Obrecht and Erasmus

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In the last twenty years of his life, Desiderius Erasmus enjoyed the notoriety of being Europe's most outspoken and publicly visible critic of contemporary church music. He had gained that notoriety on the strength of one publication, the *Annotations to the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, printed at Basel in 1519.[1] Annotations, strictly speaking, are marginal comments or footnotes, meant to clarify obscure passages in the text and to explain difficult words and phrases. They do not typically provide the occasion for venturing opinions on tangential topics—though in the case of contemporary church music Erasmus had done just that. Seizing upon a passing remark in St. Paul's epistle, he had launched a diatribe whose length and scathing tone seemed quite out of proportion to what the scriptural text could reasonably have called for. 'Yet in the church,' St. Paul had written, 'I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue' (1 Cor. 14:19). What could this remark have had to do with church music? Perhaps Erasmus took it to mean that five words in the vernacular are to be preferred over ten thousand in Latin. He did indeed hint at this interpretation, though he ended up doing much more than that. In an intemperate aside, which takes up several pages in the modern translation, he attacked singers, musical styles, performance practices, organs, choral foundations, and in the end seemed to approve of little else except simple communal recitation. St. Paul's epistle had given him the opportunity—or perhaps it might be better to say: the pretext—to unleash one of the most vicious invectives in his entire output.

Obviously these were issues that greatly preoccupied Erasmus. Yet what, exactly, could have caused him to feel so strongly about them? In a recent monograph, *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe*, I have argued that the story ultimately goes back to one occasion in Erasmus's life—an event that took place probably in the first week of July 1512.[2] It was during that week, in the course of his third and longest stay in England, that Erasmus visited Canterbury on a pilgrimage with his English friend John Colet. What he heard and witnessed at Canterbury—the worship of bizarre and repulsive relics, the obscene wealth amassed in the treasury, the unseemly and extravagant music performed in the cathedral, the compulsory attendance of layfolk for hours on end—filled Erasmus with outrage. For seven years he managed not to speak publicly about his experience, though he may have shared it privately with the friends he made at Basel upon his return from England in 1514. (Two of those friends, it is worth noting, were Beatus Rhenanus and the young Heinrich Glarean, both of whom we will encounter presently.) It was presumably at the urging of his circle of friends at Basel that Erasmus finally did decide to speak out. (He later confessed, referring specifically to the polemical

[1] Desiderius Erasmus, *Annotations on the New Testament: Acts - Romans - I and II Corinthians*, ed. Anne Reeve and Michael Andrew Screech, Studies in the History of Christian Thought 42 (Leiden, 1990), 508-9; English translation in Rob C. Wegman, *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe, 1470-1530* (New York, 2005), 161-65.

[2] For this and what follows, see Wegman, *The Crisis of Music*, 133-47.

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passages in his Annotations, that he had at times been more yielding to those friends than was expedient.[3])

Still, there are indications that his indignation may have had deeper roots, going back to an earlier stage of his life. At one point in the diatribe, for example, Erasmus bemoans the lives of choirboys in a way that suggests that he may have been writing from personal experience. Indeed, one could be forgiven for suspecting, on the strength of this passage, that he viewed his own days as a chorister, then forty years in the past, as an utter waste of time and, in retrospect, a major hindrance to his intellectual development. Here is what he wrote:[4]

> What do they think of Christ, I beseech you, those who think that they are pleasing Him with such a din of sounds? Not content even with these things, we have brought into the churches some kind of laboursome and theatrical music, an uproarious chattering of varied voices, which I doubt was ever heard in the theatres of the Greeks and Romans. The whole thing is a noisy racket of trumpets, crumhorns, shawms, and sackbuts, and the human voices are vying with them. Obscene love songs are heard, such as harlots and minstrels dance to. One flocks together in church as if it were a theatre, for the gratification of the ears.
>
> And for this custom, organ builders are maintained at large stipends, and crowds of children, whose entire youth is wasted in arduously learning such yelpings, meanwhile studying nothing of value. One supports this washed-up sewage of vile and unreliable men, as most Dionysiacs are, and on account of this pestilential custom the Church is burdened with so many expenses. Just calculate, I ask you, how many poor folk, barely clinging to life, could be supported with the stipends of singers?

There is general agreement that Erasmus's years as a chorister, sometime in the late 1470s, were indeed a failure. This is not because the humanist tells us this himself—at least not directly—but because it is reported by one of the friends he made at Basel, Beatus Rhenanus. In his posthumous biography of Erasmus, printed in 1540, Rhenanus wrote:[5]

> …[the city of] Deventer…received Erasmus to be educated, having taken him when he was still a boy chorister from the holy church of Utrecht, where he served the choirmasters in the manner of cathedral churches, usually undertaking small singing duties on account of his very feeble voice.

Throughout his life Erasmus liked to say that he had learned absolutely nothing from his teachers in Holland, and this is the sense that seems to shine through in Rhenanus's report as well. Utrecht cathedral, it seems, was one of several environments where the boy Erasmus was unable to excel as he later would. Apparently the choirmasters had little use for him, no interest in providing him with proper musical training, and the transfer to the school of Deventer must have been a godsend. Perhaps it is this memory that resurfaces when Erasmus speaks about the lives of choirboys in his *Annotations*.

