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THE RISE *of* EUROPEAN MUSIC 1380-1500

REINHARD STROHM



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PREFACE

This book, written over the years 1983-9, was originally commissioned by Malcolm Gerratt for J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. At the very end of 1987, Dent became part of Weidenfeld & Nicolson, though the concept of the book was not changed by either the publisher or the author. In early 1991, some weeks after Malcolm Gerratt had been compelled by circumstances to leave Dent, the publishers wrote to me to say that they felt the book would now be too academic for their list and that they wanted to arrange for a different publisher to take it on. Fortunately this did not prove difficult and I signed a new contract with Cambridge University Press in June 1991. By the end of 1990, Mr Gerratt had been able to supervise the main revisions. I owe him my warmest thanks for his continuous encouragement, expert advice and editorial care, without which the project might have faltered altogether. For the more detailed editing up to that point, I am indebted to the efforts and the competence of Ingrid Grimes. After the change to Cambridge University Press, the remaining half of the editing was carried out, with unusual musicological expertise and editing skill, by Ann Lewis.

It is my hope that those colleagues in the field of music history who took on the responsibility of advising me on matters of content will find that their labours were not lost. The greatest contribution by far was made by David Fallows, who commented on the whole typescript. His corrections and suggestions, plus the ensuing correspondence between us about controversial questions, would fill a potentially exciting volume by themselves. It goes without saying that the input from a leading authority such as David Fallows has substantially raised not only the value of the book, but also my own awareness of fifteenth-century problems.

Similarly, both the book and I gained very much from the prudent and patient advice given by Margaret Bent, Leeman L. Perkins, Jessie Ann Owens and Ursula Günther, all of whom read individual chapters and communicated their reactions to me.

The collaboration with such excellent scholars who are committed to serving not so much individual interests as the instruction of all is the very context from which my own studies have grown. Apart from those named elsewhere, I am particularly grateful to Brian Trowell and Pierluigi Petrobelli, scholars whose practice taught me more than many musicological books, and to all the

other colleagues and friends who made important suggestions, or presented me with their own published or unpublished findings and writings: Thomas Walker, Kurt von Fischer, Giulio Cattin, Walter Salmen, Karlheinz Schlager, Alejandro E. Planchart, Wulf Arlt, Nino Pirrotta, Martin Staehelin, Claude V. Palisca, Craig Wright, Howard M. Brown, Ernst Apfel, Allan W. Atlas, Lewis Lockwood, Maricarmen Gómez, Jaap van Benthem, Jaromír Černý, Mirosław Perz, F. Alberto Gallo, Kristine Forney, Christoph Petzsch, Keith Polk, Andrew Wathey, Anna Maria Busse Berger, Paula Higgins, M. Jennifer Bloxam, Barbara H. Haggh, Walter Kreyszig, Virginia Newes and Rob C. Wegman.

The historians Peter Burke and Hannes Obermair must be mentioned specially, as they generously entrusted me with unpublished material without having reason to know me at all.

The typescript of the main text and footnotes was completed in July 1989. Literature appearing after that date was not normally considered, except when this became necessary in the course of an actual textual revision, or when I had been allowed to use typescript contributions the publication of which was then delayed. I have yielded to the temptation of adding references to a few particularly interesting publications appearing as late as mid-1990, although their contents were not necessarily taken into account. Several of the contributions that appeared too late for being properly discussed here were written by Rob C. Wegman.

Research for this book has been supported, in the summer of 1987, by a travel grant from the American Council of Learned Societies and a complementary grant from the Whitney Griswold Fund of Yale University.

Most of the work was carried out on the basis of literature held in the Yale University Library, New Haven, and the British Library, London. Further items, including manuscripts and archival documents, were consulted in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich; the Stadtarchiv, Vienna; the Tiroler Landesarchiv, Innsbruck; the Archivio Comunale, Bolzano; the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna; the Archivio di Stato, Trent; the Bibliothèque Royale Albert I^{er}, Brussels; the Rijksarchief, Ghent; and the research libraries and archives of Bruges. To all the librarians and archivists of these institutions I wish to express my heartfelt thanks.

The Music Librarian of the University of London, musicologist and friend Anthea Baird, gave me the characteristically charming and congenial support known to all scholars who have worked with her.

Janet M. Smith shared with me most of the anxieties and frustrations of writing this book during our years in America; I hope she will find the result worthwhile.

I was able to benefit much from my students and doctoral advisees at Yale University, particularly Ruth Hall, who worked on the bibliography and provided a useful critique of my prose, and Leslie Kearney who helped with the thinking.

After two of my students, I should also mention two of my teachers: the

Preface

music historians Thrasyboulos Georgiades and Carl Dahlhaus. In the present context, let me remember them not so much for the light they gave to musicology in general as for the profound understanding they had, and communicated to me, of the music of the fifteenth century.

