Johannes Tinctoris and the Art of Listening

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If there is one day in the life of Johannes Tinctoris about which I would love to know more, it is that fateful day, some time around 1480, when he was visiting Bruges and found himself listening to two blind viol players. Tinctoris, at the time, was in his mid-forties, and he had served for almost ten years as the chief musician at the royal court of Naples. During that decade he had published an impressive series of music treatises – treatises that had won him a reputation as the pre-eminent authority on music of his age. Yet for all its intellectual depth and scope, this formidable body of theoretical reflection seems to have left him somehow unprepared for what he was to hear that day in Bruges. All we know about the occasion comes from Tinctoris himself. A few years after the event he published one last treatise, *De inventione et usu musicae* (*c.*1481-83), and it is here that the memory surfaces, in the midst of a long discussion of musical instruments. Without warning, he interrupts his matter-of-fact description of bowed string instruments to share with us a little story from his personal life. Here is what he writes[1]:

'(**1**) Neque preterire in animum venit: quod exiguo tempore lapso: duos fratres Orbos natione Flamingos: viros quidem non minus litteris eruditos quam in cantibus expertos: quorum uni Carolus: alteri Johannes nomina sunt. Brugis audiverim: illum supremam partem et hunc tenorem plurium cantilenarum: tam perite: tamque venuste hujusmodi viola consonantes: ut in ulla nunquam melodia: me profecto magis oblectaverim.	[(**1**) 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 skillfully, and so gracefully, that I truly have never found greater delight in any harmonious sound.
(**2**) Et quia rebecum (si sonitor artifex et expertus fuerit) modulos illis quam simillimos emittat: quibuslibet *affectus spiritus mei (occulta quadam familiaritate)* ad leticiam quam simillime *excitantur*.	(**2**) And since the rebec can produce tunes as similar as possible to those [of the viol], if the player be a craftsman and experienced, *the affections of my spirit (through some hidden kinship) are aroused*, by any [tunes] whatsoever, to joyous delight in as similar as possible a way.

[1] After Karl Weinmann (ed.), *Johannes Tinctoris (1445–1511) und sein unbekannter Traktat 'De inventione et usu musicae'* (Regensburg, 1917), 45-6.

(**3**) Hec itaque duo instrumenta mea sunt. mea inquam: hoc est quibus inter cetera: animus meus ad *affectum pietatis* assurgit: quaeque ad contemplationem gaudiorum supernorum: *ardentissime* cor meum *inflammant*.	(**3**) These two instruments are mine, therefore. 'Mine', I say, that is by which, among other things, my mind rises up to *a feeling of devotion*, and which *most ardently* set my heart *aflame* to a contemplation of the joys on high.
(**4**) Quo mallem ea potius ad res sacras: et secreta animi solamina semper reservari: quam ad res prophanas et publica festa interdum applicari'.	(**4**) Therefore I would prefer to have them reserved always for sacred matters and the private solace of the mind, rather than have them used sometimes for profane matters and public feasts].

The two blind musicians, Johannes and Carolus, have been identified as the brothers Jean and Charles Fernandes. Unfortunately no other contemporary has written about their manner of playing, yet it is clear from documents that they were internationally famous, not only as musicians but as humanist scholars as well. They were in fact prolific writers, and if their collected works were to be printed today, they would probably run into several volumes.[2] Tinctoris's account of the Fernandes brothers and their viol playing is of course well known, and has already invited much scholarly commentary.[3] And yet, although its surface meaning seems clear enough, there is a lot going on beneath the surface of the text – and one of my aims in this paper is to bring out some of those deeper undercurrents of thought.

Take, for example, the words printed in italics: 'the affections of my spirit (through some hidden kinship) are aroused', 'a feeling of devotion', 'most ardently', 'aflame'. In his article 'Reading and Reminiscence: Tinctoris on the Beauty of Music', Christopher Page has pointed out that these are in fact direct borrowings from an old but extremely influential text, the *Confessions* of St Augustine (*Conf.* X. xxxiii). One is reminded of that well-known chapter in Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* in which Adso of Melk recounts how he spent a night of passionate love-making with a beautiful peasant girl, but is unable to describe the experience except by drawing on the language of the *Song of Songs*. For Tinctoris, too, it seems, the performance at Bruges left him

[2] The lives of Jean and Charles Fernandes will be the subject of a forthcoming article provisionally entitled 'The Blind Brothers of Bruges'.

[3] See f.i. Anthony Baines, 'Fifteenth-Century Instruments in Tinctoris's De Inventione et Usu Musicae', *Galpin Society Journal*, 3 (1950), 19-26, at 24-5; Ian Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol* (Cambridge, 1984), 78-9; Christopher Page, 'Reading and Reminiscence: Tinctoris on the Beauty of Music', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 49 (1996), 1-31, at 11-7. For the date of the treatise, see Ronald Woodley, 'The Printing and Scope of Tinctoris's Fragmentary Treatise "De inventione et vsv mvsice"', *Early Music History*, 5 (1985), 239-68.