And yet, the picture is not as clear-cut as it seems at first sight. One complicating factor is that Erasmus published his *Annotations* at a critical historical juncture—two

[3] James D. Tracy, 'Erasmus Becomes a German', in *Renaissance Quarterly* 21 (1968), 281-88 at 287-88.
[4] Wegman, *The Crisis of Music*, 163-64.
[5] See Rob C. Wegman, *Born for the Muses: The Life and Masses of Jacob Obrecht* (Oxford, 1994), 77-78.

years after the beginning of the Reformation, and, more importantly, two years before Luther would abolish the Catholic liturgy in Germany and was to be excommunicated by the Pope. Catholics throughout Europe would feel, in hindsight, that the writings of Erasmus had spurred Luther on, or, as they put it, that Erasmus had laid the egg which Luther hatched.[6] For years they would be hell-bent on demonstrating that the humanist was in large part responsible for the outbreak of the Lutheran heresy. And they seized upon critiques like the one in the *Annotations* to prove the point: Erasmus had attacked Catholic church music, and Luther had gone ahead and abolished it altogether.

The humanist himself would have none of this. His motto was 'I yield to no-one', and in this case it was probably prudent to observe it. It was too late now to admit that he had been too harsh in the *Annotations*: that would have been tantamount to admitting that he had indeed provided Luther with the fuel he needed. So Erasmus stuck to his guns, and as a consequence, his position on church music hardened with every attack against him. Again and again he complained that Catholic critics has misconstrued his words, that they had taken them out of context, that they failed to grasp the subtlety of his argument. All he had really ever wanted to do, or so Erasmus now claimed, was urge moderation, not the complete abolition of polyphony, let alone that of all liturgical music. Yet the problem is that the more he complained about lack of moderation in church music, the less moderation he exercised in his polemic replies. Erasmus lost few opportunities to reiterate the criticisms he had expressed in the *Annotations*, and he made no attempt to soften them.

It is only from other writers that we get a more nuanced picture of Erasmus's views, one less affected by polemical pressures. The most informative of those writers, of course, was Heinrich Glarean, whom Erasmus had met at Basel shortly after his return from England in 1514. For years the two scholars lived practically next door to each other, and discussed issues of mutual interest on an almost daily basis. Glarean regarded Erasmus as his teacher, his *praeceptor*, and in the *Dodekachordon* he proudly invoked the latter's views whenever an opportunity presented itself. It is with some surprise, then, that we learn here—despite the apparent failure of Erasmus's years as a choirboy, and despite his vicious attack on contemporary church music—that the humanist actually liked the music of Jacob Obrecht, and in fact regarded the composer in some respects as second to none. Here is what Glarean writes:[7]

> The first example is from the musician Jacob Obrecht, who is second to none in regard to prolificacy (*copia*) and to majesty of song (*carminis maiestas*) in the opinion of our teacher, *Dominus* Erasmus of Rotterdam, and also in our opinion. And he was the teacher in music of the boy Erasmus, as we ourselves heard many years ago from Erasmus's own lips.

This passage gives us two of the three key criteria in Glarean's assessment of Obrecht. The first, *copia* or prolificacy, is obviously borne out by the size of Obrecht's surviving oeuvre; the second, *maiestas*—majesty, grandeur, or dignity—makes obvious sense even

[6] For this and what follows, see Wegman, *The Crisis of Music*, 108-21.

[7] Heinrich Glareanus, *Dodekachordon* (Basel: Henricus Petri, 1547), 256; see Heinrich Glarean, *Dodecachordon*, trans. Clement A. Miller, 2 vols., Musicological Studies and Documents 6 (n.p.: American Institute of Musicology, 1965), 252.

today in the case of some works—*Salve crux*, for instance, or the six-part *Salve regina*. Glarean makes it clear that *copia* and *maiestas* were qualities that Erasmus valued in Obrecht. I strongly suspect that the same was true of the third criterion, which the Swiss theorist mentions elsewhere: *mediocritas* or moderation—a key term in Erasmus's critiques of contemporary church music. To quote Glareanus again:[8]

> …Jacob Obrecht…in fact was the teacher of *Dominus* Erasmus of Rotterdam, whose opinion of Obrecht we have reported [earlier]. Moreover, it is said that he worked with such quickness of device (*ingenij celeritas*) and fertility of invention (*inventionis copia*), that, in a single night, he composed an excellent Mass, and one which was also admired by learned men. All the monuments of this man have a certain wonderful majesty (*mira maiestas*) and an innate quality of moderation (*mediocritas vena*). He certainly was not such a lover of the unusual as was Josquin. Indeed, he did display his skill, but without ostentation, as if he may have preferred to await the judgement of the listener rather than to exalt himself. There are many compositions of this man everywhere, and we have shown the reader several examples of his in this very book, especially when we were discussing the sesquialtera ratio. And therefore, we refrain from saying more about him.

Glarean states for the second time that Obrecht was the teacher in music of Erasmus. Perhaps we may infer from this that the composer had been one of those choirmasters at Utrecht who had so little use for the boy's singing. In the earlier passage, Glarean specifically states that Obrecht had been teacher of the *boy* Erasmus, the *puer*, a child of less than about 17 years. Yet in neither passage does Glarean actually say that Obrecht had taught the boy in Utrecht. And any attempt to make that case is bound to run into serious problems.

Erasmus is known to have moved to Deventer by about 1475, so the logical conclusion from Rhenanus' report must be that he had been a chorister before that date. Yet in 1475, Obrecht himself had barely left the years of his own *pueritia*, and presumably had not yet taken his master's degree at the university. In fact, one of the problems with the scenario is the age difference between Obrecht and Erasmus—which we now know to have been no more than about nine years. This leaves a very small window in which the scenario might work—late in the 1470s, at best—and it virtually rules out Utrecht as the place where that scenario could have taken place. As the Erasmus biographer Richard J. Schoeck recently put it: 'either the Obrecht or the Utrecht part of the legend is demonstrably wrong'.[9] And yet this is not a legend, but the credible report of two friends and students who had known Erasmus for decades. I shall return to this thorny problem later on, but for now I would like to pursue a different angle, one that may point us in another direction.

