 1445).¹⁶ Certainly there are many things that can be *understood* about such a piece—principally, of course, its *cantus firmus* layout and treatment. Yet everything we know about the musical sensibility of the early 15th century suggests that the most significant quality, for listeners, would have been its consonant sweetness. Was that quality susceptible to understanding as well?

Undoubtedly, many listeners must have received training in counterpoint, and acquired a thorough understanding of the rules by whose application sweetness could be effected. Yet rules of composition did not necessarily determine the criteria for aesthetic appreciation.¹⁷ In fact, they might not even have been particularly helpful. Even the most knowledgeable musicians of the period, for all their understanding of the art of counterpoint, could confess to utter perplexity when they heard the sheer magic of consonant sweetness as listeners. Indeed, such perplexity was often considered a tribute to the effectiveness of musical sound as heard. A good example is the following, from one of the earliest treatises by Tinctoris, the *Proportionale musices*:¹⁸

But alas! I am astonished not only at [moderns like Ockeghem, Busnoys, Regis and Caron] but also at many other composers, for while they compose so ingeniously and with such refinement, and *with incomprehensible sweetness*, I have known them either to ignore musical proportions altogether, or to designate wrongly the few they did know. [my italics]

Incomprehensible: that was a term usually associated with the mysteries of the Christian faith—the Trinity, the sacraments, transubstantiation. Yet the analogy was not inappropriate. In the Middle Ages the concept of ‘sweetness’ had always suggested a touch of the divine—whether one spoke of the savour of Christ, the odour of sanctity or the song of angels.¹⁹ In a document from 1438 we find another adjective closely related to *incomprehensible*: *incredible*. An anonymous humanist writer, active at Rome in the direct vicinity of Dufay, praises the polyphonic hymns and psalms performed in the Papal chapel:²⁰

Archbishops, bishops, patriarchs, protonotaries and other orders almost beyond limit have all been instituted and invented, with the greatest dignity and authority, for the worship of God; when they have convened as one body to

attend either the sacrifice or any other divine service, and [when], the Pope being seated in that venerable throne of the Popes, they have all sat down in order, and [when] those divine hymns and psalms are sung with different and diverse voices, [then] who is so uncultured, so uncivilized, so boorish, who again is so savage, so inimical to God, so lacking in reverence, that he, seeing and hearing these things, does not ... [hiatus], whose mind and soul are not seized with some feeling of reverence, and overcome by stupefaction and a certain sweetness, whose eyes are not marvellously nourished and delighted by the very sight, whose ears are not charmed by *the incredible sweetness and harmony of the music?* [my italics]

The expression ‘incredible sweetness’ occurs also in another early report of the singing of papal musicians. This is an eyewitness account of the consecration of Florence Cathedral in 1436—the occasion, as is well known, for which Dufay composed his motet *Nuper rosarum flores*.²¹ Here, we learn that ‘the voices filled the listeners’ ears with such a wondrous sweetness that they seemed to become stupefied.’ And a little further on, the same writer speaks of the ‘incredible celestial sweetness’ of the sounds heard during Mass:²²

Meanwhile, everywhere there was singing with so many and such various voices, such harmonies exalted even to heaven, that truly it was to the listener like angelic and divine melodies; the voices filled the listeners’ ears with such a *wondrous sweetness* that they seemed to become stupefied, almost as men were fabled to become upon hearing the singing of the sirens. I could believe without impiety that even in Heaven, yearly on this solemn day that marks the beginning of human salvation, the angels sing thus, the more ardently to give themselves up to the celebration of this festive day with sweet singing. And then, when they made their customary pauses in singing, so joyous and sweet was the reverberation that mental stupor, now calmed by the cessation of those sweet symphonies, seemed as if to regather strength from the wonderful sounds ...

But at the Elevation of the Most Sacred Host, the whole space of the church was filled with such sounds of harmony and such consonances of divers instruments that it seemed (not without reason) as though the sounds and songs of the angels and of divine Paradise had been sent forth from the heavens to whisper in our ears *an incredible celestial sweetness*. Wherefore at that moment I was so possessed by such pleasures that I seemed to enjoy the life of the Blessed here on earth; whether it happened so to others present I know not, but concerning myself I can bear witness. [my italics]

Incredible—wondrous—incomprehensible: if that is how intelligent listeners felt about the music of their time, then perhaps Cusa was right: all one can

really *understand* about the sweetness of vocal polyphony, as a listener, is the mathematical properties of the individual consonances—and these only if you have received a university education. Their overall effect is overwhelming, and beyond audible comprehension.

Whether one could understand it or not, sweetness was universally felt to be a spiritually nourishing and wholesome quality. This is a point that cannot be emphasized too strongly.²³ Certainly there were writers who objected to polyphony on moral grounds, and who advocated that plainchant be sung instead. Yet it was hard even for such critics to disparage the sweetness of polyphony—not only because sweetness was traditionally associated with heavenly things, but because plainchant itself was habitually praised as sweet. Consider the following example, a passage from an essay by the famous Florentine humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), written in the early 1440s. Three interlocutors are strolling in Florence Cathedral, and in the conversation that ensues, one of them praises the building for its sensuous delights, and particularly the chants that can be heard in worship:²⁴

And if it is the case, as they say, that delights arise when things are offered to our senses in the precise quantity and quality that nature requires, who would hesitate to call this temple the nest of delights? Here, wherever you look, you see every place exhibiting happiness and joy; here [it is] always most fragrant; and, what I esteem above all, here you sense in those voices during Mass, and in those [rites] which the ancients called mysteries, *a marvellous sweetness*. [my italics]

Marvellous: another well-established medieval concept.²⁵ Anything that was marvellous provoked wonder, astonishment, stupefaction. Needless to add, none of those responses required understanding. What was marvellous was also, by definition, incredible and incomprehensible. So, if these four testimonies are anything to go by, there seems to have been a certain consistency in the valuation of musical sweetness—at least among intellectual writers.

Yet the point is this: if plainchant could be praised for its sweetness, then of course polyphony could not be blamed for it. And to my knowledge it never was. In recent years I have become very interested in critiques of polyphony from before the Reformation

and Counter-Reformation, and especially in the criteria on which they were based. I feel reasonably confident in saying that sweetness, whether of consonance or of voice-production, had never been a problem. On the contrary, it was held up as the musical ideal to aspire to. A good example is the papal bull *Docta sanctorum patrum*, issued by Pope John XXII in 1324. As is well known, this edict outlawed various types of polyphony from the church, and imposed severe penalties on those who refused to heed its strictures. However, and this is important, the bull raised no objection to sweetness *per se*. This may be illustrated by the following two excerpts, taken from the beginning and end of the edict:²⁶

The learned authority of the Holy Fathers has decreed that in the offices of divine praise, which are performed in the obedience of due service, the minds of all people should be attentive, the diction should not stumble, and the restrained dignity of the singers should chant with gentle song. For: 'by their voices they made sweet melody.' Of course, a truly sweet sound will resound from the mouth of singers if they, while speaking in words, accept God also with the heart, and in this way also kindle devotion [to Him] through [their] songs ...

