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Sense and sensibility in late-medieval music

Thoughts on aesthetics and 'authenticity'

In memoriam Frits Noske

> Who does not accord them the highest praises, whose compositions, spread throughout the whole world, fill God's churches, the palaces of kings, the houses of private individuals, with the utmost sweetness [*dulcedo*]? (E, xix.8)[1]
>
> Almost all these men's works are so perfumed with sweetness [*suavitudo*] that in my opinion at least they are to be considered most worthy not only for men and demigods, but even for the immortal gods themselves. And what is more, indeed, I never hear or examine [them] but I come away more joyful and more learned ... (C, Prologus 17–18)
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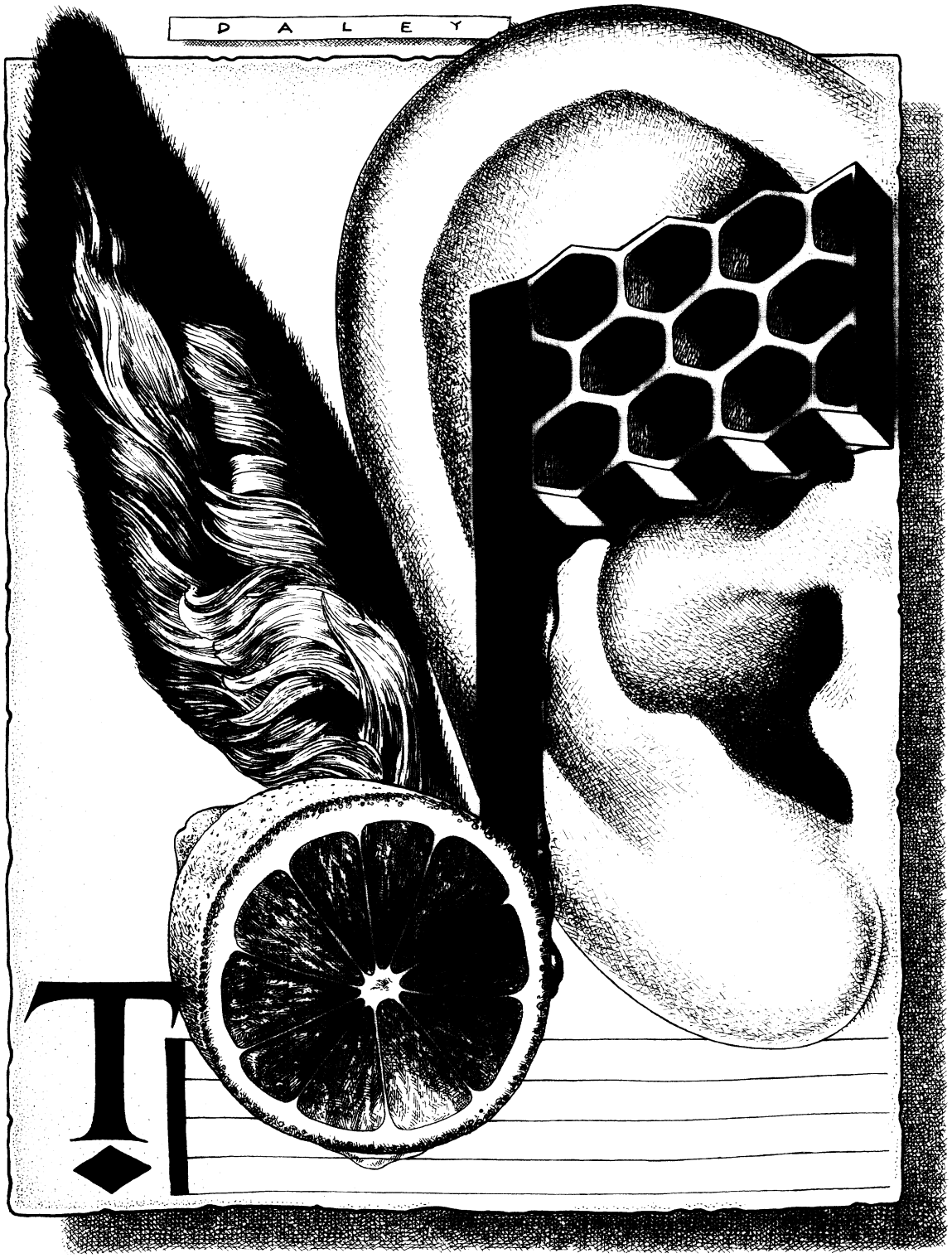
> But alas! I wonder not only at these but even at many other famous composers, for, while they compose so subtly and ingeniously with incomprehensible sweetness [*suavitas*], I have known them to be entirely ignorant of musical proportions or to signify wrongly those few that they do know. (P, Prologus 13)

For all their exalted imagery and hyperbole, Johannes Tinctoris's appraisals of the foremost composers of his time were probably as genuinely felt as anything he ever wrote. For, as the third statement quoted above already indicates, the theorist was as candid in condemnation as in praise, and in fact he voiced rather more of the former than of the latter. Most of the men whose works he praised so generously—Dunstable, Binchois, Dufay, Okeghem, Busnoys, Regis, Caron, Faugues—repeatedly had their wrists slapped elsewhere in his writings, often on notational slips that would hardly seem worth bothering about. It is only on rare occasions that the theorist leaves technical matters aside and makes qualitative judgements about their music. Then his words can be filled with a sense of enthusiasm and excitement that suggests a deep intensity of musical experience—one that we may perhaps recognize.

Sadly, however, Tinctoris makes no attempt to elaborate his critical standards in the methodical fashion that usually typifies his writing. His enthusiastic outpourings seem to cry out for amplification. How, for a start, did he value his musical sensations in the framework of musical understanding as a whole? What qualities did he look for in contemporary composition? Does the listener need to develop an ear for those qualities, or do they communicate themselves immediately to the ear? Should they be emphasized in performance, or are they inherent in the music itself?