groping for words that could adequately convey its powerful effect on him, and St Augustine's language found its way into his narrative almost unbidden – or so it would seem. And yet, when we turn to the Church Father's own words, it turns out, paradoxically, that the two texts are completely at odds. St Augustine is talking about the pleasures of the ear, in a longer section devoted to the bodily senses and their perils. His attitude is one of profound ambivalence. Our Church Father admits that music has a powerful effect on him. Indeed it has sometimes moved him to tears. One chant in particular made a deep impression on the Church Father, shortly after his conversion in Milan, the Ambrosian hymn *Deus Creator omnium*. As St Augustine recalls elsewhere in his *Confessions*: 'How I wept during your hymns and songs! I was deeply moved by the music of the sweet chants of your Church. The sounds flowed into my ears and the truth was distilled in my heart. This caused the feelings to overflow. Tears ran, and it was good for me to have that experience'. And yet, the Church Father is also worried, deeply worried, that he is merely indulging in pleasurable sensations, that the sounds of plainchant might charm the ears, but distract from the words on which he feels he ought to focus. For that reason he has sometimes felt that one should do away with singing in church altogether, and just read the words aloud:[4]

'Voluptates aurium tenacius me implicaverant et subjugaverant; sed resolvisti, et liberasti me.
Nunc in sonis quos animant eloquia tua, cum suavi et artificiosa voce cantantur, fateor, aliquantulum acquiesco; non quidem ut haeream, sed ut surgam cum volo. Attamen cum ipsis sententiis quibus vivunt, ut admittantur ad me, quaerunt in corde meo nonnullius dignitatis locum, et vix eis praebeo congruentem.

[The pleasures of the ear had a more tenacious hold on me, and had subjugated me; but you set me free and liberated me.
As things now stand, I confess that I have some sense of restful contentment in sounds whose soul is your words, when they are sung by a pleasant and well-trained voice. Not that I am riveted by them, for I can rise up and go when I wish. Nevertheless, on being combined with the words which give them life, they demand in my heart some position of honour, and I have difficulty in finding what is appropriate to offer them.

[4] St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions, X. xxxiii*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford and New York, 1991), 207-9.

Aliquando enim plus mihi videor honoris eis tribuere quam decet, dum ipsis sanctis dictis religiosius et *ardentius* sentio moveri animos nostros *in flammam pietatis*, cum ita cantantur, quam si non ita cantarentur; et omnes *affectus spiritus nostri* pro sui diversitate habere proprios modos in voce atque cantu, quorum nescio qua *occulta familiaritate excitentur*. Sed delectatio carnis meae, cui mentem enervandam non oportet dari, saepe me fallit, dum rationem sensus non ita comitatur ut patienter sit posterior; sed tantum quia propter illam meruit admitti, etiam praecurrere ac ducere conatur. Ita in his pecco non sentiens, sed postea sentio.

Sometimes I seem to myself to give them more honour than is fitting. *I feel that when the sacred words are chanted well, our souls are moved and are kindled to a flame of piety, more religiously and with a warmer devotion than if they are not so sung. All the diverse emotions of our spirit have their corresponding modes in voice and chant, and are stirred through a mysterious inner kinship*. But my physical delight, which has to be checked from enervating the mind, often deceives me when sense perception is unaccompanied by reason, and not patiently content to be in a subordinate place. It tries to be first and to be in the leading role, though it deserves to be allowed only as secondary to reason. So in these matters I sin unawares, and only afterward become aware of it.

Aliquando autem hanc ipsam fallaciam immoderatius cavens, erro nimia severitate: sed valde interdum, ut melos omne cantilenarum suavium quibus Davidicum Psalterium frequentatur, ab auribus meis removeri velim, atque ipsius Ecclesiae; tutiusque mihi videtur quod de Alexandrino episcopo Athanasio saepe mihi dictum commemini, qui tam modico flexu vocis faciebat sonare lectorem psalmi, ut pronuntianti vicinior esset quam canenti. Verumtamen, cum reminiscor lacrymas meas, quas fudi ad cantus Ecclesiae tuae in primordiis recuperatae fidei meae, et nunc ipso quod moveor, non cantu, sed rebus quae cantantur, cum liquida voce et convenientissima modulatione cantantur, magnam instituti hujus utilitatem rursus agnosco.

Sometimes, however, by taking excessive safeguards against being led astray, I err on the side of too much severity. I have sometimes gone so far as to wish to banish all the melodies and sweet chants commonly used for David's psalter from my ears and remember being often told of bishop Athanasius of Alexandria. He used to make the Reader of the psalm chant with so flexible a speech-rhythm that he was nearer to reciting than to singing. Nevertheless, when I remember the tears which I poured out at the time when I was first recovering my faith, and that now I am moved not by the chant but by the words being sung, when they are sung with a clear voice and entirely appropriate modulation, then again I recognize the great utility of music in worship.

Ita fluctuo inter periculum voluptatis et experimentum salubritatis; magisque adducor, non quidem irretractabilem sententiam proferens, cantandi consuetudinem

Thus I fluctuate between the danger of pleasure and the experience of the beneficent effect, and I am more led to put forward the opinion (not as an irrevocable view) that the custom of singing in Church is to be approved, so that through the

approbare in Ecclesia; ut per oblectamenta aurium infirmior *animus in affectum pietatis assurgat*. Tamen, cum mihi accidit ut me amplius cantus, quam res quae canitur, moveat; poenaliter me peccare confiteor, et tunc mallem non audire cantantem.

delights of the ear the weaker *mind may rise up towards the devotion of worship*. Yet when it happens to me that the music moves me more than the subject of the song, I confess myself to commit a sin deserving punishment, and then I would prefer not to have heard the singer.

Ecce ubi sum: flete mecum, et pro me flete, qui aliquid boni vobiscum intus agitis unde facta procedunt. Nam qui non agitis, non vos haec movent. Tu autem, Domine Deus meus, exaudi; respice, et vide, et miserere, et sana me, in cujus oculis mihi quaestio factus sum, et ipse est languor meus'.