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INTRODUCTION

I

Among the breathtaking developments of European civilization in the fifteenth century – which can be described as the ‘Waning of the Middle Ages’ and as the ‘Renaissance’ at the same time – there was also the rise, or the emancipation, of music to a major human resource and a universal language.

Our age is reluctant to acknowledge ‘progress’ in history, even where that word is used without implying a value judgement. We have adopted a relativist approach to history, partly because we accept that many ‘progresses’ of humankind have ended in chaos. But European music, it seems, is not among these stories of failure: after centuries of growth, it continues to be a restoring and healing element in society. Its influence on our lives and thinking may even have increased. Let us hope that the music of today’s world will retain its ability to teach people how to respect each other.

Although it is widely believed today that the idea of historical progress was a product of the Enlightenment, a number of medieval and Renaissance writers acknowledged progress at least in certain areas of human endeavour (and not only for theological reasons). Music was judged by them as capable of continuous development and, indeed, ever greater aesthetic perfection. This humanistic view was held, for example, by the fourteenth-century writer Johannes Boen, who argued that music would probably soon develop to unheard-of refinement, as it had already made such great progress since its inventor Pythagoras (see p. 38). The fifteenth-century music theorist Johannes Tinctoris judged that only the composers of his own lifetime had produced music worth hearing (see p. 127).

Now, post-Enlightenment historicism has taught us not to discriminate against the old in favour of the new. The opposite view to that of Tinctoris was held, for example, by the influential nineteenth-century music historian François-Joseph Fétis, who disliked the musical avant-garde of his time and pioneered the appreciation of music of the past as an aesthetic experience in its own right.¹ It is not even a paradox that these two men, born only about 30 miles apart in what is now southern Belgium, devoted themselves to the appraisal of exactly the same repertory: the polyphonic music created in

¹ For example in his *Esquisse de l'harmonie considérée comme art et comme science systématique* (Paris, 1840).

England, France and the Low Countries in the fifteenth century. Tinctoris, the Renaissance humanist, approved of this music because its novelty demonstrated to him the continuing progress towards an *ars perfecta*. Fétis, the Romantic historicist, approved of it because it was an ancient tradition of his beloved homeland: two reasons so contrary to each other as to convince anyone of the fallibility of historical hindsight. Perhaps both judgements were wrong, and we might accuse Tinctoris of a chronological, Fétis of a geographical bias. But why, then, do they in effect agree?

The present writer considers that these two value judgements, although made for seemingly opposite reasons, were both right. From the point of view of human attitudes towards the world, there is no fundamental contradiction between the cultivation of ancient roots, and the urge for novelty, freshness, emancipation. Whereas undoubtedly many people in the fifteenth century enjoyed musical traditions simply as they were – and this will be further elaborated in Part III of this book – some must have believed in the progressive potentials of the art, too. It was this belief which then unfolded into history, creating new traditions. We are speaking not so much of real change or measurable progress as of people who, by dedicating themselves to perfecting their art, created lasting values. To explain why and how such values were created in fifteenth-century music is the main purpose of the present study.

The period from 1380 to 1500 in Europe was transitional like any period in history: it was not in any way self-contained. Nevertheless, certain changes happened to music then which have since become stable traditions. One of them was the phenomenon that composers became accustomed to apply the best of their art to musical works for the enjoyment of *listeners*. Another was the fact that composed polyphony ('harmonic' or 'part-music'), aspired to being understood by every *individual* in Europe like his or her own language. As a result of both, Europe imparted a significance to the role of the *composer* such as no other musical culture has ever done.

Today, the European language of music has developed into a world language, and the European attitude towards music has become a model all over the world. We go further today by accepting that music of whatever kind and ancestry is universal, and that every human being has a right to music, for personal recreation or any other purpose. Such beliefs, however, are rooted in the opinions of fifteenth-century European musicians – humanists and others. Similarly, the structural (harmonic, contrapuntal) principles of fifteenth-century music are still implied in ours, although they are now valid on a more universal plane. They are connected with the idea that music can convey meaning and emotion not only by reference to its generic form, text, performance circumstance – but directly, as it were, by its *individually composed structures*. This is possible – i.e. these structures are 'eloquent' – because they have absorbed multiple conventions and intentions of people, imitations of art and nature, symbols of eternity. This makes them potential resources which individual listeners across the countries and centuries can unlock. The concept of univer-

salinity and the ability to re-create the individual mind are complementary features of European music which it will take a long time to eradicate. For these lasting values, we acknowledge a debt to individual composers: masters such as Guillaume Dufay and Josquin des Prez created them at a time when medieval and Renaissance cultures overlapped.