Despite being associated with an English choral foundation (New College, Oxford), Rob Wegman neither experienced the 'English discovery' nor subscribes to the theory that there is one.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It can be dangerous to blame medieval authors for not answering questions that concern us today. Often their silence *is* the answer, or at least a more important one than the indirect and ambivalent statements that we might extract through close (and easily prejudiced) reading. Such silence may remind us that musical aesthetics and criticism, as social and intellectual activities, are typical phenomena of the 19th century—as is, indeed, musicology itself. To some extent, then, the questions we raise and the answers we expect may well reflect cultural assumptions of which we are hardly aware, and which it ought to be our task to become aware of.

On the other hand, it is possible also to swing to the other end, and to deny or belittle the importance of aesthetic experience to medieval musicians. This would be to invert a prejudice while reiterating its underlying premises. Tinctoris may not speak about his musical experiences very often, but when he does it is in terms which suggest that he valued them highly. He may not share our particular aesthetic assumptions (and it would indeed be dangerous to project them on his writings), but he could hardly have written about music without expressing some of his own. It is those assumptions—often implicit and appealed to as self-evident—that we should seek to discover beneath the technical surface of his writings.

This is not a straightforward task. As I shall suggest in this essay, we may often be standing too close to Tinctoris to recognize that his assumptions are sometimes different from ours. Our musical culture has inherited so much from the 15th century (something that would be more obvious to a non-Western observer than to us) that the recognizable often leaps into the eye and keeps the unfamiliar from sight. This is true, for instance, of transcriptions into modern score notation. Claims that such transcriptions are 'faithful to the original notation' usually mean faithful to what is recognizable, since the unfamiliar has nearly always been adapted or removed (for instance, notation in parts, alteration, proportion, ligatures, mensural relationships and so on). But it is equally true of counterpoint, which is taught today as a dead language, a system of rules that must be obeyed for their own sake, irrespective of our aesthetic sensibility (which tolerates transgressions from those rules in very many compositions). Consequently, in a treatise like Tinctoris's *Liber de arte contrapuncti* the rules leap to the eye, since they are familiar as rules, but the aesthetic judgements that are made to support them seem hardly worth taking seriously (at least not as *aesthetic* judgements). At first sight, then, the treatise seems to express a fundamentally technical and theoretical outlook, because that is what is most recognizable about it today.

Tinctoris's manner of writing may also be to blame, however. In typical scholastic fashion he attempts to give the art of counterpoint an objective status, by appealing to 'the judgement of the ears', and constructing a rational framework of rules on that empirical foundation. Yet since we regard medieval counterpoint as one of many possible musical worlds (late Romantic harmony or early 20th-century primitivism being others), and aim to cultivate an aural sensitivity to all of them, the claim to objective status obviously undermines his credibility today. That problem is compounded by Tinctoris's professed adherence to logic and consistency, principles which can only seem to remove him further from aesthetic experience—however much they might have enhanced his credibility in his own time. Rather than trying to account for the aesthetic, it seems, the theorist pulls it through a narrow channel of naïve empiricism, in order to legitimize a system of rules that was never really in question.

It seems to me that this impression is misleading, due more to our expectations, and Tinctoris's evident failure to live up to them, than to the treatise itself. Before this claim can be substantiated, however, it will be necessary to show why the question of the aesthetic should lead us to counterpoint at all. For this we need to return to the three indubitably aesthetic statements quoted at the beginning of this essay. As the reader will have noticed, each of these statements emphasizes the same quality in contemporary music: its 'sweetness', its *suavitudo*, *suavitas* and *dulcedo*. That could hardly be coincidence: surely the key to Tinctoris's musical sensibility should lie in some understanding of what is 'sweet' in 15th-century polyphony. Yet it is difficult, at least on a first reading, to regard these key words as more than poetic clichés. 'Sweetness', after all, is not a

technical term. It is a quality that almost every generation in the late Middle Ages perceived as worth pursuing (for instance, in plainchant), and not infrequently found wanting in the music of previous generations.

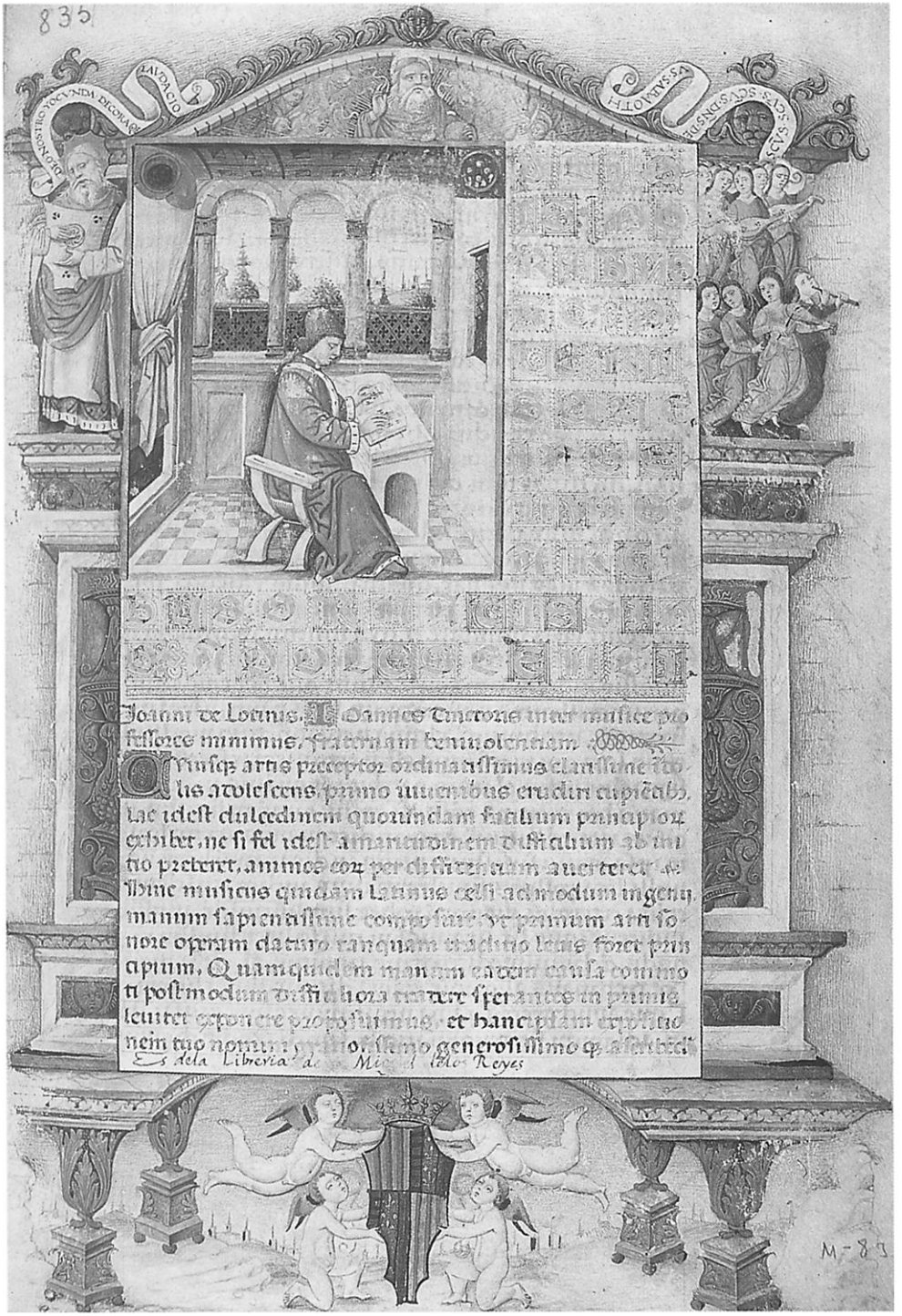
In Tinctoris's writings, 'sweetness' can be the quality of a musical instrument, or of a vocal performance, but is most often associated with consonance (*concordantia*). Since it is only in this respect that a written composition might have been 'perfumed with sweetness', it would seem that his primary sensibility was to consonant sound. This is a quality for which we find several terms in his work, but unfortunately these are too vague to clarify the concrete meaning of 'sweetness'. In the dictionary of musical terms, for instance, we find the words *euphonia* and *melodia*, which are synonymous with *armonia*: 'a certain pleasantness caused by agreeable sound'. *Symphonia* is likewise synonymous with *concordantia*, which is 'a mingling of diverse sounds sweetly agreeable to the ears'. Take the two descriptions together, and any word can be substituted by any other—as indeed the theorist comes close to admitting himself (**C**, I.ii.3).