Let us turn to a little-known dialogue by Erasmus entitled *De recta latini graecique sermonis pronuntiatione*, printed in 1528.[10] One reason why this dialogue is important for us is that it shows that Erasmus, for all his evident disgust at English musical practices, had been interested enough in them to find out how they worked. Early on in the book

[8] Glareanus, *Dodekachordon*, 456; trans. Miller, 277-78.

[9] Richard J. Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: The Prince of Humanists, 1501-1536* (Edinburgh, 1993), 53.

[10] After Desiderius Erasmus, *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami recognita et adnotatione critica instrvcta notisqve illustrata*, 21 vols. to date (Amsterdam, 1969-), I/4, 42 and 65.

he gives a technically accurate description of *faburden*, the English practice of polyphonic improvisation.[11] More than fifteen years after his stay in England, the memory of that practice was apparently still fresh. And the following passage, later in the same dialogue, shows that he also had the basics of mensural theory at ready recall. Here he has one of his interlocutors talk about notes and their divisions, and describe augmentation and diminution:

> Atque adeo miror hoc homini musico videri, qui noris quomodo vocem, quam hodie maximam vocant, dividant in longam; rursus quomodo longas in breues, breues in semibreues, semibreues in minimas, et has insuper secant in plusquam minimas: tum non ignores quomodo proportionibus, quas illi modos hodie vocant, varie producant aut accelerent pronuntiationem, nunc ad rationem duplam, nunc ad triplam.
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> I am totally amazed that this would seem [to be the case] to a musical man [like you], who knows so well how they divide the note which they nowadays call the maxima into the longa, and again how a longa into breves, breves into semibreves, semibreves into minims, and [how], in addition, they split those into less than minims: you know, besides, how they slow down or speed up the performance in different ways by means of proportions, which nowadays they call *modi*, now at a duple ratio, then at triple.

Erasmus was not a pompous Ciceronian, and he had no problem about calling notes by their medieval names. Yet there is one intriguing and, I think, revealing exception: although he duly lists the maxima, the longa, the brevis, semibrevis, and minima, he cannot bring himself to call a semiminim a semiminim. Instead he speaks of 'less than minims' or, literally, 'more than minims'. And he does not even bother with the fusa and semifusa, even though both notes were widely current by the late 1520s.

This gives us a possible clue to Erasmus's musical training. It shows, first of all, that his mensural knowledge was no longer up to date by the late 1520s, but reflects the theory of an older age—acquired, one is tempted to speculate, early in his career. More importantly, there is only one music theorist who could have inspired such terminological fastidiousness. This, of course, is Johannes Tinctoris, the man who famously refused to speak of semiminims on the grounds that 'minima' means 'least', and it is logically impossible for any other note to be less than what is least.[12] Of course there was hardly any other theorist who had ever taken this argument seriously, not even Tinctoris's own student Gaffurius. What, then, is it doing in Erasmus?

When it comes to just this question, it is interesting to note a curious coincidence: another distinctive aspect of Tinctoris's theory happens to have found its way into the music of Jacob Obrecht. I am referring to *Regina celi*, Obrecht's two-part setting of the Marian antiphon, which appears to be essentially an exercise in musical proportions.[13] The proportions in this piece are indicated not only by their full numerical fractions—precisely as Tinctoris insisted that one should—but they are simultaneously spelled out

[11] Wegman, *The Crisis of Music*, 211 n. 9 and 227 n. 17.

[12] Johannes Tinctoris, *Proportionale musices* (c. 1472-73) and *Tractatus de regulari valore notarum* (c. 1474-75); see Tinctoris, *Opera theoretica*, ed. Albert Seay, 2 vols. plus vol. 2a, Corpus scriptorum de musica 22 (s.l., 1975; vol. 2a Neuhausen-Stuttgart, 1978), vol. 1, 112 and vol. 2a, 17.

[13] Edition in Jacob Obrecht, *Motets II*, ed. Chris Maas, New Obrecht Edition 16 (Utrecht, 1996), 63-64.

verbally in the mathematical terminology set forth by the theorist.[14] It looks almost as if Obrecht had turned the *Proportionale musices* upside down, and decided to put together a composition from the unfeasibly complex proportions that came falling out. The end result is a virtual companion piece to Tinctoris's treatise. Yet the crucial point about *Regina celi*, noted long ago by Helen Hewitt, is that Obrecht treated the proportions in *cumulative* fashion, in the sense that every fraction is relative to the previous one, and that the rhythmic relationships, at any point, reflect the accumulated effect of all proportions up to that point.[15] As Anna Maria Busse Berger has demonstrated, cumulative proportions were uniquely an invention of Tinctoris.[16] So it is fair to conclude that Obrecht must have known the teachings of the *Proportionale* inside out. And if Obrecht was the teacher in music of Erasmus, as Glarean assures us, then it is entirely possible that it was he who passed on some of Tinctoris's ideas to the young humanist. This would make sense; and yet it does not solve the problem. For what are those ideas doing in the *Regina celi* when Obrecht, in every other respect, seems to have been more loyal to the mensural usage of Busnoys than to that of Tinctoris?

Regina celi is found in only one source, the Segovia manuscript, which is probably the most important extant source for Obrecht's music. Although copied in Spain, this choirbook offers an intimate glimpse of Flemish musical life in the 1480s and 90s—intimate enough, for example, for some of the composers to be mentioned by their nicknames.[17] Thus we encounter a figure known simply as Roelkin, or Little Roland, and we learn that Hayne van Ghizeghem was known in Flemish circles as 'scoen Heyne', or Fair John. There are numerous compositions by Obrecht in the Segovia manuscript, stemming mostly from his years in Bruges—including a sizeable repertoire of otherwise unknown songs on Middle Dutch texts, and of course his 'autobiographical' motets *Mille quingentis* and *Inter preclarissimas virtutes*.