See my condition! Weep with me and weep for me, you who have within yourselves a concern for the good, the springs from which good actions proceed. Those who do not share this concern will not be moved by these considerations. But you 'Lord my God, hear, look and see' [Ps. 12: 4] and 'have mercy and heal me' [Ps. 79: 15]. In your eyes I have become a problem to myself, and that is my sickness].

For St Augustine, it seems, musical sounds are the equivalent of mind-altering drugs. Once you abandon yourself to those sounds, once you relinquish control, you do not know *what* they will end up doing to you. They may move you to tears, but they may also rouse you to violent anger, or cause suicidal despair, or provoke lascivious desire. Like Ulysses before the Sirens, you may find yourself powerless to resist them.

How is it that music can exert such extraordinary power over humans? St Augustine does not claim to have the definitive answer, but his neo-platonist background leads him to suggest one possibility: that there is a mysterious inner kinship between music and the human soul. It is as if music provides direct, sounding counterparts to particular states of mind. Take, for example, the innate human capacity for anger. According to St Augustine's explanation, anger cannot but be provoked by musical sounds that represent anger. That is how the mysterious inner kinship works. Just tune in to a heavy metal station, and before you know it you are chopping the veggies with all the frenzy of a deranged psychopath. Here is how St Augustine himself puts it, in one of the sentences to which Tinctoris later alluded: 'All the diverse *emotions of our spirit* have their corresponding modes in voice and chant, and are stirred through *a mysterious inner kinship* [between them]'. If music is so powerful and so potentially dangerous, then perhaps it would be better not to use it at all. But in the end St Augustine is not so sure. The extraordinary power of music may still be useful in church. For example, he knows from personal experience that scriptural words move him much more deeply *with* musical

tunes than without them. That is what he meant when he said: 'The sounds flowed into my ears and *the truth was distilled into my heart*' – literally, the truth was refined, purified to its essence ('eliquabatur') by music. To quote another of the sentences to which Tinctoris would later allude: 'I feel that when the sacred words are chanted well, our souls are moved, and kindled *to a flame of piety*, more religiously and *with a warmer devotion*, than if they are not so sung'. So that is why St Augustine ends up recommending the use of music in church. Because he has personally experienced this effect, he concludes (perhaps not unreasonably) that others are bound to experience the same thing. Still, it is a cautious recommendation, one that he might well retract on further reflection. For St Augustine dreads music as much as he loves it. For him, there are only two beacons of certainty in the treacherous waters of musical delight: the words of the plainchant, on the one hand, and his own determination to resist the seductive powers of music, on the other. So it is not surprising that St Augustine, like most church fathers, strongly condemned music without words, or with the wrong words. In particular, he tirelessly inveighed against instrumental music. Not only did instrumental sounds smack of the theater and its immoral entertainments, but they lacked words, and thus seemed to exist merely for the arousal of sensuous pleasure. Such music was far too dangerous to be accorded even a limited place in the life of devout Christians.

How ironic it seems, then, that Tinctoris invokes his words precisely when he is writing about instrumental music. It is the theorist's experience listening to two viols, and viols performing secular tunes at that, which he implicitly likens to St Augustine's experience of psalm singing in church. Tinctoris completely ignores the critical distinction: that one involves scriptural words, and is therefore permissible, and the other has no words at all, and is therefore reprehensible. There is no way St Augustine could have approved of the way his words were being used here. Nor could he have had much respect for a man who admitted, without any moral scruples, that he had allowed himself to be carried away by the sound of two fiddles. By modern standards, obviously, Tinctoris has completely misread St Augustine. But that is precisely why his text is so interesting. A misreading of this magnitude tells us that Tinctoris was at great pains to bring across a point of his own – a point in which he believed so firmly that either it colored his understanding of St Augustine, or else led him to be knowingly oblivious to what the Church Father had meant to say. But what was that point? Why did he insert this extraordinary passage into an otherwise matter-of-fact discussion of musical instruments? What is the take-home message here?

The obvious place to start looking for an answer is the last sentence, labeled number four in the quotation above. Here, after all, is where we might expect Tinctoris to sum up his conclusions. At first sight it looks like a general recommendation, that the viol and rebec should always be reserved for sacred settings – presumably in church, perhaps during Elevation – rather than for profane matters and public feasts. But is that, in fact, the take-home message? If Tinctoris seriously expected the recommendation to be implemented, to be made binding for all those who played and heard the viol and rebec, then he should offer compelling arguments, founded in truth and reason, as he always did elsewhere. Otherwise, why issue a general recommendation in the first place? A story from his personal life, though undeniably disarming, was not going to convince many readers. Then again, it does not look as if Tinctoris really expected anyone to follow his recommendation. Apart from anything else, he seems to be consciously abdicating his scholarly authority here, by using the word 'mallem', which means 'I would prefer' or 'I would rather'. What he is saying, in so many words, is: 'if it were up to me'. He expresses a personal preference. The rest of us are presumably still free to disagree. This is confirmed by the preceding sentence, sentence number three: 'These two instruments are mine, therefore'. In other words, other people's favorite instruments might well be different ones altogether. And he goes on: '*mine*, I say, that is by which... *my* mind rises up to a feeling of devotion, and which most ardently set *my* heart aflame to a contemplation of the joys on high'. I, me, mine – this is really about himself and how these instruments affect him personally. If you or I are not moved by the viol in exactly the same way, it does not mean that there is anything wrong with us. All it means is that we are not Tinctoris.