Not surprisingly, then, Tinctoris tends to use these terms (with the obvious exception of *concordantia*) in a non-technical, often philosophical sense. Only rarely do we find them applied as critical standards, that is, to evaluate the quality of a particular work or a particular performance. A Mass by Pasquin is described in the *Proportionale* as being 'devoid of all *ars* and *melodia*' (**P**, I.vi.21). Yet apart from two brief examples cited there nothing of the work survives, and consequently we can only guess at the criteria on which this verdict was based. Similarly, to sing the Gloria of Domarto's *Missa Spiritus almus* at twice the normal tempo would cause 'a difficulty of performance and indeed a destruction of the whole *melodia* because of the excessive speed' (**P**, III.iii.10). This statement, too, does not take us much further. In the nave of a medieval church the acoustic effect of the musical play with consonances (*melodia*) is clearly sensitive to speed; it would probably take much less than a doubling to cause the kind of destruction of which Tinctoris speaks.

Yet if the theorist seems ambiguous about the aesthetic qualities of individual works and performances, he can be quite specific about the musical sensibility of the listener. As we have seen in the second statement, he declares that hearing and examining contemporary compositions almost invariably made him 'more joyful and more learned'. We do not know how Tinctoris went about examining musical works, and to what purpose, but it is clear from several of his treatises (particularly the *Proportionale*) that he had an extremely sharp memory for the rarest and tiniest notational slips in the contemporary repertory. As for hearing, the word 'more joyful' (*laetior*) must have been carefully chosen, for one of the effects that Tinctoris attributed to music was indeed 'to make men joyful' (*homines laetificare*; **E**, Prologus 13). And it is in elaborating this point, in the 13th chapter of the *Complexus effectuum musices*, that he finally offers some insight into his aesthetic sensibility.

The central point made in this chapter is that the consonances which offer sensuous delight to the ears represent only the 'outwardly perceived' nature of music. Although they may provoke a certain joyfulness, that joyfulness is limited if the listener does not simultaneously appreciate the 'inwardly perceived' nature of music, which is 'proper composition and performance' (**E**, xiii.6). Only such understanding enables him to take true delight in a musical work, and to pronounce considered judgement on its quality. We need not doubt that Tinctoris is speaking partly from his own experience here. The aural delight that he experienced as a choirboy would certainly have deepened as he matured as a professional musician. It was only through constant study and effort (the necessity of which he emphasizes in nearly every treatise) that he had become like those who grasp music 'both outwardly and inwardly'. This may explain his several quotations from Aristotle's *Politics* on the importance of music in the education of the young (**E**, xiii.3, 7–8, 13).

If the outwardly perceived nature of music is represented by the words *armonia*, *melodia* and *euphonia* ('a certain pleasantness caused by agreeable sound'), the inwardly perceived nature is summed up by the word *ars*, a concept whose overtones range from artfulness and skill to learning. The modern inclination might be to distinguish them as aesthetic and technical: the sensuous perception of sonorities



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

is contrasted with the mental appreciation of formal properties and performance skills. If Tinctoris regarded the former as little better than savouring honey on the palate (or, indeed, worse, since sounds do not even provide physical nourishment), the latter reaches well beyond the senses, and touches nothing less than the innermost core of human being, the immortal soul.

Yet what do we know about these two sides of the same coin? How do they relate to our own aesthetic experience of 15th-century music? Is sensuous perception mere hedonistic self-indulgence, a passive revelling in sounds for their own sake? Is understanding and appreciation a purely cerebral exercise, yielding an intellectual delight similar to that offered by a game of chess? Is that what Tinctoris means when he appears to say that examining contemporary music almost invariably makes him more learned (inward), and hearing it more joyful (outward)? If so, his insistence on appreciating the music 'inwardly' would certainly confirm modern preconceptions about the scholastic understanding of music. As Christopher Page put it in his recent book *Discarding images: reflections on music and culture in medieval France* (Oxford, 1993), p.xxii:

> Medieval ways of describing the materials and effects of the 'arts', music among them, have a tendency to carry the discussion of artistic materials no further than basic matters of form and structure, and their language of praise, like the things which they can identify for praise, are governed by convention. In some cases ... it is clear that we shall form a very distorted impression of medieval susceptibilities to art if we found our judgements upon what medieval writers themselves declare. Musicologists are particularly vulnerable in this regard since very little medieval writing has yet been discovered which records a personal or impressionistic reaction to music.