Regina celi is found in gathering XXVI, whose complete contents are listed in Table 1. This is a self-contained collection of settings, distinguished from the rest of the manuscript by a number of shared features: they are all two-part settings, presumably meant for instrumental performance, and the secular song arrangements reflect a repertoire no later than the 1470s. All settings exhibit a pronounced theoretical interest, especially in mensuration and proportion. This is conspicuously so in the case of Obrecht's *Regina celi*, but also, for example, in Adam's *De tous biens playne* which is found next to it. Settings by Tinctoris dominate the gathering, and two of these settings, as Bonnie Blackburn has noted, are found also in a contemporary treatise on proportions.[18] Yet Tinctoris had been working in Naples since the early 1470s, and so one is bound to wonder: what could his settings have to do with Flanders, or even Bruges?

[14] Cumulative proportions, as written out in the unique source for Jacob Obrecht's *Regina celi*, SegC s.s., fol. 200v: 'sexquitercia : dupla : superbiparciens [tripla] : dupla superbiparciens [tripla] : tripla : quadrupla : quindupla sexquitercia : sexdupla : dupla : sexquiquarte : sexquialtera : dupla sexquiquarta : quadrupla : sexquioctaua'.

[15] Helen Hewitt, 'A Study in Proportions', in *Essays on Music in Honor of Archibald Thompson Davison* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), 69-81.

[16] Anna Maria Busse Berger, *Mensuration and Proportion Signs: Origins and Evolution* (Oxford, 1993), 164-226.

[17] For this and what follows, see Rob C. Wegman, 'The Segovia Manuscript: Another Look at the "Flemish Hypothesis"', in *Segovia C Revisited: Eine spanische Renaissancehandschrift historiographisch neu beleuchtet*, ed. Cristina Urchueguía and Wolfgang Fuhrmann, Collection Epitome musicale (Turnhout, in press).

[18] Bonnie J. Blackburn, 'A Lost Guide to Tinctoris's Teachings Recovered', in *Early Music History* 1 (1981), 29-116 at 36-40.

Table 1. SegC s.s., gathering XXVI

Folio	Composer	Title	Rubrics
200r	Alexander Agricola	*Gaudeamus omnes in domino*	
200v	Jacobus Hobrecht	*Regina celi*	sexquitercia : dupla : superbiparciens [tripla] : dupla superbiparciens [tripla] : tripla : quadrupla : quindupla sexquitercia : sexdupla : dupla : sexquiquarte : sexquialtera : dupla sexquiquarta : quadrupla : sexquioctaua
201r	Adam	*De tous biens playne*	tripla : quadrupla : quindupla : sexdupla : sexquioctaua
201v	Alexander Agricola	*Comme femme desconforté*	
202r	Johannes Tinctoris	*De tous biens playne*	
202v-203r	Roelkin	*De tous biens playne*	
203v	Johannes Tinctoris	*Le souvenir*	
204r	Johannes Tinctoris Johannes Tinctoris	*D'ung aultre amer* [textless]	
204v	Johannes Tinctoris	*Tout a par moy*	
205r	[anon.]	*Fecit potentiam*	
205v	Johannes Tinctoris	*Comme femme desconforté*	

It so happens that the preceding gathering in the manuscript, gathering XXV, contains a piece ascribed there to 'Ferdinandus et frater eius', 'Ferdinandus and his brother'—as far as I know the only ascription in this period which appears to suggest multiple authorship. The setting is entitled *Cecus non iudicat de coloribus*, 'a blind man judges not about colors', and it is elsewhere ascribed to 'cecus' ('the blind man'), or said to be 'cecorum' ('of the blind men').[19] It has long been clear that 'Ferdinandus' is not a first name, but rather that the ascription must refer to the brothers Johannes and Carolus Fernandes, two blind instrument players who were born and raised in Bruges, and who lived in that town until about 1483, after which they settled permanently in France.[20] *Cecus non judicat* survives in ten sources, an unusually large number. The earliest of those sources was copied around 1476, and four other sources ascribe the piece to Alexander Agricola—a composer from nearby Ghent who was about the same age as Obrecht. The setting is now generally believed to be by Agricola. If *Cecus non judicat* is indeed by Agricola, then it must be among his earliest known compositions. Yet the conflicting attributions suggest that it may well have been written specifically for the blind brothers of Bruges, or, at least, that it belonged in their repertoire.

[19] SegC s.s., fols. 195v-197r.
[20] I am currently in the process of writing a biographical essay on these fascinating figures.

Returning now to the Segovia manuscript, perhaps the proximity of *Cecus non judicat* to the two-voice gathering XXVI is more than just a coincidence. For it is worth noting that Tinctoris is known to have visited Bruges around 1480, and to have heard the two blind brothers play on the viol.[21] He would write about this occasion in his treatise *De inventione et usu musice*, and although the passage is very famous, it is worth quoting once again:[22]

> Nor should I pass over the fact that a little while ago, I heard in Bruges two blind brothers, men of Flemish birth who, in truth, are no less learned in literary studies than they are versed in music, of whom one is called Carolus and the other Johannes, making concord on this kind of viol (the former playing the top part, and the latter the tenor of many songs) so skilfully, and so gracefully, that I truly have never found greater delight in any harmonious sound.

What was Tinctoris doing in Bruges? What sort of occasion could this have been? What he tells us about the playing of the brothers—a two-voice performance on viols of many songs—matches the contents of Segovia's gathering XXVI almost perfectly. Even more tantalizingly, the gathering is dominated by compositions ascribed, of all people, to Tinctoris himself. Those compositions form a cluster of six pieces in the gathering, yet Tinctoris is otherwise represented by only one piece in the whole Segovia manuscript. It is also worth noting that gathering XXVI is the only source for *any* two-voice arrangements by Tinctoris; all his other surviving secular song arrangements (not counting musical examples in his treatises) are in three or four parts.