This, in turn, is confirmed by the sentence before it, sentence number two. This is the place where Tinctoris invokes St Augustine's 'mysterious inner kinship'. Now, there is a small but very significant alteration as these words are lifted from the *Confessions* to Tinctoris's treatise. Indeed I would go so far as to speak of another misreading – this one more serious than the first. St Augustine speaks in general terms, terms that apply to all of us. He says: 'All the diverse emotions of *our* spirit have their corresponding modes in voice and chant, and are stirred through a mysterious inner kinship'. Every human being, according to the Church Father, has a range of emotions, each of which corresponds directly to a particular mode of singing, causing us to be moved to different emotions by different kinds of music. And although he does not say it in so many words, the implication is that we are all moved in the same way by the same sorts of music. It is not as if a sad tune will cause you to be

sad, whereas someone else will become angry, and yet another joyful. If music were that erratic and unpredictable in its effects, then St Augustine would not have allowed it to be used under any circumstances. Tinctoris, however, is not interested in generalities. He changes the 'our' of St Augustine's 'our spirit' into 'me' and 'my spirit'. The consequence is that the hidden kinship with viols and rebecs has become unique to him alone. What he is saying, in effect, is this: I feel a special bond with these instruments, and that is why I call them mine. The implication, once again, is that Tinctoris is not really talking about the instruments so much as about himself. It is true that the viol and rebec are needed to awaken a peculiar sensibility within him. But since none of us may share that sensibility, the instruments function really like a mirror, in which he perceives the reflection of his own individuality. That, it seems, is why he abdicates his authority as theorist here, and simply shares a story from his personal life. It is as if he is saying: listen, I am about to tell you something that may strike you as absurd, but believe me, it does make sense if you hear what I experienced.

So the take-home message is really that there is no take-home message. Tinctoris does not presume to state objective facts about the musicianship of the blind brothers, the songs they played, or even their instruments. On the contrary, he makes it quite clear that everything he writes about them is mediated by his personal experience. If it had not been for that experience, he probably would not have written about the occasion in the first place. It does not matter if none of us, on that occasion in Bruges, would have responded the way he did. Even if the whole world disagreed with Tinctoris about the viol, it would not diminish the value of the experience to him personally. Its value is not contingent on the agreement of others. In fact, its value would not be contingent even on the agreement of St Augustine. Tinctoris's reasoning is exactly the opposite of the Church Father's. The latter endorsed church music because his personal experience led him to conclude that it could be beneficial for everybody. Tinctoris, by contrast, emphasizes that *his* personal experience cannot serve as the basis for any general pronouncement, because it is utterly subjective. This is a massive conceptual discrepancy. But I do not think that Tinctoris was particularly troubled by it. For when we look more closely, it is apparent that he does not actually treat the Church Father as an authority to back up his account, in the way he quotes Aristotle or Boethius on particular theoretical issues. Rather, his relationship to St Augustine is like that of a humanist who wants to speak like Cicero, and who knows his writings inside out, but who nevertheless wants to say his own thing. That, I think, is why Tinctoris does not bother to spell out that he is borrowing from the *Confessions*: it would not have added anything to the point he is making here. As far as he is

concerned, the only authority he needs to speak about his experience in Bruges is the experience itself.

Compare this with a text written some eight years previously, in *Liber de natura et proprietate tonorum*, a treatise completed in 1476. In this passage, unlike the later one, Tinctoris does invoke St Augustine as an authority in the traditional sense, to lend support to a theoretical point he is making. Interestingly, the point in question is closely related to the issues raised by the Bruges story. Tinctoris claims that different people respond to music in different ways:[5]

'Nempe unius et eiusdem toni carmen possibile erit et planctivum et remissum et rigidum et medium esse, tum ex parte compositorum et pronunciatorum, tum instrumentorum et sonitorum. Quis enim huius artis peritus ignorat alios planctive, alios remisse, alios regide, alios medie componere, pronunciare et sonare, quamvis eorum compositio, pronunciatio et sonitus eodem tono ducantur?

[To be sure, it will be possible for a song in one and the same mode to be mournful, gentle, stern, or moderate, not only with respect to composers and performers, but to instruments and players as well. For what person skilled in this art does not know how to compose, perform, or play some [songs] mournfully, some gently, some sternly, and some moderately, even though they are all composed, performed and played in the same mode?

Vocum etiam et instrumentorum genera quaedam planctiva, quaedam remissa, quaedam rigida et quaedam media naturaliter aut artificialiter sunt aut efficiunt. Unde et secundum ea differentias harmoniarum, cum de fistulis et organis, tum de cytharis et aliis instrumentis loquens ipse philosophus assignat.

Certain types of voices and instruments, by nature or by design, are mournful, certain gentle, certain harsh, and certain moderate, or have those effects. That is why that philosopher [Aristotle] assigns differences of harmonies accordingly, speaking now of pipes and organs, then of lyres and other instruments.

Quarumquidem harmoniarum aliae aliis aetatibus et moribus conveniunt, decent et expediunt, nec earum apud omnes eadem est delectatio aut simile iudicium. Remissus enim animus harmoniis remissis delectatur, e converso rigidae rigido sunt acceptae'.

Of these harmonies certain ones are agreeable, fitting, and useful for different ages and customs, and there is not the same delight or a similar judgment to all [people]. A gentle soul is delighted by gentle harmonies, and conversely stern ones are agreeable to a stern soul].