One can recognize the problem in Tinctoris. He identifies 'sweetness' for praise, yet however personal and impressionistic his praises may be, the word itself seems little more than an empty poetic convention, and the theorist moreover prefers the inwardly perceived nature of music, in which basic matters of form and structure would surely have dominated.

Still, it is not certain that the problem should be understood in quite such oppositional terms—even if the inward/outward distinction goes back to Tinctoris himself. For it is clear from his writings that the two natures of music are distinct only to listeners who cannot appreciate them simultaneously, that is to say: who are sensitive to one but not the other. What he advocates is a kind of appreciation in which inward and outward have collapsed into a single experience, an experience that can only be described as integrally aesthetic. This is suggested already by his negative judgements. Pasquin's lost Mass, as we have seen, was deficient with respect to both *ars* (inward) and *melodia* (outward). So, too, were old compositions, for which the theorist had little regard. He spoke scathingly of 'the compositions of ancient musicians in which there were more dissonances than consonances' (C, II.xxiii.3). These works fell short with respect to their outwardly perceived nature, but Tinctoris found their inwardly perceived nature equally deficient:

> And, if I may refer to what I have heard and seen, I have formerly held in my hands several ancient songs of unknown authorship called 'apocrypha', so absurdly, so awkwardly composed [inward] that they much sooner offended the ears [outward] than pleased them. (C, Prologus 14)

Such works were not 'worthy of the hearing', according to the educated, the *eruditi* (C, Prologus 15). In a famous statement Tinctoris adds that he knows no composition older than 40 years that would be worthy of the hearing. If his assertion is to be taken at all literally (the theorist is writing this in 1477), then his sensibility to 'sweetness' and 'proper composition' must have been very subtle indeed. Certainly most of the surviving works by Dunstable and Binchois (composers for whom he had the highest regard) were written before 1437, and the same is true of a substantial part of Dufay's *œuvre*.[2] On a less literal interpretation one might perhaps assume that the 'apocrypha' included works by Vitry, Machaut and composers of the *ars subtilior*. Even then, however, his aesthetic sensibility must have been a great deal more discriminating than ours is today. One needs to read only the programme notes of modern concerts and CDs to realize that by gathering together and appreciating everything as 'medieval', we cultivate a much greater aural tolerance than 15th-century musicians themselves possessed.

Part of the subtlety of Tinctoris's musical sensibility, I suggest, lies precisely in the fact that outward

and inward are not really distinct to him. Let us begin by taking a closer look at the outwardly perceived nature of music, grasped 'with the auditive ability, by which one perceives the sweetness of consonances' (**E**, xiii.6). I have already noted that Tinctoris aspires to empirical objectivity as well as logic and consistency. The basic distinction between consonances and dissonances (as worked out in **C**, I–II) satisfies all these criteria: the former 'please the ears' while the latter 'offend' them. By Tinctoris's own criteria, then, dissonances ought to be banished from all music that would make a credible claim to 'sweetness'. Indeed, if he criticizes the compositions of ancient musicians for containing 'more dissonances than consonances' (**C**, II.xxiii.3), logic and consistency alone would dictate that the relationship be reversed as much as possible. There is, moreover, a moral dimension involved, since Tinctoris compares dissonance to vice (which, I might remind the reader, is to be avoided at all costs), and consonance to virtue (**C**, II.xxx.4). In sum, there is no reason why Tinctoris should not uphold the plain logic of his position, in the way that he is elsewhere prepared to do in the face of universal contrary practice. (See, for instance, his denial of the existence of semiminims on semantic grounds; **P**, I.v.8; **NP**, vii.6.)

Logic gets him into a tight corner here, for of course the central embarrassment of the treatise (at least in its own terms) is that Tinctoris does allow dissonances to be used. He feebly justifies them 'for the sake of ornament and necessity, like reasonable figures [of speech]' (**C**, II.xxxi.2–4), but that is an inconsistent position, and it directly undermines the objective status that he claims for 'sweetness'. Tinctoris clearly attempts to justify an acquired taste for 'offending sounds' that cannot be justified on logical or empirical grounds alone. He qualifies, in other words, the very principles on whose absolute authority he insists when 'ancient' composers qualified them differently. One taste is placed against another.

Yet Tinctoris is forced to abandon logic and consistency already on a much more elementary level of his argument, in the categorization of the musical intervals. To start with, consonance and dissonance are fluid and subjective concepts: not all intervals cause the same aural delight or offence in every situation.[3] The 6th, for instance, is described as a consonance outright, but the ancients classed it as a dissonance, and indeed, 'according to the judgement of my ears it has, heard by itself, that is, alone, more asperity than sweetness' (**C**, I.vii.6; see also I.xii.10). The status of the 4th is even more uncertain: the ancients classed it as 'the first of all consonances', but by itself 'it produces intolerable dissonance'. Although it is therefore 'rejected from counterpoint', it may be used liberally and without preparation in certain conditions, unlike any proper dissonance (**C**, I.v.5–9). The unison is hailed as the 'fount and origin of all consonances', yet according to some it is not an interval at all, and it is in any case 'to be avoided most carefully because of its moderate sweetness', as if it were a dissonance (**C**, I.iii.4, 8).