The occasion in Bruges to which Tinctoris referred, taking place around 1480, is one that could well have brought together not only the blind brothers and Tinctoris, but several other composers, who may have written song arrangements specially for the occasion. We know for a fact that international meetings between musicians took place at St. Donatian's in Bruges, where they were hosted by a brotherhood of musicians known as *de ghezellen vanden musike*, or companions of music.[23] What I am suggesting is that a similar meeting may have taken place around 1480, that it was attended by Tinctoris, Agricola, Obrecht, and others, and that they had a marvelous time singing, playing, and discussing song arrangements written for the occasion.

Certainly this could account for the cluster of two-part settings by Tinctoris in gathering XXVI. But what of the other composers? If we assume a Bruges context for this gathering, then Roelkin can only be Roland Wreede, the composer who served as organist at St. Donatian's until 1482, after which Johannes Fernandes, one of the blind brothers, served briefly as his deputy. Roelkin's piece in gathering XXVI is a two-part arrangement of *De tous biens plaine*, in which the top part spans an amazing two-and-a-half octaves. According to Jon Banks this piece would have been perfectly playable on

[21] See, most recently, Rob C. Wegman, 'Johannes Tinctoris and the Art of Listening', in *Recevez ce mien petit labeur: Studies in Renaissance Music in Honour of Ignace Bossuyt*, ed. Pieter Bergé and Mark Delaere (Leuven, 2008), 279-96.

[22] After Karl Weinmann (ed.), *Johannes Tinctoris (1445-1511) und sein unbekannter Traktat "De inventione et usu musicae"* (Regensburg, 1917), 45-46.

[23] See, for example, Rob C. Wegman, 'From Maker to Composer: Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450-1500', in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 49 (1996), 409-79, and idem, 'Ockeghem, Brumel, Josquin: New Documents in Troyes', in *Early Music* 36 (2008), 203-18.

two lutes.[24] In all probability it would have been playable on viols, too, and a performance on the organ is certainly conceivable.

As for the other composers, it is hard know who might be the Adam who composed a setting of *De tous biens plaine*. It would probably be far-fetched to assume that his name was a corruption or misreading of Aliamus—in which case he might have been Aliamus de Groote, the composer who served as Obrecht's predecessor as choirmaster at St. Donatian's until 1485.[25] Adam's two-part arrangement of *De tous biens playne* makes a valiant effort to incorporate some arcane proportions, especially the rare *quintupla*. Yet it is clear from the piece that he either did not agree with Tinctoris, or, more probably, had not properly read or understood his treatise on proportions. The arrangement lasts no more than about half a minute, being based on only the first half of the song tenor, after which Adam had presumably exhausted the extent of his knowledge of proportions. The presence of Alexander Agricola need not be surprising, if we recall that he is the probable author of *Cecus non judicat*, which existed by 1476 and was apparently associated with the Fernandes brothers.

This leaves us, finally, with Jacob Obrecht. I think it is unlikely that Jacob Obrecht would have gone out of his way to follow Tinctoris's theory to the letter—something he did in no other work—unless he expected the theorist to see and hear the piece, and more importantly, to approve of it. An encounter at Bruges, some time around 1480, is one possibility, though of course it is just as conceivable that Obrecht sent his work as a gift to Tinctoris. Either way, the existence of the *Regina celi*, and the flattering theoretical gesture which it represents, might go some way towards explaining one of the most curious pieces of evidence about Obrecht's early biography. This is the reference which Tinctoris makes to Obrecht in the *Complexus effectuum musices*, in the course of an elaborate eulogy of composers who have won glory by their creative accomplishments:[26]

> In our time we have experienced how very many musicians have been endowed with glory. For who does not know John Dunstable, Guillaume Dufay, Gilles Binchois, Johannes Ockeghem, Antoine Busnoys, Johannes Regis, Firminus Caron, Jacob Carlier, Robert Morton, Jacob Obrecht? Who does not accord them the highest praises, whose compositions, spread throughout the whole world, fill God's churches, kings' palaces, and private men's houses, with the utmost sweetness? I say nothing of the very many distinguished musicians who have been presented with outstanding wealth and dignities, for although they have obtained honours from them, these are not at all to be compared with the immortal fame that the first composers have prolonged for themselves. The former belongs to fortune, but the latter to virtue. Whence Vergil, in the tenth book of the Aeneid, 'Each has his appointed day; short and irretrievable is the span of life for all; but to prolong fame by deeds—that is the task of virtue.

The prologue to the treatise indicates that it was completed by 1475, which seems implausibly early for Obrecht, since he was at that time probably in his late teens. If we assume, on the basis of the Segovia manuscript, that Obrecht and Tinctoris met each other in Bruges around 1480, then the theorist's remark could make better sense if it

[24] Jon Banks, 'Performing the Instrumental Music in the Segovia Codex', in *Early Music* 27 (1999), 294-309.
[25] The name Aliamus comes from the Flemish saint Adelinus or Adelermus of Étival (St. Alleaume in French), who died in 1152 and was venerated in the diocese of Le Mans.
[26] Johannes Tinctoris, *Complexus effectuum musices* (c. 1474-75), ch. 19; *Opera theoretica*, vol. 2, 176-77.

Table 2. Tinctoris, *Complexus effectuum musices*, hypothetical reconstruction of its genesis, with examples of the seventh and thirteenth effects (see *The Crisis of Music*, 53-54, 63-66, 189-91).