Yet with this [bull] we do not intend to forbid that now and then (especially on feast days, whether in solemn masses or the aforesaid Divine Offices) certain consonances that have the savour of harmonious sound (such as the octave, 5th, 4th and such like) be placed over the single ecclesiastical chant, yet still in such a way that the unblemished integrity of the chant itself is maintained, and nothing therein is diverted from well-ordered music; [this] above all because consonances of this kind please the hearing, arouse devotion and do not permit the souls of those singing to God to be torpid.

As the Holy Father affirms in the first excerpt, 'a truly sweet sound will resound from the mouth of singers if they, while speaking in words, accept God also with the heart, and in this way also kindle devotion [to Him] through [their] songs'. And at the end he gives his papal blessing to several consonances (including the octave, 5th and 4th), on the grounds, above all, that their harmonious sound pleases the ear, arouses devotion and prevents torpor among the singers. Clearly, there is no principled hostility here to consonant sweetness, but rather the contrary.

I would argue that similar views were still current among critics of polyphony in the early 15th century. For this period, roughly before 1470, I am aware of

only two critiques—which is actually a very small number, compared to the flood of diatribes against music we find, for example, in the 16th century.²⁷ The first comes from a sermon preached by Johannes Hübner, an Augustinian monk who was active in Silesia around 1400.²⁸ This document may probably be discounted, because the passage turns out to be quoted almost verbatim from a much older text, dating from the mid-12th century.²⁹ Yet perhaps it could still be seen as relevant: the sermon was, after all, preached before a 15th-century congregation. In any case, the main objection here is that polyphony has recently become distasteful and even ludicrous. Our preacher speaks, for instance, of ‘monstrous songs’, and he fulminates against the ridiculous vocal effects created by singers, which have turned the divine service into a veritable dogs’ dinner. Thundering from the pulpit, he complains:

For nowadays there are disciples of a certain new school in the choir, [who are] aberrant in mind, crazed in eyes, dissolute in deportment, obscene and lascivious in song. Indeed they sing more to please the crowd than God; nor do they sing in choir together with Miriam, the sister of Moses [Exodus 15:20–21], but in the palace with Herodias to please those reclining at the table and Herod [Mark 6:21–2]. And, in order that we go the full extent of this satire, I ask: whence so many monstrous songs in church? This one sings under, that one sings against, another sings above, yet another divides and chops certain notes in the middle; now the voice is strained, now cracked, now battered, now broadened in a more dispersed noise, and sometimes, I am ashamed to say, it is forced into horse-like whinnying; and at times, having lost its manly vigour, it is sharpened with the thinness of a woman’s voice. Meanwhile, the whole body is moved about with histrionic gesticulations, the lips are twisted, the eyes rolled about; they play with their arms, and curlings of fingers accompany all single notes. And this ridiculous dissoluteness is called religion. Yet the fascinated crowd, standing by, is amazed at the lascivious, whorish gesticulations of those singing, the exchanges and fracturings of sounds; it regards this with smiles and laughter, so that it seems to have convened not at a house of prayer, but rather at the theatre.

Although the preacher does not say it in so many words, I suspect that it was precisely the lack of sweetness that was the problem here. It is hard to imagine that the most widely admired music of the period could have invited or justified such a diatribe.

Now the second example: here, the prolific theologian and mystic Denis the Carthusian (1402–71) raises the question whether polyphony should be

admitted or banished from worship. On this point he has certain reservations, particularly with regard to a practice called *fractio vocis*, the breaking-up of notes into small and intricate rhythmic values. (This same practice had, of course, been condemned by Pope John XXII.) Denis seems to have this practice in mind when he writes that ‘certain people, who have become accustomed to sing this way, as occasion serves, admit that there is pride and a certain lasciviousness in music of this kind.’ Yet if intricate rhythms could be rejected out of hand, it was far less easy to condemn the sweetness of consonance. Since the text has rarely been cited in the musicological literature, I provide it here in full:³⁰

Besides it may be inquired whether it is praiseworthy to admit counterpoint or the breaking-up of the voice [or of sound] in the worship of the Deity. In which connection it is noteworthy that the aforesaid *Summa* states: *The breaking-up of voice appears to be reprehensible in song. Whence we find in the Life of St Sebastian: ‘Do you think that a man who loves to go to the barber, styles his hair, covets flavours and breaks up [his] voice, should be reckoned among the Christians?’ The breaking-up of voice appears to be a sign of a broken soul. In the same way as the [artificial] curling of hair is reprehensible in men, the pleating of garments in women, so [is] the breaking-up of voice in singers; just as the wind customarily produces ripples in the water, so the wind of vanity customarily produces this trembling and breaking of the sound.* This according to the aforesaid *Summa*.

This gains support from the fact that certain people, who have become accustomed to sing this way as occasion serves, admit that there is pride and a certain lasciviousness in music of this kind. Further, if it should be excused in any way, it does not appear to be excusable or commendable unless instituted and performed to arouse devotion. For some people are powerfully stirred to contemplation and devotion by harmonious sounds: that is why the church allows organs. But if it should be practised [merely] to offer delight to those present, including women, then it is undoubtedly reprehensible, as St Augustine has said as well: *But whenever the song pleases me more than the sense [of the words], or that which is being sung, every time I acknowledge that I am committing, just as many times, a sin deserving punishment, and then I would prefer not to hear the singer.* Finally, although counterpoint in particular may provoke some people to devotion and to the contemplation of heavenly things, it does seem very much to divert and impede the individual who listens and prays, from [giving] attention even to the sense of his prayer. Hence St Bernard says: *It is of insufficient benefit to sing only with the voice, without attentiveness of the heart. God, from whom nothing that is done unlawfully remains hidden, does not demand gentleness of voice, but purity of heart.*

Significantly, Denis admits that some people are 'powerfully stirred to contemplation and devotion by harmonious sounds'. Indeed, as he observes later in the same passage, counterpoint may 'provoke some people to devotion and to the contemplation of heavenly things'. This is essentially the same position as held by Pope John XXII. The latter, as we have seen, endorsed consonant intervals on the grounds, among others, that they please the ear and arouse devotion. The only real problem for both ecclesiastics was that music may distract many other people from their prayers. Yet despite this reservation, the commentary by Denis does not exactly amount to a categorical rejection; far from it: it is remarkably moderate.