If we move from this elementary level to the superstructure of rules, we find that there is little or no logical connection between them. Much turns out to depend on scoring and registration. Tinctoris perceives 'only a moderate amount of sweetness' in widely spaced combinations, even though they may be impeccably consonant (**C**, I.xv.8). Much, too, depends on speed. By any logical standard, a note-against-note counterpoint in even note-values involving only consonances would *have* to be 'perfumed with sweetness'. Yet such counterpoint can still be 'completely ridiculous' and 'childish' unless one speeds up the tempo, thereby obtaining a counterpoint 'that affords much sweetness' (**C**, II.xxii.8). Then again, we have seen that too fast a speed may destroy all *melodia* in a well composed work like Domarto's *Missa Spiritus almus*. Similarly, the theorist allows 'short' (literally 'small') dissonances on off-beat moments (**C**, II.xxxi.2–4), but 'short' is obviously relative to the tempo chosen. And since the tempos implied in mensural polyphony are known to have slowed down significantly in the course of the 15th century, one is not surprised to learn that in older works, like the Mass by Domarto, they were not always short enough by the standards of the 1470s (**C**, II.xxix.2). To make things even more complicated, voice-leading and superimpositions of consonances could intensify or mitigate the inherent 'asperity' of intervals like the 6th or 13th (**C**, I.vii.29; I.xii.18, 22).

The upshot of all this is that 'sweetness' was in fact a narrowly circumscribed quality, ultimately

dependent on the supposedly objective distinction between consonance and dissonance, but in addition on speed, spacing, scoring, voice-leading, dissonance treatment, superimpositions of consonances, and various other 'inwardly perceived' aspects that presuppose skill, art and experience on the part of the composer. To balance these aspects judiciously, and to maintain 'incomprehensible sweetness' throughout the course of, say, a four-part Mass, could hardly have been a straightforward task. This may explain why composition, for Tinctoris, was a matter of searching (*exquirere*) as much as discovering (*invenire*). Okeghem, for instance, could be caught transgressing a rule of dissonance treatment in his (lost) *Missa La belle se siet*. Yet he was nevertheless a 'careful seeker-out of sweetness' (*dulcedinis accuratus exquisitor*), and Tinctoris left the matter to the judgement of listeners (C, II.xxxii.5–6).

The line between outward and inward has clearly become diffuse here. The sweetness of polyphony may represent the outwardly perceived nature of music to untutored ears, but it cannot be achieved without full control of music's inwardly perceived nature. Not to recognize this while listening is to get only half the enjoyment out of polyphony. True, the ear may find delight in the sweet sonorities that it offers. Yet without appreciation of the subtle inwardly heard qualities which make that sweetness possible—speed, spacing, scoring, voice-leading, dissonance treatment, superimpositions of consonances—the ear might as well find delight in 'offending' sonorities, as *our* ears do when we listen to Vitry or Machaut. As Tinctoris affirms in another context, 'the sense of hearing is very often fallacious' (T, i.34). On more than one occasion he inveighs against those who, intoxicated by their imperfect aural sensations, praise crude singers above excellent musicians, or prefer calf-like bellowing over angelic song (E, xiii.10; T, i.35). Such listeners might as well have ass's ears (T, i.36). Whoever sings without understanding is like a *bestia*, an animal with ears but without reason (D, 'Musicus'). Similarly, when Tinctoris, in 1481, heard Turkish prisoners-of-war at Naples consoling themselves with music, he considered their 'songs ... in truth so crude and absurd that it alone was quite sufficient to demonstrate their barbarity' (I, IV). Any pleasant sensation provoked by such 'absurd' songs (or by the equally 'absurd' music of ancient composers) could have been no more than a bodily reflex, not guided or enlightened by human reason, let alone being of any profit to the soul.

In terms of our own appreciation and understanding of 15th-century polyphony, the consequences are in some ways disturbing. We may criticize Tinctoris for using 'sweetness' as a mere poetic convention, but he and his contemporaries had a very acute sense of what it meant in terms of actual composition. We do not cultivate their sense today, on the contrary. By absolutely refusing to consider the music of Vitry or Machaut, for instance, as intrinsically better or worse than that of Busnoys or Okeghem we aspire to a historical relativism that, by Tinctoris's standards, can only blunt our sensibility to true sweetness—the very quality he seems to value most in the music of his time. No wonder that his appeals to 'the judgement of the ears' fall on deaf ears (or at least unbelieving ears), and that his treatise on counterpoint strikes us as primarily a technical manual.

Its technical nature may partly lie in the eyes of the modern beholder, however. It is significant, for instance, that 5th and octave parallels, for us, have become the cardinal sins in counterpoint, and clear signs that a composer is lacking in technical skill. Although such parallels often hardly affect the sweetness in four- or five-part contexts (and might not be easily detectable outside the modern score), it seems sufficient to observe that a technical *rule* has been transgressed. Tinctoris, by contrast, is not concerned to berate any composer for using parallel 5ths and octaves, even though he could have found plenty,[4] even in his own examples of good counterpoint (e.g. C, II.xx, bar 3; II.xxiii, bar 12; III.vi, bars 14–15). When he does berate composers for contrapuntal flaws, it is rarely a technical rule that is at issue, but usually the quality of 'sweetness'. And the perceived 'asperities' then tend to be so slight and momentary that we would have scarcely noticed them (C, II.xxix.3; II.xxxii.5–6; II.xxxiii.5–6). The art of counterpoint, for Tinctoris, was not just a matter of avoiding errors (that would have been second nature since his childhood), but of cultivating the most subtle shades of sonority and tone colour.[5]

But what about the inwardly perceived nature of music, grasped by 'the ability of understanding (*virtus intellectiva*), through which one understands proper composition and performance' (E, xiii.6)? We have already observed that such understanding is a precondition for genuine appreciation of 'sweetness'. But it does more than merely enable the ears to discern, and it does not just depend on what they can register. Certain laws of counterpoint 'can hardly be left to the judgement of the ears', such as the necessity of avoiding progressions that dislodge a voice-part from its mode (C, III.v.3). Certainly the sense of modal unity was much more developed in Tinctoris's time than in the early decades of the 15th century. In 1476 he was able to observe that 'out of fifty composed songs, there is scarcely one that does not begin on that place in which it ends' (T, xix.8). Yet in the early decades of the 15th century it would often have been impossible to predict until the last bar on what chord a song would end. (One assumes that Tinctoris had something like this in mind when he spoke of ancient songs being 'absurdly and awkwardly composed'.) There is clearly no 'sweetness' involved here: this is 'proper composition' in the true sense of the word. Yet it is also an acquired taste, grounded in aesthetic experience rather than intellectual dogma.