A (1460s) T. copies seven effects, along with scriptural and patristic citations, from Humbert of Romans, *Expositio regulae*.	→	**B** (c. 1470) **Cambrai Version.** Number of effects is expanded from eight to twenty-seven, but text is still only a chapter.	→	**C** (c. 1472–75) **Naples Redaction 1.** Effects reduced to twenty, and the treatise, now self-contained, is "classicized" by the addition of new citations and a prologue.	→	**D** (after c. 1475) **Naples Redaction 2.** Two polemical afterthoughts added in Chapters 13 and 19.
Item, tristitiam malam depellit. Glossa super illo verbo Jac. 5: Tristatur aliquis vestri, etc.: Crebra psalmodiae dulcedo nocivae tristitiae pestem depellit; ideo dicit David, Ps. 70: "Exultabunt labia mea, ed est, ita replebor gaudio quod in labiis apparebit, cum cantavero tibi."		Quintodecimo: Tristitiam depellit. Iacobus: Tristatur aliquis uestrorum; oret equo animo et psallat. Hinc Augustino teste [*Conf.* IX. vii. 15]: "Hymni et psalmi ut canerentur secundum morem orientalium partium (ne populus meroris tedio contabesceret) ab occidentalibus institutum est."		Septimus effectus est: Musica tristitiam depellit. Unde Jacobi capitulo quinto: "Tristatur aliquis vestrum? oret. Aequo animo [est]? psallat." Hinc de Polyphemo Vergilius in tertio libro *Aeneidos* ait: "Solamenque mali de collo fistula pendet." Et quoniam in amore plurimum tristitiae accidit, hanc musica quodam innato solamen depellere solet. Unde idem Vergilius de Orpheo tristi propter absentiam Euridicis quam flagranter amabat, proprio instrumento se consolante in quarto libro *Georgicorum* sic inquit: "Ipse cava solans aegrum testudine amorem Te, dulcis coniunx, te solo in litore secum, Te veniente die, te decendente canebat."		

Table 2. (continued)

A (1460s)		B (c. 1470)		C (c. 1472–75)		D (after c. 1475)
T. copies seven effects, along with scriptural and patristic citations, from Humbert of Romans, *Expositio regulae*.	→	**Cambrai Version.** Number of effects is expanded from eight to twenty-seven, but text is still only a chapter.	→	**Naples Redaction 1.** Effects reduced to twenty, and the treatise, now self-contained, is "classicized" by the addition of new citations and a prologue.	→	**Naples Redaction 2.** Two polemical afterthoughts added in Chapters 13 and 19.
		Nono: Homines letificat. Vt enim Museus ait, hominibus cantare delectabilissimum est, propter quod in conuentus ac deductiones rationabiliter ipsam assumunt musicam, tamquam potentem letificare [Moerbeke trans.]		Tertiusdecimus effectus est: Musica homines letificat. Namque, prout refert Aristoteles, in octavo *Politicorum*, "museus ait esse hominibus delectabilissimum cantare propterea quod in conventus et deductiones rationabiliter assumunt ipsum tamquam potentem letificare"; …		… et 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. Interius quidem virtute intellectiva qua intelligit debitam compositionem ac pronunciationem et exterius potentia auditiva, qua percipit concordantiarum dulcedinem. Tales autem sunt solum qui de ipsa musica vere judicare delectarique possunt; propterea quod philosophus, in 8º *Politicorum*, consulit juvenibus …

were written after that date rather than five years previously. But how do we reconcile this with the date given in the prologue?

At this point it is worth summarizing some new findings regarding the textual history of the *Complexus effectuum musices*.[27] Tinctoris, it has recently turned out, borrowed seven of his effects, along with their supporting citations, verbatim from a thirteenth-century text—the Commentary on the Rule of St. Augustine by Humbert of Romans, fifth Master-General of the Dominican Order. This discovery has interesting implications. As Ronald Woodley pointed out twenty-five years ago, there is a much shorter version of the *Complexus* which survives in a manuscript at Cambrai.[28] In this Cambrai manuscript it is part of a collection of excerpts said to be from Tinctoris's treatise *De inventione et usu musicae*. More specifically, this version of the *Complexus* is said there to constitute chapter 5 of book 1 of that treatise. Since *De inventione et usu musicae* was printed in the early 1480s, Woodley naturally concluded that Tinctoris must have revised and abridged the *Complexus* for inclusion in this later treatise. In other words, the Cambrai version represents a later adaptation of the original treatise.

Yet the new evidence suggests exactly the opposite. All the effects borrowed from Humbert are in the Cambrai version, in readings that are actually closer to Humbert's original than those we find in the *Complexus* as we now have it. Unlike the latter version, moreover, the Cambrai version contains hardly any quotations from classical authors (the chief exception being Horace's *Ars poetica*), and it seems to reflect the state of Tinctoris's learning *before* he went to Naples in the early 1470s.

I am led to propose, therefore, that the Cambrai text, as yet only a chapter, represents an early draft of what was later to become a treatise in its own right, one furnished with a prologue and generously spiced with nuggets of humanist erudition. The implication is that the treatise of which this early chapter was said to be a part, *De inventione et usu musicae*, was more or less complete at an early stage of Tinctoris's career, probably before he moved to Naples in the early 1470s. It was there that he decided to parcel it up into separate publications, and published the impressive series of treatises as we know it today. This would tie in with what Tinctoris writes about one of the first treatises published at Naples, the *Proportionale musices*, namely, that it had gestated in him a long time before publication.[29] It also ties in with the fact that when he finally did publish a treatise under the name of *De inventione et usu musicae*, in the early 1480s, it consisted only of excerpts—presumably all that was left after the remainder of the treatise had been raided for publication in other contexts.