The upshot of all this should be clear: sweetness represented a spiritual and aesthetic ideal. As such it was unassailable even for the staunchest critics of polyphony. And as such, it could be confidently invoked by advocates of polyphony. On this ideal there was universal agreement, among critics and advocates alike.

Nothing more than sound

With this historical context in mind, let us now return to table 1. Tinctoris, as we have seen, objected that the sweetness of consonances amounts to 'nothing more than sound', and is by itself insufficient for a truly rewarding musical experience. Nothing more than sound: what an extraordinary sense of disenchantment and demystification is conveyed by those few words. Where, one wonders, is the magic? Where is the touch of the divine? Where the incomprehensible? The incredible? The wondrous? The marvellous? Tinctoris makes no reference to any of this. For him, at least in this late treatise, consonant sweetness amounts to nothing more than sound.

And yet, it is precisely in those words, I suggest, that we may have the key to his insistence on musical understanding. Unless the sweetness of consonance was significantly depreciated, regarded literally as nothing more than sound, there would have been no need for its perception to be complemented by something else—in this case, the understanding of proper composition and performance. It was that other aspect which was necessary now, in the early 1480s, to complete and validate the musical

experience. Without it, one's ears would merely register agreeable noise.

Where did this depreciation of sensuous musical pleasure come from? What are its historical roots? Although it would exceed the scope of this article to demonstrate the point, I would argue, and will argue in a forthcoming study, that the comment by Tinctoris reflects a broader shift in musical sensibility, taking place in Europe from around 1480 onwards. In the final decades of the 15th century, the international musical climate became notably more austere, less inclined to endorse unselfconscious pleasure in what was now perceived as the surface quality of music as an acoustic phenomenon. The ideal of consonant sweetness for its own sake began to be qualified, and another ideal was to become equally influential: that of the musical work which is *intrinsically* good—that is, well composed. This ideal was reflected in Agricola's letter of 1484, as we have seen, but perhaps one can even detect it in the famous letter of Gian de Artiganova to Duke Ercole d'Este, in 1502, when he admits: 'It is true that Josquin composes better [than Isaac].'³¹

All this did not amount to a total repudiation of consonant sweetness, although there are extreme examples in which just that was the case. The most notorious case is of course the Savonarola regime in Florence in the mid-1490s. As is well known, Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98), a reformist Dominican preacher, became the sole leader of Florence for a period of four years. During this period, 1494–8, he persuaded Florentine citizens to go so far as to disband their chapels, and to burn all their precious music books and instruments in bonfires. This is of course a late and exceptional example, and it raises many issues of its own. Certainly Savonarola was not particularly novel in all his criticisms of polyphony. In some sermons, for instance, he resorted to the time-worn practice of ridiculing singers and their perceived eccentricities, recalling the fire-and-brimstone sermon delivered by Johannes Hübner around 1400. Consider the following example, from a sermon on the Book of Amos delivered on 5 March 1496:³²

The Lord doesn't want [elaborate music on feast-days]; rather he says: 'Remove from me the uproar of your songs, I will not listen to the songs of your lyre' [Amos 5:23]. God

says: 'Take away your beautiful polyphonic songs.' Those lords have chapels of singers who appear to be in a regular uproar (as the prophet says here), because there stands a singer with a big voice who appears to be a calf and the others cry out around him like dogs, and one can't make out a word they are saying. Give up these polyphonic songs, and sing the plainchant ordained by the Church. You wish to play organs, too; you go to church to hear organs. God says: 'I don't listen to your organs.' You still don't want to understand.

A bellowing calf and barking dogs: so what else is new? And yet, there is in fact a new idea emerging here. Significantly, Savonarola acknowledges that there is beauty in polyphonic music, yet he claims, on the basis of scripture, that this beauty is displeasing to God. That is certainly not what medieval critics of polyphony had implied. They objected to what was offensive and distasteful, not (or at least not in principle) to what was sweet and agreeable. Consider, once more, Pope John XXII. At the beginning of his edict, quoted earlier, he had held up King David as the example to follow, citing the following verse from the scriptures: King David 'set singers also before the altar, that by their voices they might make sweet melody, and daily sing praises in their songs'. If no one less than King David had promoted this during worship, and if Pope John XXII had endorsed it, then why should Savonarola now rebuke the lords of his time for doing exactly the same?

Yet this was not the only difference between Savonarola and medieval critics of polyphony. Consider the following comment, from a sermon on the Book of Haggai delivered on 30 November 1494:³³

So that God may always be praised, the praises and divine offices of the Church were created. But we today have converted these divine praises into something secular, with music and songs that delight the sense and the ear but not the spirit; and this is not to the honour of God. Even though these songs may be sweet to the ears, nevertheless they do not stir the soul, nor do they incite to the enjoyment of divine things, and thus it is necessary to return to that original simplicity. And they should say the offices without so much singing, but only with devotion and with little inflection of the voice and with simplicity. I tell you that these songs of yours today have been invented by ambition and avarice.

Once again there is an acknowledgement that polyphony is sweet, and pleasing to the ear. Yet for Savonarola, consonant sweetness amounts to noth-

ing—no matter how pure and devout the hearts of singers may be. Indeed, sweetness does not even have the *potential* to arouse devotion—despite clear statements to the contrary by Pope John XXII and Denis the Carthusian. Polyphony is, literally, nothing more than sound. Or in fact, it is something much worse than that. For in yet another sermon, Savonarola went so far as to claim that the beauty of polyphonic music (or at least the widespread enjoyment of it) was inspired by the devil. If that was the case, then of course no one could trust their ears any longer, and it would be best to dispense with polyphony altogether:³⁴

The devil, under the guise of doing good, began to show the religious persons how to build beautiful churches and conduct beautiful ceremonies, and give themselves to polyphonic songs; and all day sing, sing, sing, so that nothing was left of the spirit; and thus the nuns all day with their organs, organs, organs, and there was nothing left: and in this way blight exterminated the greenery of the prayers and of the spirit.