[5] Johannes Tinctoris, *Liber de natura et proprietate tonorum* (1476). After Johannes Tinctoris, *Opera theoretica*, ed. Albert Seay, i (Corpus Scriptorum de Musica, 22; n.p., 1975-78), 68-69.

In other words, music is not going to move you unless it precisely matches your peculiar temperament, your psychological make-up. If you are not a particularly cheerful person, say, then cheerful melodies will leave you relatively indifferent. Which is to say that music really serves as a kind of mirror in which you recognize your own individuality, your peculiar sensibility. In the end, the only reason why you happen to like some kinds of music more than others may be that they agree better with you personally. Your preference may be as subjective as Tinctoris's preference for viol music.

Tinctoris presents this observation as a general truth-claim, and so he needs to demonstrate it if readers are going to agree with him. To that purpose, he turns to St Augustine. This time, interestingly, he does treat the Church Father like a proper authority. He quotes a sentence from the *Confessions* in its entirety, not just isolated words and phrases, and he makes sure to properly credit the quotation, not just weave the words inconspicuously into his own narrative. Tinctoris continues:

'Quod Augustinus sentire videtur in libro Confessionum dicens: *Omnes affectus species nostri pro sua diversitate habent proprios modos in voce atque cantu quorum occulta familiaritate excitantur*'.	[St Augustine is seen to believe this in a book of his Confessions, when he says: 'All the diverse emotions of our spirit have their corresponding modes in voice and chant, and are stirred through a mysterious inner kinship'].

By quoting this sentence he commits the very same misreading that we find some eight years later in the Bruges story. Tinctoris claims that every individual has a mysterious inner kinship with the music he or she happens to prefer, just as he himself was to feel such a kinship with the sounds of the viol and rebec. Needless to repeat, St Augustine had never implied anything of the kind. For him, the mysterious inner kinship was between the entire range of emotions, in all of us, and the different sorts of music that could elicit these emotions, in all of us. In other words, for him responses to music were universally shared, not peculiar to individuals.

To appreciate the significance of Tinctoris's text, let us now broaden our perspective a little, and consider late-medieval thinking about music listening in general. Let us begin with a text from the writings of the cardinal and theologian Nicholas of Cusa. Not that he was an expert on music, but for our purposes he does not need to be. For what his text illustrates is what any man of education, including Tinctoris himself, would have taken as accepted in the mid-fifteenth century. The specific question that concerns Nicholas of Cusa may seem a little academic at first: how do humans and animals hear

polyphony? And this is how he answers it. Senseless animals, Nicholas says, find pleasure in consonant sound, just like us. Yet they are unable to understand *why* it is pleasurable, because they lack the faculty of reason. They are wholly at the mercy of mere aural sensations. Humans, on the other hand, do have the capacity to understand, since they can determine the mathematical ratios of consonances – and it is those ratios that ultimately account for the pleasure. You only need to do the math: a 3:2 ratio here, a 2:1 ratio there, and then comes the proverbial 'Aha Erlebnis': Ah! So *that* is why we like those fifths and octaves so much.[6]

'Quando enim audimus concinentes voces: sensu attingimus. Sed differentias & concordantias: ratione & disciplina mensuramus. Quam vim: in brutis non reperimus. Non enim habent vim numerandi & proportionandi. Et ideo incapaces sunt disciplinae musicae: licet sensu voces nobiscum attingant & moveantur concordantia vocum ad delectationem.

[When we hear voices singing together we arrive at this through the sense. But we measure differences and consonances through reason and study. We do not find this power in beasts, for they do not have the power of numbering and of making proportions. And for that reason they are incapable of the science of music, although they hear sounds through the sense as we do, and are moved to delight by the consonance of sounds.

Anima igitur nostra: rationalis merito dicitur, quia est vis ratiocinativa seu numerativa, in se complicans cuncta, sine quibus perfecta discretio fieri nequit.

Therefore our soul is deservedly called rational, because it is the power of calculating or numbering, enfolding all in itself, without which perfect distinction cannot be made.

Quando enim sensu auditus movetur ad motum delectationis ob dulcem harmonicam concordantiam, & intra se invenit rationem concordantiae in numerali proportione fundari: disciplinam ratiocinandi de musicis concordantiis per numerum invenit'.

For when one is moved by the sense of hearing to delight, on account of a sweet harmonious consonance, and discovers within oneself that the reason of consonance is founded in numerical proportion, one discovers the art of calculating musical consonances through number.]

None of this, of course, is unusual for its time. Nicholas of Cusa is simply repeating what he had learned by reading Boethius as a student – *De musica* was a standard text in the medieval liberal arts curriculum. Yet there are a number of corollaries that are worth drawing out.

[6] Nicholas of Cusa, *De ludo globi, II* (1462-63). Text and trans. after Nicholas of Cusa, *De Ludo Globi: The Game of Spheres*, trans. Pauline Moffitt Watts (New York, 1986), 104-5. Cf. Heinrich Hüschen, 'Nikolaus von Kues und sein Musikdenken', in Friedrich Wilhelm Riedel and Hubert Unverricht (eds.), *Symbolae Historiae Musicae: Hellmut Federhofer zum 60. Geburtstag* (Mainz, 1971), 47-67.