In the case of the *Complexus*, therefore, we may now postulate at least three chronological layers, illustrated in Table 2. The first layer consists of the borrowings from Humbert, and basically represents an act of unabashed plagiarism. The second layer is the Cambrai version, as yet only a chapter, in which the number of effects is expanded from seven to twenty-seven, but in which Tinctoris has little to offer in the way of humanist learning. The third layer is the treatise as we have it, dedicated by 1475, in

27 See Rob C. Wegman, 'Tinctoris's *Magnum Opus*', in *Uno gentile et subtile ingenio: Studies in Renaissance Music in Honour of Bonnie Blackburn*, ed. M. Jennifer Bloxam, Gioia Filocamo, and Leofranc Holford-Strevens (Turnhout, 2009), 771-82.

28 Ronald Woodley, 'The Printing and Scope of Tinctoris's Fragmentary Treatise "De inventione et vsv mvsice"', in *Early Music History* 5 (1985), 239-68.

29 In the Prologue to *Liber de natura et proprietate tonorum* (1476); see Tinctoris, *Opera theoretica*, vol. 1, 66.

which the number of effects is reduced to twenty, but the number of supporting citations is greatly expanded: it now includes references to Quintilian, Cicero, and Vergil, as well as more Horace, St. Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas.

In *The Crisis of Music* I have argued that there is in fact a fourth layer, consisting of two apparent afterthoughts in chapters 13 and 19.[30] The principal reason why these two passages seem to represent later insertions is that they contradict the main thrust of the treatise, and appear to have been written in response to debates that had little to do with the doctrine of musical effects as such. The important point to note here is that it is in one of these apparent afterthoughts, in the fourth and final textual layer of the *Complexus*, that Obrecht's name is mentioned. Ronald Woodley once suggested, on the basis of the Cambrai manuscript, that Tinctoris revised and abridged the *Complexus* in the early 1480s. I am now suggesting the opposite: that Tinctoris revised and expanded the treatise at this time, adding amongst others the paragraph quoted earlier. It reflects what I take to have been a personal encounter with the young composer at Bruges around 1480.

By now I have been piling hypothesis upon hypothesis, and perhaps it is time to leave the resulting edifice for what it is. Let us therefore return, in the third and final part of this essay, to that other edifice of hypotheses, Obrecht's alleged stint as choirmaster at Utrecht in the late 1470s.

There is no reason to doubt, I think, that Erasmus was once a chorister at Utrecht cathedral. Yet I am no longer convinced that Obrecht ever worked as a musician in that town. Admittedly the situation is made more confusing by some indications that Obrecht may have taught others at Utrecht. In 1953 the French historian Augustin Renaudet stated that Obrecht had been the musical teacher in Utrecht of the reformer Jan Mombaer of Brussels.[31] Of the sources he cited for this claim, none specifically mention Obrecht as a choirmaster at Utrecht.[32] It cannot be ruled out that Renaudet was perhaps relying on some other source which he failed to report in his footnotes—or else made the inference from what he understood to be Erasmus' apprenticeship with Obrecht.

However that may be, the chief problem with the Utrecht scenario, to my mind, is the word *puer* used by Glarean. Since Erasmus was born around 1466 or 1467, this word more or less sets a *terminus ante quem* for his apprenticeship with Obrecht around 1483 or 1484. But if we let go of the word *puer*, and see it as perhaps an assumption on Glarean's part, then other possibilities may open up. Glarean tells us that Obrecht was the *praeceptor* of Erasmus, yet this is a very loose term. For example, Glarean also claims that Gaffurius was his teacher in music, even though he confesses that he had never

[30] Wegman, *The Crisis of Music*, 63-66.

[31] Augustin Renaudet, *Préforme et humanisme à Paris pendant les premières guerres d'Italie (1494-1517)* (Paris, 1953), 219: '…Jean Mombaer, qu'on appelait aussi, du nom de sa ville natale, Jean de Bruxelles. Tout enfant, à l'école-cathédrale d'Utrecht, il avait appris la grammaire, et, sous la direction d'Obrecht, la musique d'église.'

[32] See, for example, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. lat. 15049, fol. 41r, which confirms that Mombaer learned to sing plainchant at Utrecht, but not that his teacher was Obrecht: 'ante religione ingressus musicen peritus in ecclesia Traiectense choralia extitit'. (I am most grateful to Dr. Jeanice Brooks, who kindly procured photos of the relevant section of this manuscript for me.) The same is true of Jean-Noël Paquot, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire littéraire des dix-sept provinces des Pays-Bas*, 3 vols. (Leuven, 1765), vol. 1, 311: 'Qui se trouve aussi nommé *Momburnus*, ou *Mamburnus*, ou enfin *Joannes de Bruxellâ*, parce qu'il étoit natif de *Bruxelles*, fut envoyé dans son enfance à *Utrecht*, & élevé dans la Cathèdrale de cette ville, où il apprit la Grammaire, & le chant Grégorien. Ces premières études finies, il prit l'habit de Chanoine-Régulier au *Mont-Ste-Agnès*, (fameux monastère près de *Swolles*, dont *Thomas à Kempis* a écrit l'histoire,) & fut ensuite chargé de diffèrens emplois dans la congrègation de *Windesem*, où la discipline étoit alors dans un état très-florissant.'

actually met the man in person.[33] So it is possible, at least in principle, to suggest a less direct relationship between Obrecht and Erasmus, evolving perhaps through correspondence and isolated encounters. Both men had close connections with Bergen op Zoom. Obrecht began his career there in 1480, and returned to the city later in life. He seems to have been on excellent terms with the Lord of Bergen op Zoom, Jan van Glimes, who presented him with a gift when he said his first mass. In 1484 Obrecht left Bergen op Zoom for Cambrai, and it is hard not to see this as the result of Lord Jan's patronage: the brother of Jan van Glimes was Henry of Bergen, bishop of Cambrai.[34] Eight years later, long after Obrecht had left Cambrai, Erasmus became Henry's personal secretary, and remained in his service for three years. He even wrote his *Antibarbari* while staying at Bergen op Zoom, and in fact the entire dialogue is set in that town. One of Erasmus's correspondents in the 1490s was Jacob Batt, schoolmaster of Bergen op Zoom, who is one of the interlocutors in the *Antibarbari*. Their correspondence continued throughout the late 1490s, when Obrecht himself was active as a singer in the local collegiate church of St. Gertrude.