For these extremist ideas, I would argue, Savonarola could not draw on any sources other than a mentality prevailing in his own time.³⁵ Nor, I suspect, would Florentine citizens have embraced those ideas, and implemented them so readily, unless they had already felt a certain unease about the pleasure they took in polyphony. It is perhaps no coincidence that we learn of several public schools in Germany where instruction in polyphonic music was discontinued because it prevented students from engaging in more profitable pursuits.³⁶ This was true, for example, of Görlitz in 1489, and of Nuremberg in 1511. Likewise, in the town of Hall in Swabia in 1514, four-part singing among students was rejected as *inanis stridor*, or 'empty noise'. In this late disparagement we can still hear a distant echo of Tinctoris's phrase 'nothing more than sound'. Such examples remind us that we are on the eve of the Reformation—one of whose principal grievances was indeed the excessive musical splendour of the Catholic church.³⁷

Of course, not everybody may have subscribed to these views. But my point here is that several writers on music took them seriously. They responded typically in three ways. First, as we have seen in the case of Tinctoris, by asserting that music was useful and

even profitable since it invited understanding, and could therefore be a source of knowledge. Second, by arguing that consonant sweetness was acceptable if used in moderation. And third, by writing encomiums of music, in which every conceivable authority was invoked in support of the art. An example of the latter is the *Complexus effectuum musices* by Tinctoris, whose 13th chapter we have already discussed as a key text on musical understanding. This treatise on the effects of music has often been regarded as a somewhat redundant exercise in demonstrating the obvious—namely, that music is a Good Thing.³⁸ Yet the sheer amount of literary, scriptural and doctrinal ammunition accumulated in this short apology for music suggests how defensive Tinctoris really felt. Clearly there was an important case to be made, and Tinctoris had just the polemic cast of mind to make it.

In his 13th chapter we see all three arguments combined (see the appendix below). The principal claim, that music makes one joyful, is part of the encomium. For the other two arguments Tinctoris relies on the eighth book of Aristotle's *Politics*. That text was, indeed, quite helpful to his case. Unlike Plato, Aristotle never proposed that certain kinds of music should be banished from the state. Instead, he endorsed music as a worthwhile pleasure for free citizens, provided that they enjoy it in moderation, not excess. This is the argument of moderation. For the final argument, knowledge and understanding, Tinctoris invoked a well-known passage from the *Politics*. Here Aristotle argued that when citizens grow up, they should limit their musical pursuits, and cultivate discerning musical judgement:³⁹

For first, since it is for the sake of forming judgements that [the leisured citizens] ought to take part in [musical] performances, for that reason they should engage in performances when they are young, but when they have become older they should abstain from performances, but be able to judge the good ones and have correct enjoyment on account of the knowledge acquired in youth.

Judgement, correct enjoyment, knowledge: these are key concepts in the 13th chapter of the *Complexus*. Tinctoris, in short, is like a whisky producer who might have made a case against Prohibition by arguing that a single-malt Scotch makes you joyful,

should not be consumed to excess, and is appreciated best by expert connoisseurs.

Then again, other writers, especially humanists, might invoke the authority of Cicero. A good example is the following, from the well-known appraisal of Obrecht, Josquin and Isaac by the humanist Paolo Cortese (1465–1510), published in 1510:⁴⁰

In this genre [the motet], Iacobus Obrechius has been considered mighty in varied subtlety, but in the whole style of composition somewhat rough, and indeed one who has sown more of the keenest sweetness in music with skilful harmony, than would have sufficed to please the ear—just as people, when tasting, praise such things that seem to taste of unripe juice more highly than those tasting of sugar.

More than would have sufficed to please the ear: a comment like this clearly implies the responsibility on the part of composers to avoid excessive use of musical ingredients that are pleasing and beneficial only when used in moderation. The source for this comment, evidently, was the Ciceronian notion of *satiety*. In his *De oratore*, Cicero had famously argued the ear has only a limited capacity to take in a single style of ornate rhetoric—that there is a fine line between intense sensory pleasure and disgust.⁴¹

For Cicero, this potential for disgust had been an argument for maximizing stylistic variety—an argument that Tinctoris is known to have invoked in another context.⁴² Yet for Cortese, and this is important, it seems to have dictated a moderation of consonant sweetness. One is reminded of Duke Orsino's cry in *Twelfth Night* (1.1.7–8): 'Enough, no more! 'Tis not so sweet now, as it was before.' The kind of moderation advocated by Cortese was to be coupled with a style of composition that could be appreciated as learned. It is worth noting, for example, that he praised Josquin for having put more *doctrina* in his Masses than any other composer. Whatever Cortese may have meant by *doctrina*—which literally means learning, teaching, or science—surely it would have been a quality that appealed to the faculty of understanding, not merely the sense of hearing, perhaps even not at all.⁴³

Sacrificial songs [i.e. Mass settings] are those in which all modes, mensurations and imitations are employed, and in which praise is given to the art of music for constructing the piece most splendidly ... they say that Josquin the Frenchman was the one who excelled among many, because he

invested more science [*doctrina*] in sacrificial genres of song than is usually added to it by the unskilled zeal of more recent musicians.

My point here is not that authors discovered these ideas in Aristotle or Cicero and then simply repeated them. If that were the case, after all, one might well ask why similar ideas had not become influential (especially among humanists) earlier in the century. Rather, I suggest, it is the other way round. It was a new and widely shared musical sensibility that led them to invoke authorities who could be seen to support their case. What matters, in other words, is the case itself, not the source of its justification.

To summarize, the key here is the depreciation of consonant sweetness. This depreciation can be recognized in Tinctoris's revealing phrase 'nothing more than sound', in Agricola's implication that mere pleasure cannot by itself warrant a truly informed judgement, and in Cortese's novel view that musical sweetness may in some cases exceed what would suffice to please the ear. This explains Tinctoris's insistence on proper composition and performance, Agricola's on intrinsic quality, and perhaps Cortese's on *doctrina*—all of which require musical understanding.

It may now also be easier to tell the difference from Beethoven reception. Unlike Beethoven's apologists, writers did not have to vindicate the style of an innovative composer in response to hostile critics. Rather, they sought to defend music in general against the charge that it amounted merely to vain pleasure. It is significant, in this connection, that Paolo Cortese had opened his discussion of music on an unusually defensive note. In the following passage, he acknowledges at once that there are many people who think that music is harmful, because its sweetness invites idle pleasure and arouses the evil of lust. Such people, Cortese asserts, are not only bereft of good sense, but appear to suffer from some deformed perversion of their nature:⁴⁴

Wherefore, since at this time [after meals] those things must be sought after by which a cheerful mood is usually aroused, it may well be inquired whether the sweetness of music should be put to use particularly at this point, inasmuch as many, estranged from the natural disposition of the normal sense, not only reject [music] because of some deformed perversion of their nature, but even think it to be harmful for the reason that it is somehow an invitation to idle pleasure,

and above all, that its agreeableness usually arouses the evil of lust. On the opposite side, however, many agree to resort to it as to a certain discipline that is engaged in the acquisition of knowledge about consonance and modes. Indeed, we recommend that music be offered [after meals] for the sake not only of delight, but also of knowledge and morals. ... For when a discipline (which is a certain activity aimed at understanding with the guidance of reason) is recognized to have a way of seeking not only the good, but also proper delight, then it is appropriate that whatever is to be pursued for the sake of understanding, and results by its own nature in delight, must be sought after for the sake of both diversion and learning. Also, he who brings the faculty of contemplation to bear to music—which of its own nature is pleasing—should not hesitate to acknowledge that it must be rightly sought after for the sake of both delight and knowledge.