The same is true of Tinctoris's well known rejection of English music, on the grounds that English composers 'always use one and the same manner of composing, which is a sign of poorest invention', whereas the French 'write new music each day in the newest fashion' (P, Prologus 12). It is not outwardly heard sweetness that is at issue here (this had never been a problem in English music) but the inwardly perceived 'manner of composing'. Tinctoris's *aesthetic* appreciation of compositional novelty recalls his eighth rule of counterpoint, 'which is that variety must be most accurately sought for in all counterpoint' (C, III.viii.2). In the expression 'most accurately sought for' (*accuratissime exquirenda*) one can hear a resonance of the description of Okeghem as a 'careful seeker-out of sweetness' (*dulcedinis accuratus exquisitor*). The expression suggests hard work, and a great deal of patient revision. Indeed, 'a composer or improviser of the greatest talent may achieve this diversity if he composes or sings now by one metre, then by another, now by one perfection, then by another, now by one proportion, then by another, now by one [melodic] interval, then by another, now with off-beat rhythms, then without them, now with imitations, then without them, now with rests, then without them, now in diminution, then unchanged' (III.viii.4). Note that Tinctoris mentions only features that pertain to music's inwardly perceived nature: basic matters of form and structure, which presuppose technical proficiency. And for good measure he adds that 'the highest reason (*summa ratio*) must be adhered to in all these' (III.viii.5). And yet, when true 'diversity of singing' has been achieved in this arduous way, it may 'vehemently provoke the souls of listeners into delight' (III.viii.3). That is a purely aesthetic observation, yet the aesthetic is evidently not based on sensuous perception alone, let alone sweetness.

For us there may emerge an opposition here which Tinctoris seems hardly able to resolve. Is there not an inherent contradiction between hard work, guided by reason, on the one hand, and the vehement aesthetic delight that it causes on the other? What about inspiration or imagination, what about transcending technical constraints and aspiring to a pure aesthetic beauty, that might speak to us directly today? The problem here, of course, is that Tinctoris is not trying to understand his creative and aesthetic experiences in the Romantic terms that he might have used if he had lived today. ('Imagination' and 'inspiration' are such terms, as is the distinction between 'merely technical' and 'purely aesthetic'.) Our first impulse might be to say that scholastic conventions prevented him from doing so. Yet here we run immediately into the problem that the Romantic terms are themselves conventions—indeed rather peculiar ones if one views them in a broader historical or anthropological context. If we say that 'sweetness', at first sight, seems a vague poetic cliché, why would the same not be true of 'inspiration' or 'imagination'? The reason is that the latter conventions are part of contemporary culture, and hence they tend to acquire the same objective status today that Tinctoris perceived in sweetness. Looking carefully for synonyms of our conventions in his writings, we find that he is silent, and that his language of praise seems governed by convention—that is to say: not

governed by *our* convention. Perhaps we are standing too close to his musical culture to realize what would be self-evident to the anthropologist, when he is confronted with

> the oft-heard comment that the peoples of [non-Western] cultures don't talk, or not very much, about art—they just sculpt, sing, weave, or whatever, silent in their expertise. What is meant is that they don't talk about it the way the observer talks about it—or would like them to—in terms of its formal properties, its symbolic content, its affective values, or its stylistic features, except laconically, cryptically and as though they had precious little hope of being understood. But, of course, they do talk about it, as they talk about everything else striking, or suggestive, or moving, that passes through their lives—about how it is used, who owns it, when it is performed, who performs it or makes it, what role it plays in this or that activity, what it may be exchanged for, what it is called, how it began, and so forth and so on. But this tends to be seen not as talk about art, but about something else—everyday life, myths, trade, or whatever.[6]

Against this background, what conclusion should we draw from Christopher Page's observation, cited earlier, that 'very little medieval writing has yet been discovered which records a personal or impressionistic reaction to music'? What has not been discovered, I suggest, is the Romantic conventions that would have made medieval reactions appear personal and impressionistic to us. What we *have* discovered, on the other hand, are the scholastic conventions that so often make medieval reactions appear impersonal and stereotyped.

Conventions always seem limiting to those who do not share them, and enabling to those who do. They provide a framework, a vocabulary, with which to understand, express, value and handle one's inner sensations—just as they seem to distort such sensations to those not used to the conventions. I suggest that Tinctoris's conventions were as enabling to him as Romantic conventions still are to many listeners today. The expression 'careful searching' may now seem to imply a sweat-and-toil understanding of the creative act, yet we need look only at Beethoven's sketchbooks to imagine how 'searching' might have related to 'inspiration'. And 'the highest reason'—at a time when it was not yet distinguished from the deepest inspiration—would certainly have involved notions of taste, judgement and skill as well as calculation. Indeed, the very ideal of 'variety' can only have been inspired by taste and judgement, just as Tinctoris's understanding of 'sweetness' turns out to have involved taste and judgement. Outward and inward cannot be profitably distinguished. For the ideal listener they are fused together in an indivisible union, in a single, integral aesthetic experience.

Sometimes not even a language governed by convention can conceal from us the forcefulness of that experience. Note how Tinctoris, in the early 1480s, described the musical sensations he felt when hearing two bowed viols being played by expert musicians:

> ... a little time ago I heard at Bruges two blind brothers from Flanders, men no less educated in literature than experienced in music, of whom one was called Carolus and the other Johannes, sounding together on this kind of viol, the former the top parts and the latter the tenors of many songs, in so skilled [inward] and so pleasing [outward] a manner, that I have truly never found greater delight in any euphony [*melodia*]. And since the rebec emits melodies as like to those as can be, at least if the player is skilled and experienced, my spirit is roused to a joyfulness [*laetitia*] as similar as possible, by some secret association. [Here, as in T, i.32, Tinctoris refers to Aristotle's *Politics*.] These, therefore, are my instruments. Mine, I say, that is by which among other things my soul is transported to a mood of piety, and which most ardently inflame my heart to the contemplation of the heavenly joys. For that reason I would rather that these instruments were always reserved for sacred things, and for the secret consolations of the soul, than sometimes used for worldly affairs and public feasts. (I, iv)

The conventions that governed Tinctoris's language—*melodia*, *laetitia*, Aristotle's 'secret association', the heavenly joys, the ardently inflamed heart—gave him a voice to express his deepest, innermost musical sensations. We are not the readers to whose aesthetic sensibility he can appeal, nor do his literary conventions always strike a chord with us. Yet it is a consoling thought that we are standing close enough to his world to recognize the sincerity of his experience—which a dogmatic insistence on our own literary conventions could only have denied him.