None of this proves anything, of course, but it suggests, at least, that there were plenty of opportunities for informal contact. It is worth mentioning one possible reason why Erasmus might have cultivated a connection with Obrecht, and might even have worked with him on aspects of mensural theory. If any man had been a role model for Erasmus in his early years, it was the Dutch humanist Rudolph Agricola. Agricola was not only an internationally famous scholar, but a supremely accomplished musician. In the last years of his life, he had maintained a correspondence with the composer Jacob Barbireau—who in fact was Obrecht's predecessor at the Church of Our Lady in Antwerp.[35] This correspondence circulated widely, and Erasmus may well have come across it. His admiration for Agricola, and the latter's references to his own music making, must have brought home a painful realization: Erasmus's own experience in music amounted to little more than one or two years of frustration spent as a choirboy in Utrecht.

For a man who was acutely conscious of the inadequacies in his schooling, here was yet another embarrassing deficiency. He was a failed choirboy, with a very feeble voice, and whatever he had learned in Utrecht must have been quickly forgotten. Yet Erasmus was not lacking in energy and determination when it came to making up for such deficiencies, with or without the help of teachers. So I am inclined to dismiss the Utrecht scenario, and to assume that Erasmus made the effort to learn about music theory at a later stage of his life, perhaps in the mid-1490s, before his move to Paris. By that time, Obrecht had written enough music for Erasmus to admire the composer for his *copia*, his *maiestas*, and perhaps his *mediocritas*. In fact, it is in 1496 that another Dutch humanist, Matthaeus Herbenus, praised Obrecht for his sensitive text treatment in *Salve crux* and *Haec deum celi*.[36]

33 Glareanus, *Dodekachordon*, 91: 'Franchinus et Dominus Erasmus Roterodamus alter mutus, alter uocalis mihi doctor… Franchinum sane nunquam uidi.'

34 Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 79-85.

35 Elly Kooiman, 'The Letters of Rodolphus Agricola to Jacobus Barbirianus', in *Rodolphus Agricola Phrisius 1444-1485: Proceedings of the International Conference at the University of Groningen, 28-30 Oct. 1985*, ed. Fokke Akkerman and Arie Johan Vanderjagt, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 6 (Leiden, 1988), 136-46.

36 Matthaeus Herbenus, *De natura cantus ac miraculis vocis*, ed. Joseph Smits van Waesberghe, Beiträge zur rheinischen Musikgeschichte 22 (Cologne, 1957), 58-59; see also the translation in *The Crisis of Music*, 175-77.

It also means that we can take Rhenanus at his word: Erasmus *was* a choirboy at Utrecht for a couple of years, but he left for Deventer at the age of about eight or nine—well before Obrecht's career had even started. Erasmus probably remembered little of what he learned in the choir school, but by the 1490s he may have developed a new interest in musical issues, one that must have been driven by genuine intellectual curiosity; and in Obrecht he found a composer willing to nourish that interest. Although Erasmus could not bring himself to admit it publicly, Obrecht apparently represented for him the ideal of moderation which he found so patently lacking in the church music of the 1510s and beyond. In this respect he may have been influenced by Herbenus, who had praised Obrecht for the same reason.

What is the upshot of all this? It is worth noting a suggestive parallel in the scenarios suggested here. Early on in his career, Obrecht seems to have made enough of an impression on one avowed humanist, the music theorist Tinctoris, for the latter man to extol him as a composer who had earned immortal glory. Some time later, as I have suggested, he made enough of an impression on another humanist, Erasmus, for the latter to remember him proudly as his erstwhile teacher in music. And yet, it seems odd that neither connection suggests a particular interest in humanism on the part of Obrecht himself. In both cases, the only knowledge we positively know to have been exchanged was of a specifically music-theoretical nature: proportions in the case of Tinctoris, note-values in that of Erasmus. Neither does Obrecht's biography suggest that his literary education went much beyond that of the typical fifteenth-century choirmaster, or that he was especially well-connected with humanists in any of the places where he lived and worked. Even the connection with Erasmus, as the humanist himself confirmed, involved him as a teacher in music rather than a friend or equal—as in the case of Rudolph Agricola and Barbireau. Still, in his capacity as teacher in music, Obrecht does seem to have imparted something of value to the Dutch humanist. Between his traumatic experience as a chorister and the almost equally traumatic experience he had at Canterbury, there was one man who not only gave him an abiding appreciation of music as a branch of knowledge, but whose works showed him by example what the best church music could sound like. That was no small accomplishment.

Abstract

The biographical connection between Obrecht and Erasmus, attested to by Glarean and Rhenanus, remains problematic: there is no easy way to read either the composer's or the humanist's career in such a way as to allow for a musical apprenticeship during the years of Erasmus's youth. However, renewed scrutiny of the pertinent evidence brings to light a number of considerations that appear to strengthen the possible ties between Obrecht and Erasmus, and that make the figure of Johannes Tinctoris loom large in this picture as well. The search is on for a plausible scenario that can take account of these considerations.