First of all, the teachings rehearsed by Nicholas of Cusa seem to answer the dilemma felt by St Augustine, who so desperately clung to *words* to keep the musical experience from becoming sinful. He need not have worried. For as Nicholas of Cusa confirms, even when there are no words, one can still find worthwhile things to appreciate in music. Those things are the consonances, and their underlying mathematical ratios. The great thing about these ratios is that they can be empirically demonstrated, on the measuring tool known as the monochord – which is basically a single string stretched along a ruler. So the appreciation of consonance is really an appreciation of objectively demonstrable truth, of 'certain' knowledge. More than that, the truth in question stems directly from the mind of the divine creator, just as surely as the Word of God does. After all, did not the Book of Wisdom say that God has 'ordered all things in measure and number and weight'? Surely the truth of that was borne out beautifully by consonances. Not that you needed to be a mathematician to arrive at this kind of appreciation. Even music theorists were not going to remind themselves of numerical proportions at every turn. The crucial ability in question here, the ability that animals were thought not to have, was that of making abstractions. Imagine, for example, that you hear the following sounds, produced, respectively, on an organ, on two clarinets, by your kitchen blender, and two singers:

Example 1.

According to Nicholas of Cusa, an animal would register four completely different sonorities, all of them vaguely pleasurable. But, or so his argument implies, a human would say: they are really the same sound, for I hear a fifth in every case. This idea of 'a fifth' is obviously an abstraction. It reflects a decision to focus only on intervallic relationships, and to disregard issues of sonority, orchestration, loudness, pitch, acoustic environment, or social setting. Needless to add, the fifth as such does not exist except as an idea: it resides somewhere in the same realm as, say, $e = mc^2$, or the number fifteen. There is a further corollary as well. If I am able to abstract the idea of 'the fifth' from a bewildering variety of sounds; and if it can be shown that this idea reflects objective mathematical truth – then it means that on the highest level, on the level of the rational soul, musical experience is not 'subjective' but 'objective'. For the mathematical truth I respond to on that level is just as true for you as it is for me, or anybody else – it is universal.

This is useful to know for a variety of reasons. First of all, it means that I can listen to polyphony without any guilt or self-consciousness. I do not need to learn how to listen, or to acquire an art of listening. So long as I am enjoying consonances for what they are, which seems easy enough, I can actually claim to be engaging in musical appreciation of the highest order. True, composers and professional musicians may be able to hear a lot more than that. They may be able to tell, for example, how a motet is put together, what structure it has, what rhythmic proportions are being used. But all that pertains merely to human handiwork. Styles and techniques may come and go, musical tastes may change over time, or vary between countries or individuals. All of that is historically contingent and subjective, and it divides specialists from lay folk – which is probably why Nicholas of Cusa has no interest in talking about it. After all, how could any of this compare to music's power to unite *all* listeners, learned as well as unlearned, in a shared appreciation of objective and divinely-inspired truth? This is perhaps one reason why late-medieval eyewitness descriptions of music seldom give us the kind of information that we would most like to have: what piece was heard, who was the composer, how was it performed, and what sort of appreciation did listeners have of its technical, compositional qualities? Instead, writers seem to be going on and on about the 'wondrous sweetness' of the consonant sounds, in language that is bound to strike the modern reader as conventional and commonplace. And yet, from their own point of view, these writers were really focusing on what was all-important – and they left out details that would have been of interest only to a handful of specialists. It was simply not their job to write like experts for experts. It may also explain another feature of late-medieval eyewitness descriptions of musical events: the tendency for writers to assume, quite unselfconsciously, that if *they* found delight in a musical performance, then everybody else must have as well. This follows logically from the fact that true musical experience was known to be objective. In this period, paradoxically, the most private musical experiences, deep within the rational soul, were also the most public ones, since the truths found most deeply within are precisely the truths most valid for everybody else. If there was anyone who did not find delight, then there had to be something seriously wrong with him – though this was almost impossible to conceive.

This attitude of serene confidence in the goodness and truth of consonant sound, and its universal appreciation by all humans, is what characterizes late-medieval musical culture. Take, for example, the following document, in which the author, a humanist writing at the Papal Curia in the late 1430s, speaks of 'divine hymns and psalms…sung with different and diverse voices', that is, sung in polyphony. He does not tell us what we would most like to know: whether these were the hymns by Dufay, which had in fact been written in

Rome in the 1430s. Instead he waxes lyrical over what he calls the 'incredible sweetness and harmony' of the music. So overwhelmed is he by the memory alone of such musical splendor, that he cannot imagine how anyone could possibly remain unmoved when hearing it in real life. This is how he puts it:[7]

'Sunt archiepiscopi, epiescopi, patriarchae, protonotarii aliique paene infiniti ordines, omnes maxima dignitate et auctoritate ad Dei cultum instituti et inventi, qui cum in unum vel ad sacrificium vel ad quamvis rem divinam obeundam conierunt et, sedente pontifice maximo in augusta illa pontificum sede collocato, cuncti ex ordine assederunt ac divini illi hymni ac psalmi disparibus variisque vocibus decantantur, quis est tam inhumanus, tam barbarus, tam agrestis, quis rursus tam immanis, tam Deo hostis, tam expers religionis, qui haec aspiciens audiensque non moveatur, cuius non mentem atque animum aliqua religione occupet et stupore perstringat et dulcedine quadam deliniat? Cuius non oculi mirifice aspectu ipso pascantur oblectenturque? Cuius non aures incredibili cantus suavitate et harmonia mulceantur? Quo quidem spectaculo quod in terris pulchrius, quod maius, quod divinius, quod admiratione, quod memoria ac literis dignius reperitur, ut non homines modo, qui intersunt et quibus hoc natura datum est, sed ipsius etiam parietes templi et exultare quodammodo et gestire laetitia videatur?'.