Cortese's condemnation strikes one as overstated: is the view he counters really a pathological one? Yet in context his position is perhaps understandable. After all, Cortese was writing 12 years after the death of Savonarola. As an author active in the vicinity of Florence, he was bound to feel that people like these are fanatics, zealots, philistines—and, conceivably, heretics. Against these slightly sad individuals, Cortese invokes the view of many others who agree that music is rather like a discipline, by which he means the pursuit of understanding with the guidance of reason. His line of argument is by now familiar: while conceding that music offers sensuous delight, he counters (like Tinctoris before him) that it can also be a source of knowledge and understanding. Anyone who brings the faculty of contemplation to bear on music, he says, should acknowledge that this is true. Interestingly, as Fiorella Brancacci demonstrated ten years ago, Cortese's apology for music is based directly on the eighth book of Aristotle's *Politics*—the very same source on which Tinctoris had relied in his comments on musical understanding, three decades previously.⁴⁵

By the early 16th century the idea that it is possible to understand compositions seems to have been well established—though the question remained how many people are truly able to arrive at such understanding. This, evidently, was the implication of Heinrich Glarean, who in his *Dodecachordon* of 1547 signalled the danger that some compositions might appeal only to a limited number of expert connoisseurs, and that many others might be afraid to appear uneducated by comparison:⁴⁶

Moreover, since music is the mother of pleasure [*delectatio*], I consider much more useful that which pertains to the pleasure of many than what pertains to the pleasure of a few. ... For how many are there, even among the very highly educated, who truly understand [*vere intelligat*] a composition of four or more voices? Indeed, all praise it when they hear it, lest one may be considered less educated if he would disparage it.

Glarean points here to an anxiety that seems to have been more common among 16th-century listeners—one that we may recognize in the modern period as well: have I truly understood this composition, and will others be persuaded that I did? It is this anxiety, the anxiety of ‘true’ understanding, that seems to be signalled in other remarks from this period as well. One is reminded, for instance, of Castiglione’s famous report about a motet heard at the court of Urbino, some time in the first decade of the 16th century: ‘Then again, when a motet was sung in the presence of the duchess, it pleased no one and was considered worthless, until it became known that it had been composed by Josquin des Prez.’⁴⁷ The times of unselfconscious pleasure in the sheer splendour of sound, even among the most highly educated humanists, were long past.

THERE are many other pieces of evidence that could be drawn into this historical picture, and many issues remain. Most obviously, given that modes of listening and styles of composition must have developed in tandem, can one identify changes in musical style that parallel the developments discussed here? Did music somehow become more audibly intelligible, and less reliant on sweetness for its own sake? If so, might that development have been related to the increasing professional self-confidence of composers, their sense that composition was an exclusive and specialized art, by which a composer demonstrated his mastery, and which was truly understandable only to insiders? Is it coincidence that humanists were among the first to promote these ideas? Is the increasing value placed on understanding related to the idea (which became

influential especially in the 16th century) that musical experience should ideally involve, and promote, understanding of the words?

This is not the place to address those questions, though a preliminary statement may be found in my article on Jacob Obrecht in the recent second edition of *New Grove*.⁴⁸ Yet it is perhaps important to stress that musical understanding may not be the most interesting historical issue here. As far as I am concerned, it is precisely the earlier 15th-century sensibility that needs to be explored more fully—the exquisite appreciation of consonant sonority, and the enviable ability to hear the marvellous, the wondrous, the incomprehensible, the incredible, in musical sound. If we are to learn from history, then this is an area where we might perhaps endeavour to learn more.

For, in a way, understanding music is something most of us have tried to do throughout our professional lives. Within musicology, in fact, there is a disciplinary resistance—probably healthy—to accepting that some things in music may remain forever incomprehensible to us. Yet when certain musical qualities seem truly incomprehensible, and when our witnesses tell us they were, then we may be the poorer—as historians, and perhaps also as human beings—if we choose to privilege the intelligible instead. As I have suggested in this article, the idea of musical understanding emerged only because something else, some other quality or value, had been lost. It made up for that loss, but it could not replace the thing that was lost. In this sense, the development was at once an impoverishment and a major step forward—albeit in a different direction. It is true that musical sound was to regain a perceived spiritual dimension, under the impact of neo-Platonism, in the later 16th century.⁴⁹ Yet this was on different terms, and with a different sound ideal in view, than had been the case in the early 15th century. To explore the musical sensibility of this earlier period will be one of the main challenges for me in years to come.



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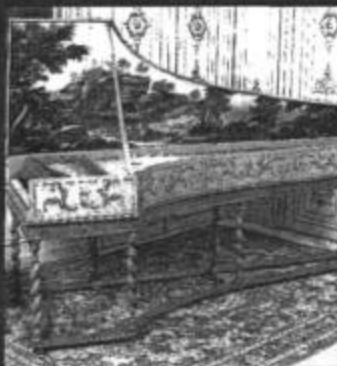
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Appendix: Tinctoris on the effects of music

An extract from Johannes Tinctoris (c.1435–1511), *Complexus effectuum musices*, xiii (early 1480s). After *Johannes Tinctoris: Opera theoretica*, ed. A. Seay, 2 vols., *Corpus Scriptorum de Musica*, xxii (American Institute of Musicology, 1975, 1978), ii, pp.172–3.

²Tertius decimus effectus: Musica homines letificat.

³Namque prout refert Aristoteles in octavo Politicorum: ⁴'Museus ait esse hominibus delectabilissimum cantare, propter quod in conventus et deductiones rationabiliter assumunt ipsum tamquam potentem letificare.' ⁵Et letificat alios quidem plus et alios minus, namque quanto plus in hac arte perfectus est, tanto plus ab ea delectatur, eo quod naturam ipsius et interius et exterius apprehendat. ⁶Interius quidem virtute intellectiva, qua intelligit debitam compositionem ac pronuntiationem, et exterius potentia auditiva, qua percipit concordantiarum dulcedinem. ⁷Tales autem sunt solum qui de musice vere iudicare delectarique possunt, propter quod philosophus in octavo Politicorum consulit iuvenibus operam dare musice, ut non tantum sono per se sive per alium delectentur. ⁸Sed senes etiam effecti dimissis operibus de ea recte possint iudicare. ⁹Musica vero minus illos letificat qui nihil ex ea penitus quam sonum percipiunt, extrinseco etenim sensu tantummodo delectantur. ¹⁰Afficiuntur adeo tamen tali sono, quod iuxta Iuvenalem 'currentes ad vocem iocundam', eos qui voce delectabili sicut opinantur canunt, licet rudissime pronuntient, tamquam optimos musicos predicant et extollunt. ¹¹Neque miror cum Vergilium cecinisse Bucolicorum, egloga secunda, legerim: 'Trahit sua quemque voluptas.' ¹²Perfectio igitur delectationis musice consistit in eius perfecta cognitione. ¹³Unde Aristoteles in octavo Politicorum ponit ad propositum quod imperfecto, supple in apprehensione, ipsius artis musice non convenit finis, id est, perfectio eius delectationis.