As far as the present-day enjoyment of 15th-century polyphony is concerned, this is where problems only begin. Do Tinctoris's writings suggest that we must develop a period ear for the music of his time? If so, our ears would have to become

attuned to a very brief period in history (basically the one or two generations after about 1437). They would instinctively have to reject as 'absurdly and awkwardly composed' and 'offending our ears' anything dating from before that period. 'Authentic' appreciation of one CD (say, Gothic Voices' *The castle of fair welcome*, which contains secular music from the 1460s and 1470s) would exclude appreciation of another (say, Gothic Voices' *The mirror of Narcissus*, containing secular music by Guillaume de Machaut, who died in 1377).

This would not necessarily make us more prejudiced than we already are. After all, the assumption that Machaut is intrinsically no worse than Okeghem or Busnoys would probably have been regarded as a strange prejudice by musicians from Tinctoris's time—and they would have *their* aesthetic sensibility on their side. Indeed, the assumption that Machaut, Okeghem and Busnoys invite the same kind of listening as, say, Vivaldi or Shostakovich, seems an even stranger prejudice—without which modern CD culture (with its emphasis on private consumption rather than communal use, and aesthetic egalitarianism rather than historical incompatibility) would scarcely be possible. As Carl Dahlhaus once put it: 'The fact that today's public treats the music of the 18th and 19th centuries as its own is so taken for granted that we scarcely notice just how strange and paradoxical this situation actually is.'[7]

Moreover, an aesthetic sensibility so discerning and critical as to reject even Machaut might well disclose to us an unsuspected richness of sonority, and a supreme subtlety of 'proper composition', in the music of Okeghem and Busnoys. What we lose aesthetically in one area, we might gain in another. Which prejudice do we then prefer: the 'authentic' prejudice against music from before 1437 (or thereabouts), or the anachronistic prejudice of historical relativism, which levels all musical manifestations to a single hi-fi stereo living-room experience in the Western suburb?

Our intuitive response might be to rely on the judgement of our ears. Yet so did Tinctoris, and his aural judgement seemed just as objective to him as ours might appear to us. Which is to say that to develop an ear for music is to acquire a *taste*, a taste which solidifies into a prejudice as soon as we raise it to the level of objective certainty. Moreover, how can we trust the judgement of our ears when modern performances of medieval music already involve the exercise of such judgement? How could we qualify a modern performance as 'good', 'truly inspired' or 'musically sensitive' unless it appealed to criteria of taste that we already presuppose? As Richard Taruskin has persuasively argued, we hear what we wish to hear (and have every right to hear), but to give this modern taste an objective status—for instance, by calling it 'authentic'—is to commit the same fallacy as Tinctoris did when he gave 'sweetness' objective status.[8]

The crucial problem would have been crystal-clear to musicians in Tinctoris's time. Twentieth-century Western culture does not adopt the medieval outlook on society, on the world, on human existence, on the past and future of all creation, yet it uninhibitedly appropriates medieval music for its own aesthetic gratification. Once transplanted, the music is subjected to a number of aesthetic assumptions: it is placed into the category of 'high art music' (which is just as inappropriate as that of pop music or muzak), is stripped from its cultural and historical dimensions in the concert hall and living room, and is finally expected to speak to us directly. This it does, of course, just as Indian ragas might, or Javanese gamelans, if they were subjected to the same cultural processing. So powerful is that delight, so seemingly natural, immediate and objective, that we turn to the past for confirmation of its authenticity. Yet this is what the past cannot give us. At every turn our witnesses tell us that our aesthetic sensations have no objective status, if only because they claim that same status for something quite different. If medieval music cannot resist cultural appropriation, then at least medieval writings can. What they tell us is that we cannot have our cake and eat it.

There are two ways of coming to terms with this message. One was recently adopted by Christopher Page, in the book to which I referred earlier, *Discarding images*. In sheer disappointment we might turn against our witnesses, and accuse them of not telling the truth as we know it: 'in some cases ... it is clear that we shall form a very distorted impression of medieval susceptibilities to art if we found our

judgements upon what medieval writers themselves declare' (p.xxii). Discarding their obstinately resistive statements, we might decide to give objective status to the judgement of our own ears, and to the performances in which we exercise that judgement. This can be phrased as a proposal simply to hear more of what we like to hear: 'sustained exposure to the sound of medieval music contributes to a vital sense of proportion ... not only in the analysis of specific musical details and effects but also in conceiving what the music may have meant' (p.xxiv). This 'vital sense of proportion' (which is in effect no more than a modern taste, firmed up by performances which express that taste) will then seem so objective and authoritative that it may overrule even the sense of proportion that medieval musicians themselves possessed. For a typical example, see p.14:

> It may be true, of course, that Machaut would indeed have explained his art [in terms of the exactitude of its *mesure* and its abstract virtues] to anyone who questioned him; tradition provided him with no other way of being profoundly serious about the sources of musical pleasure and its effects upon the human constitution. He may even have explained his art in those terms to himself. None the less, Machaut's music [as perceived by whom?] leaves no doubt that his sensations when composing [as guessed by whom?] were as indifferent to moral and intellectual persuasions as those of any composer at any period in history [as assumed by whom?] when genuinely engrossed [as arbitrated by whom?].