[Archbishops, bishops, patriarchs, protonotaries, and other orders almost beyond limit have all been instituted and invented, with the greatest dignity and authority, for the worship of God. When they have convened as one body to attend either the sacrifice or any other divine service, and [when] they have all sat down in order, the Pope being seated in that venerable throne of the Popes, and *[when] those divine hymns and psalms are sung with different and diverse voices, [then] who is so uncultured, so uncivilized, so boorish, who again is so savage, so inimical to God, so lacking in reverence, that he, seeing and hearing these things, is unmoved, whose mind and soul are not seized with some feeling of reverence, and overcome by stupefaction, and captivated by a certain sweetness, whose eyes are not marvelously nourished and delighted by the very sight, whose ears are not charmed by the incredible sweetness and harmony of the song?* Indeed, what could be found in this world that is more beautiful, that is greater, that is more divine, that is more worthy of wonder, of remembrance and the historical record, than this sight – so that not just humans, who take part [in all this] and to whom this is given by nature, but the very walls of the temple seem to be elated in some way, and to exult with happiness?]

This is the kind of certainty and conviction that Tinctoris could no longer bring himself to express when he wrote about the Fernandes brothers. Somewhere

[7] Lapo da Castiglionchio the Younger, *De Curiae Commodis*. Text and trans. after Christopher S. Celenza, *Renaissance Humanism and the Papal Curia: Lapo da Castiglionchio the Younger's De Curiae Commodis* (Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome, 31; Ann Arbor, 2000), 130-33. Cf. Giovanni Zanovello, 'Les humanistes florentins et la polyphonie liturgique',' in Perrine Galand-Hallyn and Fernand Hallyn (eds.), *Poétiques de la Renaissance: Le modèle italien, le monde franco-bourguignon et leur héritage en France au XVIe siècle* (Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, 348; Geneva, 2001), 625-38 and 667-73, at 629 and 669-70, and Rob C. Wegman, 'Musical Understanding in the Fifteenth Century', *Early Music*, 30 (2002), 46-66.

along the line things must have changed for him. Evidently he had stopped believing in a premise that had been taken as self-evident all his life. But what was the truth he abandoned? And why did he lose faith in it?

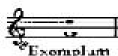
The document from the Papal Curia that I just quoted, and countless documents like it, tells us one important thing about late-medieval musical culture: there was no art of listening. You did not need to learn how to listen if you wanted to properly appreciate polyphony. The hard thing rather was *not* to appreciate it. To remain totally unmoved by polyphony, it was necessary for the hearer to be uncultured, uncivilized, boorish, savage, inimical to God, and lacking in reverence. Now, where were you going to find such a rare individual? By contrast, nothing could be easier than to appreciate polyphony, to let your ears be charmed by the incredible sweetness and harmony of the sound. Even animals can do that, as Nicholas of Cusa assured us. True, animals lack the ability to make abstractions, to conceptualize the idea of the fifth, let alone to comprehend its mathematical basis. But even the lowliest choirboy can be taught what a fifth is, and can recognize one without a moment's hesitation. Still, there is something missing in all of this. Remember the four sonorities in Example 1. Technically these are all fifths. But that is an observation that seems worth making only if you are prepared to completely disregard everything else: sonority, orchestration, loudness, pitch, acoustic environment, or social setting. The question is: why would you disregard all of that? How would that enrich rather than impoverish our musical understanding? Take the first sonority, for example, a fifth sounded near the bottom end of a grand organ. By no stretch of the imagination could this sonority be called sweet and agreeable. Musically it would probably be more useful as noise. Which is to say that the concept of the fifth, and its mathematical basis, does not begin to tell us how and why a given sonority can be heard as musically interesting.

It is this realisation that lies at the basis of Tinctoris's most important treatise on music, the *Liber de arte contrapuncti*, completed in 1477. In it, he spends two entire books to discuss a question that all conventional counterpoint treatises dispensed with in a couple of sentences: what is a consonance, and what is a dissonance? For Tinctoris, there are two answers to that question. First, there is consonance and dissonance as they are defined by reason and tradition – which is the easy answer that counterpoint manuals normally gave. But second, and more important, there is our subjective impression as to how sweet and agreeable a given sonority is. For example, reason and tradition tell us that the sonority played near the bottom end of the grand organ is a consonance, a fifth. But our musical sensibility tells us that it lacks sweetness, or to put it more neutrally, that it approximates noise. From the point of view of theory

this represents a troubling discrepancy – this is not supposed to happen, not if we insist that a consonance is intrinsically pleasing to the ear. But Tinctoris does not seek to deny it or explain it away. On the contrary: he makes it clear at every turn that what you 'know' in theory does not always have to agree with what you 'hear' in practice.

A good example is his discussion of the sixth, in the first book of the *Liber de arte contrapuncti*. Tinctoris begins by observing that tradition is not unanimous as to whether it is a consonance or not. This, he explains, is because it really depends on how you listen to it. If you hear a sixth by itself, that is, alone, it sounds rather harsh and unpleasant – at least to his ears. To quote from his discussion:[8]

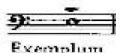
'Diapente cum semitonio est concordantia ex mixtura duarum vocum diapente ac semitonio ab invicem distantium constituta, sicut mi, E la mi gravis, et fa, C sol fa ut, ut hic:



[The fifth with semitone is a consonance, made by the combination of two pitches at a distance from each other of a fifth and a semitone, just as *mi* E *la mi* grave and *fa* C *sol fa ut*, as here:

Diapente autem cum tono concordantia est ex mixtura duarum vocum diapente ac tono ab invicem distantium effecta, sicut fa, F fa ut gravis, et sol, D la sol re, ut hic:

The fifth with whole tone is also a consonance, made by the combination of two pitches at a distance from each other of a fifth and a whole tone, just as *fa* F *fa ut* grave and *sol* D *la sol re*, as here:



Porro omnis sexta, sive perfecta sive imperfecta, sive superior sive inferior fuerit, apud antiquos discordantia reputabatur, et ut vera fatear, aurium mearum iudicio per se audita, hoc est sola, plus habet asperitatis quam dulcedinis'.