²Thirteenth effect: Music makes humans joyful.

³For just as Aristotle reports in the eighth book of Politics: ⁴'Museus says that singing is the most delightful thing to humans, whence they quite properly include it in gatherings and entertainments because of its power to bring joy.' ⁵And some it makes more joyful and others less. For the more one has attained perfection in this art, the more is one delighted by it, since one apprehends its nature both inwardly and outwardly. ⁶Inwardly through the intellectual faculty, through which one understands proper composition and performance, and outwardly through the auditive power, through which one perceives the sweetness of consonances. ⁷Only such are truly able to judge and take delight in music, whence Aristotle, in the eighth book of Politics, counsels the youth to devote themselves to music, so that not only may they take delight in sound (whether made by themselves or by others). ⁸But, once having reached old age and ceased to be working, they may correctly judge in matters concerning music. ⁹However, music brings less joy to those who perceive in it nothing more than sound, and who are indeed delighted only through the external sense. ¹⁰Nevertheless, they may be so moved by such sound that, 'scurrying to the pleasant voice' (according to Juvenal), they declare and extol as the best musicians those who (they imagine) sing with delightful voice, but are actually performing in the most coarse manner. ¹¹Nor do I marvel, as I have read in the second eclogue of Vergil: 'Each is drawn to his own pleasure.' ¹²Perfection in musical delight, therefore, consists in perfect knowledge of music. ¹³Whence Aristotle, in the eighth book of Politics, remarks on the subject that to one who is imperfect in (add: the apprehension of) the art of music, there is no goal (that is, perfection in the delight thereof).

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1 P. Schubert, 'Authentic analysis', *Journal of musicology*, xii (1994), pp.3–18, at p.3.

2 Concerning the realm of early music, see the studies presented in *The second sense: studies in hearing and musical judgement from antiquity to the seventeenth century*, ed. C. Burnett, M. Fend and P. Gouk (London, 1991), the 25th anniversary issue 'Listening practice' of *Early music*, xxv (1997), and the special issue 'Music as heard' of *Musical quarterly*, lxxxii (1998).

3 R. C. Wegman, "Das musikalische Hören" in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: perspectives from pre-war Germany', *Musical quarterly*, lxxxii (1998), pp.434–55.

4 Quoted after Rudolphus Agricola, *Opuscula, ovationes, epistolae* (Cologne, 1539; r/Frankfurt am Main, 1975), pp.192–214, at p.200: 'Oro te mitte ad me aliquid ex ijs, quae ad canendum composuisti, sed quod accuratum sit, et cum laude ostendi velis. Habemus et hic cantores, apud quos crebram mentionem tui facio, eorum magister novem et duodecim etiam vocibus canendos modulos componit, sed nihil suorum audivi quod tribus aut quatuor vocibus caneretur, quod magnopere placeret mihi, nec ego tamen animum meum iudicij loco pono, potest enim fieri, ut meliora sint, quam ego possim intelligere.' For the correspondence, see E. Kooiman, 'The letters of Rodolphus Agricola to Jacobus Barbirianus', *Rodolphus Agricola Phrisius, 1444–1485: proceedings of the international conference at the University of Groningen, 28–30 October 1985*, ed. F. Akkerman and A. J. Vanderjagt (Leiden, 1988), pp.136–46.

5 The only available edition is 'Johanns von Soest eigne Lebensbeschreibung', ed. J. C. von Fichard,

Frankfurtisches Archiv für ältere deutsche Litteratur, i (1811), pp.84–139. The fullest account of Soest's life and literary works is in G. Pietzsch, *Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte der Musik am kurpfälzischen Hof zu Heidelberg bis 1622* (Mainz, 1963), pp.678–82 (96–100). Pietzsch incorrectly assumes that Soest worked for a brief period at Hardenberg in eastern Holland; he actually worked at Aardenburg, near Bruges. For musical life in 15th-century Aardenburg, see R. M. van Heeringen and H. Hendrikse, 'Nieuw licht op de Maria-verering te Aardenburg in de Middeleeuwen', *Westvlaamse archaeologica*, vii (1991), pp.97–104, and L. Stockman, 'De oprichting van de dekenij Aardenburg (ca.1295) en het Rijkse Roomsche Leven in en om de Mariakerk van Aardenburg (966–1625)', *Appeltjes van het Meetjesland*, xliii (1992).

6 For this and what follows, see H. E. J. M. van der Velden, *Rodolphus Agricola (Roelof Huusman): een Nederlandsch humanist der vijftiende eeuw* (PhD diss., U. of Leyden, 1911), pp.46–7, 56, 87–8, 92, 139–42, 201–8; L. Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara, 1400–1505* (Oxford, 1984), pp.151–2, 320.

7 R. C. Wegman, 'From maker to composer: improvisation and musical authorship in the Low Countries, 1450–1500', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xlix (1996), pp.409–79.

8 R. C. Wegman, "And Josquin laughed ...": Josquin and the composer's anecdote in the sixteenth century', *Journal of musicology*, xvii (1999), pp.319–57.

9 E. Welch, 'Sight, sound and ceremony in the chapel of Galeazzo Maria Sforza', *Early music history*, xii (1993), pp.151–90, at pp.155–6.

10 C. Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-century music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley, 1989), pp.10–11. On musical understanding in the 19th century, see also F. Zamminer, 'Über die Herkunft des Ausdrucks "Musik verstehen"', *Musik und Verstehen: Aufsätze zur semiotischen Theorie, Ästhetik und*

Soziologie der musikalischen Rezeption, ed. P. Faltin and H.-P. Reinecke (Cologne, 1973), pp.314–19.

11 E. T. A. Hoffmann, 'Beethovens Instrumental-Musik' (1813), after Hoffmann, *Fantasie- und Nachtstücke* (Munich, 1976), pp.41–9, at pp.43–4.