This process, which is basically an extension of the appropriation described earlier, may then find its final justification in the Enlightenment philosophy of universalism: Page's book 'assumes the existence of a "transhistorical humanness": an appreciable continuity of human thought and feeling from age to age' (p.190). In other words, what empirical evidence persistently denies—what no one less than Machaut himself might deny—we may accept as *a priori* given: that medieval musicians (or any musicians from the past) heard and felt just like us, and that we hear and feel just like them. What emerges is an image of medieval aesthetic sensibility that is recognizable and consoling, since it is basically an image of ourselves.[9]

The other way might be to accept, in Carl Dahlhaus's terms, how paradoxical it really is that our culture treats medieval music as its own. Of course, we have every right to do so, if this gives us aesthetic delight and enriches our culture. But it should scarcely surprise us that there is much about medieval musical culture that resists the transfer, or at least begins to look very odd within our cultural setting. And although our responses to modern performances, within that same setting, may seem natural and spontaneous to us, we can only wonder how odd they might seem if our writings could be transferred back to the Middle Ages. It must be doubtful at the very least whether spontaneous aesthetic sensations in the modern West can reliably inform us about the responses which medieval music elicited, and was meant to elicit, five or six centuries ago. (A similar assumption for Indian or Indonesian music would be laughed out of court.) The modern performance and consumption of early music is not free from cultural interests and pressures, as its rapid commercial growth amply shows, and it would be naïve to suppose that medieval polyphony could convey a wholly 'authentic' meaning unaffected by those circumstances. To assess the damage caused by the transfer (that is to say, to establish what we are doing *to* medieval music) we can only turn to medieval writers themselves, and establish the meanings they perceived when other cultural interests and pressures were in force.

Does that mean acquiring a period ear? That proposal seems inherently absurd: we have our own ears, and we can make good use of them. The answer to having modern aesthetic assumptions is not getting rid of them and adopting 'authentic' ones instead. Why exchange one prejudice for another? The answer is: recognizing them for the assumptions they are, divesting them of their objective status, precisely because other cultures had other assumptions—however odd and governed by convention they may sometimes seem. Only such critical self-awareness might make us better than Tinctoris, who had no ear for Turkish or 'ancient' music (and, by the early 1470s, not even for English music). His is not the 'period ear' we should wish to acquire. The true period ear, I would suggest, is one that listens not only to medieval music (as performed today), but also—and very patiently—to what medieval writers themselves declare about it. It does not seek to adopt their prejudices, but by recognizing them, it might come to recognize its own.

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1 Treatises referred to in this article are: *Liber de natura et proprietate tonorum* (**T**); *Tractatus de notis et pausis* (**NP**); *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (**C**); *Proportionale musices* (**P**); *Diffinitorium* (**D**); *De inventione et usu musicae* (**I**); *Complexus effectuum musices* (E). The treatises are printed in *J. Tinctoris: Opera theoretica*, ed. A. Seay, Corpus Scriptorum de Musica, xxii (American Institute of Musicology, 1975, 1978); *Terminorum musicae diffinitorium*, Documenta Musicologica, series 1: Druckschriften-Faksimiles, xxxvii (Leipzig, 1983); *Johannes Tinctoris (1445–1511) und sein unbekannter Traktat 'De inventione et usu musicae': Historisch-kritische Untersuchung*, ed. K. Weinmann (Tutzing 1961). Upper-case roman numerals refer to books, lower-case roman numerals to chapters, and arabic numerals to lines (as numbered in Seay's edition).

2 If Italian musical sources from the 1470s are anything to go by, the actual sell-by period of polyphony was probably closer to 20 years. Only in exceptional cases are much older pieces found to have been copied in Tinctoris's time.

3 See the excellent discussion in R. L. Crocker, 'Discant, counterpoint, and harmony', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xv (1962), pp.1–21, here pp.4–7.

4 Some of the most glaring parallel 5ths in the 15th-century repertory can be found in the works of Johannes Okeghem. See, for instance, *Missa Caput*, Agnus Dei, bars 25–6; *Missa Au travail suis*, Gloria, bars 108–10; *Salve regina* [I], bars 98–9: *Johannes Ockeghem: Collected works*, ed. D. Plamenac and R. Wexler, 3 vols. (American Musicological Society, 1959–92). All these parallels are in the top two voices, in long note-values, and unmodified rhythmically. Tinctoris takes a permissive, *laissez-faire* view on parallel 5ths and octaves in music for three parts or more; see C, III.ii.3–6.

5 My point here is that Tinctoris's theory of counterpoint, however much it may be indebted to traditional rules and conventions of scholastic disputation, is not free from aesthetic judgements. However, it is possible not only to regard contrapuntal theory as too 'technical', but also as too 'aesthetic'. What I mean is the assumption sometimes made by scholars that counterpoint theory should *shape* the way we hear and appreciate medieval polyphony, that is to say: that we could acquire a 'period ear' if only we could bring ourselves to listen like a counterpoint treatise. This fallacy was already countered by Richard Crocker: '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. The instructions of discant, therefore, do not imply that the listener hears two separate melodies; at most, these instructions imply only that the composer proceeds by combining two melodies' ('Discant, counterpoint, and harmony', p.9).

6 C. Geertz, 'Art as a cultural system', *Local knowledge* (London, *R*1993), pp.97–8.

7 C. Dahlhaus, *Foundations of music history* (Cambridge, 1983), p.63.

8 R. Taruskin, 'The pastness of the present and the presence of the past', *Authenticity and early music*, ed. N. Kenyon (Oxford, 1988), pp.137–208. For an example one might turn to a recent article in *Early music*, xxi (1993), pp.453–71, where authenticity is repackaged basically as an Oxbridge old boys' network: the English *a cappella* practice is praised for its historical verisimilitude—this being 'the English discovery'—and Continental criticism of its current performance style characterized as 'above all an expression of *taste*' (p.463). Although the author notes that the English *a cappella* practice might be 'vigorously independent' of Taruskin's argument (p.468), he is in fact merely reiterating the premises that Taruskin has refuted.

9 As an aside, the assumption of 'transhistorical humanness' in musical experience was not shared by medieval authors, as Tinctoris's rejections of 'ancient' music already indicate. He would probably have regarded 'transhistorical humanness' as a euphemism for original sin: to be human meant nothing more than to be in need of Christ's mercy and God's grace, as administered through the sacraments of the Holy Church. The true ideal was not a shared humanity—which had included Romans, Moslems and many other enemies of the truth—but a shared Christianity. The Enlightenment ideal of universalism is a typical product of a society that appropriates the thoughts and artifacts of other societies while it tries to understand them. Not surprisingly, it was closely allied to imperialism and nationalism in the 19th century.