On the other hand, every sixth, be it perfect or imperfect, above or below, was considered by the ancients as a discord, and, *to confess the truth, heard by itself, that is, alone, by the judgment of my ears, it has more asperity than sweetness*].

[8] Johannes Tinctoris, *Liber de arte contrapuncti (1477)*, I. vii. 2, 4, 6. After Johannes Tinctoris, *Opera theoretica*, 2, 11-89, at 32-3. Trans. after Johannes Tinctoris, *The Art of Counterpoint*, trans. Albert Seay (Musicological Studies and Documents, v; n.p., 1961), 34. See also Klaus-Jürgen Sachs, 'Boethius and the Judgement of the Ears: A Hidden Challenge in Medieval and Renaissance Music', in Charles Burnett, Michael Fend, and Penelope Gouk (eds.), *The Second Sense: Studies in Hearing and Musical Judgement from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1991), 169-98; Rob C. Wegman, 'Sense and Sensibility in Late-Medieval Music: Reflections on Aesthetics and "Authenticity"', *Early Music*, 23 (1995), 298-312; Rob C. Wegman, 'Johannes Tinctoris and the "New Art"', *Music & Letters*, 84 (2003), 171-88.

Then again, who is going to listen to a sixth by itself? All you would hear is a sonority so abstract, so divorced from any musical context or purpose, that every judgment about it would be meaningless in any case. What really matters is what you do with it musically. Depending on how you use the sixth, it might well exhibit the most wondrous, the most captivating, the most exquisite sweetness. But the composer does have to learn how to use it, and the listener must learn how to appreciate what the composer is doing. The Art of Composition and the Art of Listening are really two sides of the same coin – which is why Tinctoris teaches them both in his counterpoint treatise.

The upshot is that Tinctoris is not interested in consonance as defined by reason and tradition. What matters to him is sweetness as perceived by those who have learned to appreciate it. Sweetness is a subjective quality – that is why he said, a moment ago, 'according to the judgement of *my* ears', admitting scope for disagreement. Unless you have trained your ears, unless you have acquired the Art of Listening, you may never become a very discriminating connoisseur of sweetness, even though you might be able to tell consonance from dissonance. As I have argued in my essay 'Sense and Sensibility in Late-Medieval Music', Tinctoris regarded sweetness as a quality contingent on a whole range of subtle musical conditions, including scoring, spacing, orchestration, voice-leading, intervallic superimpositions, even tempo. Indeed at one point he says that something may sound horrible when performed slowly, but wondrously sweet if you speed it up a bit. Then again, if you perform a piece too fast, as modern performers routinely do, you lose all sweetness.

Perhaps this gives us a clue to that extraordinary experience Tinctoris had in Bruges. He tells us that the Fernandes brothers played the tenors and top voices of many songs. So we may assume that these were well-composed, and that the composers had taken care of proper consonance handling. But consonances, by themselves, did not warrant a truly out-of-this-world experience. The sweetness that Tinctoris heard, and that moved him to the core of his being, was contingent on something else, some other quality. It could have been a combination of many things: tempo, phrasing, dynamics, intonation, what not. But all Tinctoris will say about it is that the sound of the viol was decisive. This is what carried the consonances from mere pitch relationships, defined in abstract terms, to a level of almost otherworldly sweetness. Not that Tinctoris ever understood why the viol moved him so much. All he could offer by way of explanation was St Augustine's notion of a mysterious inner kinship – which does not actually explain anything. But then, if sweetness is subjective, what *is* there to be understood about it? Why does a stretch of counterpoint sound better when you speed it up a bit? Or when you play it on viols rather than

flutes? Or when you sing it at the top of your range rather than near the bottom? Or when you sing it soft or loud, with vibrato or without? All you can say is that experience teaches you this.

So Tinctoris cannot prove anything about the viol. He cannot tell us how to listen to it. All he can do is share his own experience, for whatever it may be worth. I see his decision to share that experience as an act of generosity. It was an invitation for readers to see if they could change their minds about the viol (if they wished to), if they could hear some beauty in its sound that they might never have suspected otherwise. If they did not hear it, that was alright, too: we can take or leave Tinctoris's account, it does not oblige us to anything. Still, if we wish to pick up a take-home message, then it is not hard to discern one. That message could be summarized as follows. To all of us it may be given to have a mysterious inner kinship with certain kinds of music, and if we do, the resulting experience may well be one of ecstasy. That experience is necessarily subjective, however, since other people need not have the same inner kinship, with the same kind of music, as we do. For that reason we will not be open to the kind of experience he had at Bruges if we insist that the only worthwhile musical truth is objective, and valid irrespective of who is listening, or how. It is certainly possible to listen to music objectively, and to write about it in terms of objective truth. Throughout the late Middle Ages it had in fact been assumed that this was the only worthwhile way to listen to music. But Tinctoris was the first theorist, so far as I know, to acknowledge a fundamentally different way of listening that was essentially subjective. In this as in so many other respects, he emerges as one of the most profound and original musical thinkers of his age.