12 For an important study of the tension between sense and reason in medieval music theory, especially in connection with the definition of consonance, see K.-J. Sachs, 'Boethius and the judgement of the ears: a hidden challenge in medieval and Renaissance Music', *The second sense*, ed. Burnett, Fend and Gouk, pp.169–98.

13 Nicholas of Cusa, *De ludo globi*, ii (1462–3). Trans. after Nicholas of Cusa, *De ludo globi: The game of spheres*, trans. P. M. Watts (New York, 1986), pp.104–5. See also K. Meyer-Baer, 'Nicholas of Cusa on the meaning of music', *Journal of aesthetics and art criticism*, v (1947), pp.301–8, esp. p.304; H. Hüschen, 'Nikolaus von Kues und sein Musikdenken', *Symbolae historiae musicae: Hellmut Federhofer zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. F. W. Riedel and H. Unverricht (Main, 1971), pp.47–67, at pp.61–2.

14 *Johannes Tinctoris: Opera theoretica*, ed. A. Seay, 2 vols., *Corpus Scriptorum de Musica*, xxii (American Institute of Musicology, 1975, 1978), ii, pp.172–3. For a more accurate edition with complete English translation, see *Egidius Carlerius and Johannes Tinctoris: On the dignity & the effects of music*, ed. R. Strohm, trans. J. D. Cullington, Institute of Advanced Musical Studies Study Texts, ii (London, 1996). This extremely interesting passage has justly received a great deal of attention on the part of music historians. For a perceptive discussion, see W. Seidel, 'Die Macht der Musik und das Tonkunstwerk', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, xlii (1985), pp.1–17, esp. pp.2–7.

15 I have previously discussed the concept of musical sweetness in 'Sense and sensibility in late-medieval music: reflections on aesthetics and "authenticity"', *Early music*, xxiii (1995), pp.298–312.

16 In oral presentations of this paper I played a section from the Agnus Dei of that Mass, performed by The Hilliard Ensemble on their recording *Power: Masses and motets* (Cologne: EMI Electrola CDM 7 63064 2, 1989), which remains for me one of the most compelling attempts to evoke the fabled sweetness of early 15th-century English music in modern performance.

17 See R. L. Crocker, 'Discant, counterpoint, and harmony', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xv (1962), pp.1–21, at p.9: 'As a further rebuttal, let me point out that the discant treatise does not describe what the listener hears, any more than does the treatise on traditional harmony. In both cases the teacher tells the student how to proceed; he does not analyze the result as it strikes the ear. The typical discant treatise is a collection of practical precepts on how to make music, not a theory of aesthetics.'

18 *Johannes Tinctoris: Opera theoretica*, 2a: 10.

19 See J. Chatillon, 'Dulcedo, dulcedo Dei', *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, ed. M. Viller et al., 17 vols. to date (Paris, 1937–), iii, pp.1777–95; F. Ohly, 'Geistige Süße bei Otfried', *Typologia litterarum: Festschrift für Max Wehrli*, ed. S. Sonderegger, A. M. Haas and H. Burger (Zurich, 1969), pp.95–124.

20 Anon., *Dialogus super excellencia et dignitate curie Romane* (1438); after R. Scholz, 'Eine humanistische Schilderung der Kurie aus dem Jahre 1438', *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, xvi (1914), pp.108–53, at pp.124–5.

21 See most recently C. Wright, 'Dufay's *Nuper rosarum flores*, King Solomon's Temple, and the Veneration of the Virgin', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xlvii (1994), pp.395–441, and the Communications by C. Turner and C. Wright in the same journal, xlviii (1995), pp.156–8.

22 Giannozzo Manetti, *Oratio* on the consecration of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence (1436); original text in C. van Eck, 'Giannozzo Manetti on architecture: the *Oratio de secularibus et pontificalibus pompis in consecratione*

basilicae Florentinae of 1436', *Renaissance studies*, xii (1998), pp.449–75, at pp.474–5. Trans. quoted here after *Music in the Western world: a history in documents*, ed. P. Weiss and R. Taruskin (New York, 1984), pp.81–2.

23 I accept Christopher Page's criticism, articulated in his article 'Reading and reminiscence: Tinctoris on the beauty of music', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xlix (1996), pp.1–31, that my discussion of sweetness in 'Sense and sensibility' was too narrowly focused on musical sound. I am also grateful to him for correcting my erroneous identification of the source for an important passage in Tinctoris's *De inventione et usu musicae* (ibid. p.12 n.12).

24 Leon Battista Alberti, *Profugiorum ab aerumna, Libri III* (1441–2); after Alberti, *Profugiorum ab aerumna libri*, ed. G. Ponte (Genoa, 1988), pp.4–5. See also C. Smith, 'Della tranquillità dell'animo: architectural allegories of virtue in a dialogue by Leon Battista Alberti', *Journal of medieval and Renaissance studies*, xix (1989), pp.103–22, esp. p.107.

25 See J. Le Goff, *The medieval imagination*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago, 1988), pp.27–44 ('The marvelous in the medieval West').

26 Pope John XXII (*d* 1334), *Docta sanctorum patrum* (1324–5); after H. Huckle, 'Das Dekret "Docta sanctorum patrum" Papst Johannes' XXII.', *Musica disciplina*, xxxviii (1984), pp.119–31, at pp.121, 123.

27 See, for example, L. Lockwood, *The Counter-Reformation and the Masses of Vincenzo Ruffo*, Studi di Musica Veneta, ii (Vienna, 1970), esp. pp.74–135; C. Palisca, 'Bernardino Cirillo's critique of polyphonic music of 1549: its background and resonance', *Music in Renaissance cities and courts: studies in honor of Lewis Lockwood*, ed. J. A. Owens and A. M. Cummings (Michigan, 1997), pp.281–92.

28 Johannes Hübner, *Sermo de sanctis apostolis Symone et Juda* (c.1400); after F. Feldmann, *Musik und Musikpflege im mittelalterlichen Schlesien*, Darstellungen und Quellen zur schlesischen

Geschichte, lxxiii (Wrocław, 1938), p.125 n.365.

29 St Aelred, *Speculum charitatis*, II.xxiii; cf. *Patrologia Latina*, 195:571. For an English translation of the relevant passage, see R. F. Hayburn, *Papal legislation on sacred music, 95 A.D. to 1977 A.D.* (Collegeville, MN, 1979), pp.18–20. St Aelred's diatribe was still invoked in 17th-century England; see P. A. Scholes, *The Puritans and music in England and New England: a contribution to the cultural history of two nations* (1934; R/Oxford, 1969), pp.215–16.

30 Denis the Carthusian, *De vita canonicorum* (11440s), art. 20: 'An discantus in divino obsequio sit commendabilis'; after *Doctoris ecstastici D. Dionysii Cartusiani: Opera omnia*, ed. anon. monks of the Order of Carthusians, 42 vols. (Montreuil, 1896–1913), xxxvii, p.197: 'Praeterea quaeri potest, an discantus seu fractio vocis laudabiliter admittantur in Deitatis obsequio. Quocirca in praefata notabiliter scribitur Summa: *Reprehensibilis videtur esse in cantu fractio vocis. Unde in Legenda habetur S. Sebastiani: Putasne illum inter Christicolos numerandum, qui tonsorem diligit, comam colit, saporis quaerit, et vocem frangit? Fractio vocis signum videtur animi fracti. Quemadmodum reprehensibilis est crispatio crinium in hominibus, corrugatio vestium in mulieribus, sic et fractio vocis in cantantibus; et sicut ventus facere solet crispationem in aqua, sic ventus vanitatis hanc crispationem fractionemque vocis facere solet. Haec in Summa praefata. Cui attestatur quod quidam qui ad tempus sic cantare consueverunt, fatentur superbiam et quamdam lasciviam animi in huiusmodi cantu consistere. Porro, si aliquo modo debeat excusari, non videtur excusabilis aut commendabilis esse nisi pro devotione excitanda ordinetur ac fiat. Nam quidam ex melodiis ad contemplationem et devotionem fortiter excitantur: unde et organa habet Ecclesia. Si vero fiat ad oblectandum praesentibus, etiam mulieribus, non dubium quin reprehensibile exstet, quum et sanctus dixerit Augustinus: *Quoties me plus delectat cantus quam sensus seu id quod cantatur, toties me poenaliter peccare fateor, et tunc malle**

non audire cantantem. Denique, quamvis discantus provocet specialiter quosdam ad devotionem et contemplationem coelestium, multum tamen revocare videtur ac impedire ab advertentia sensus etiam propriae orationis ejus qui audit et orat. Hinc sanctus ait Bernardus: Parum prodest voce sola cantare sine cordis attentione. Deus enim cui non absconditur quidquid illicite perpetratur, non quaerit suis lenitatem, sed cordis puritatem.

31 Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara*, p.204.

32 Girolamo Savonarola, Sermon on the Book of Amos (1496). Quoted after P. Macey, *Bonfire songs: Savonarola's musical legacy* (Oxford, 1998), pp.93, 97–8.

33 Macey, *Bonfire songs*, p.93.

34 Macey, *Bonfire songs*, p.96.

35 It had been rare even for the Church Fathers to condemn music categorically; see T. Gérold, *Les pères de l'église et la musique* (Paris, 1931).

36 For this and what follows, see K. W. Niemöller, *Untersuchungen zu Musikpflege und Musikunterricht an den deutschen Lateinschulen vom ausgehenden Mittelalter bis um 1600*, *Kölner Beiträge zur Musikforschung*, liv (Regensburg, 1969), p.615.

37 See O. Söhngen, 'Die Musikanschauungen der Reformatoren und die Überwindung der mittelalterlichen Musiktheologie', in *Musa – Mens – Musici: im Gedenken an Walther Vetter*, ed. Institut für Musikwissenschaft der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Leipzig, 1969), pp.51–62; H. P. Clive, 'The Calvinist attitude to music and its literary aspects and sources', *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance*, xix

(1957), pp.80–102, 294–319, and xx (1958), pp.79–107.

38 See Page, 'Reading and reminiscence', p.14, and, for a similar view, R. Schäfke, *Geschichte der Musikästhetik in Umrissen* (Tutzing, 2/1964), p.235.

39 Aristotle, *Politics*, viii.1339b, 24, and 1340b, 31; after *Aristotelis Politicorum Libri Octo cum vetusta translatione Guilelmi de Moerbeka*, ed. F. Susemihl (Leipzig, 1872), pp.358–9; trans. Dr Leofranc Holford-Strevens.

40 Paolo Cortese, *De cardinalatu libri tres* (Castel Cortesiano, 1510); text and trans. after N. Pirrotta, 'Music and cultural tendencies in 15th-century Italy', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xix (1966), pp.127–61, at pp.151, 155.

41 'For it is hard to say why exactly it is that the things which most strongly gratify our senses and excite them most vigorously at their first appearance, are the ones from which we are most speedily estranged by a feeling of disgust and satiety. ... In singing, how much more delightful and charming are trills and flourishes than notes firmly held! and yet the former meet with protest not only from persons of severe taste but, if used too often, even from the general public. This may be observed in the case of the rest of the senses—that perfumes compounded with an extremely sweet and penetrating scent do not give us pleasure for so long as those that are moderately fragrant, and a thing that seems to have the scent of earth is more esteemed than one that suggests saffron ... Thus in all things the greatest pleasures are only narrowly separated from disgust.' Cicero, *De oratore*, iii.xxv.98–100; trans. after Cicero, *De oratore*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, 2 vols.

(London, 1948), pp.78–81. For an important study of the notion of satiety in Cicero, see E. Fantham, 'Varietas and satietas; *De oratore* 3.96–103 and the limits of *ornatus*', *Rhetorica*, vi (1988), pp.275–90.

42 Johannes Tinctoris: *Opera theoretica*, ii, pp.155–6. For an important study of this concept, see K.-J. Sachs, 'Pierre de La Rues "Missa de Beata Virgine" in ihrer copia aus varietas und similitudo', *Analysen: Beiträge zu einer Problemgeschichte des Komponierens: Festschrift für Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. W. Breig, R. Brinkmann and E. Budde (Wiesbaden, 1984), pp.76–90

43 Pirrotta, 'Music and cultural tendencies', pp.150, 154.

44 Pirrotta, 'Music and cultural tendencies', pp.148, 152.

45 F. Brancacci, 'Una fonte aristotelica della sezione "De musica" del "De cardinalatu" di Paolo Cortese', *Studi musicali*, xx (1991), pp.69–84.

46 Glarean, *Dodecachordon*, trans. C. A. Miller, 2 vols. (American Institute of Musicology, 1965), i, p.206.

47 '... non piacque mai né fu estimato per bono ...'; quoted after Baldesar Castiglione, *The book of the courtier*, trans. G. Bull (Harmondsworth, 1967), pp.144–5.

48 'Obrecht, Jacob', *New Grove II*, xviii, pp.290–307, esp. pp.292, 299–301.

49 See, for example, G. L. Finney, 'Music and air: changing definitions of sound', ch.7 of *Musical backgrounds for English literature, 1580–1650* (New Brunswick, 1962), pp.139–58, 269–73.