It would be foolish, of course, to deny the dignity or occasional artistic complexity of earlier music heard in Europe. Neither can it be doubted that certain musical repertoires enjoyed wide, 'international' circulation in the Middle Ages. The European nations did not yet exist as political entities (the rise of European music accompanies their making), and this could mean that, under specific circumstances, political-cultural barriers could be quite easily crossed. But we should not really believe that medieval music, for example 'Gregorian chant', was a universal language. The organization of the Church and its practices, the ritual language (Latin) and to some extent the individual texts of the liturgy were common to Catholic Europe. The chant melodies, however, were subject to many local dialects and fiercely defended traditions of performance. The most effective struggles for the supra-regional unification of plainsong – those led by some mendicant orders and also limited to them – were also the forerunners of the more general trend towards universality which characterized fifteenth-century polyphony.

Furthermore, precisely the most generally shared features and circumstances of medieval music tended to be pre-artistic in nature. What was common to musicians of many regions was not so much the art in the sense of musical works, as the art in the sense of know-how, of practice. It is possible to speculate that the musical folklore of many European countries had, in the Middle Ages, common characteristics (some of which were shared, besides, with Arab and Eastern peoples): but on the high level of the individual art-work, musical style was particular and special, even idiosyncratic. What happened at the very end of the Middle Ages was the creation of individualized music (dignified less through the support of its high-ranking patrons than through its own artistic expertise and endeavour) that had *absorbed* the common and simple traditions and thus became itself a common language.

This language was that of polyphony, music performed in different lines (and usually by different people) simultaneously. Polyphonic music, which had existed in Europe since the Dark Ages, but either as a general, simple know-how or – occasionally – as an artistic speciality, has become *the* musical art-form of later centuries in Europe. We identify this art-form with a quest for communication and relationships: it is a symbol of togetherness and harmony – or of diversity and counterpoint, according to how we accentuate it. Neither this symbolic function of polyphony nor its predominance in the repertory was given to it by Nature. Rather, polyphony attained this status in the fifteenth century, when the greater complexity it offered over monophonic ('one-line') music appeared novel and 'progressive' to its listeners, stimulating more and more gifted minds to cultivate it.

Late medieval Europe witnessed an unprecedented expansion of the means of artistic creation and the access to art, triggered by an overall improvement (despite setbacks) of material conditions. For example, the use of musical instruments in art-music increased rapidly. This was partly because far more people could now afford them. The archives continuously document the introduction of new forms and uses of music, the ever greater expenditures on music, and its greater availability to lower social classes. Art-music began to travel more quickly and to be codified on paper. The fact that there are documents which tell us much about fifteenth-century music that we will never know about earlier repertoires, points to an expanded public cultivation and consumption of music. The fact that there are perhaps ten times as many written compositions extant from that century as from the preceding one, suggests a considerable increase in the production of artistically complex (and therefore, written) music. Both facts together imply that relatively more social groups had now access to it than ever before. By the end of the fifteenth century, the ordinary people of several European towns could listen to free concerts with music by Josquin or Obrecht in the local parish church or indeed *in the streets*. The region where such a practice had already been common for generations – the Low Countries – was not surprisingly the one which was now producing the leading performers and composers of polyphony.

The development of fifteenth-century music is like a breaking of barriers everywhere, a flooding with ideas, an irrigation of deserts. Admittedly, this flood must also have submerged musical traditions or unwritten practices of which we now know nothing. But many local or ‘common’ practices that had never been written down were now absorbed into written art-music and thus at least documented; others were reported in writing by archivists, poets and musical theorists, or in design and colour by painters and architects. To the fifteenth century, we owe the invention of printing and music printing – although the latter became a typical mode of transmission only in the next century. Conversely, it is to fifteenth-century documents that we owe much of our understanding of medieval musical traditions: fifteenth-century people transmitted them because they cherished them. Because of this pivotal character of the period, we have to examine not only the leading innovations in art-music but also at some length what are called here the ‘common traditions’ of music: those common to upper and lower social classes, and shared by many countries and centuries of the European Middle Ages.

At the same time, this book describes the development of late medieval music as a step which music made towards ourselves. What was left behind deserves our respect, our careful evaluation, and perhaps our nostalgia. But only the comparison of tradition with what was newly created can help us recognize ourselves. Consider just one example: to discuss aspects of mode and tonality only in medieval, traditional terms, would mean to pass over the moment as insignificant when composers first conceived the idea of expressing sadness with the minor mode. Do we really want to miss this event in our history of

music? It is hindsight that illuminates the past, although it is fallible and may throw a distorting light on the objects. But without any light, would we be able to guess that our perspective had to be adjusted? This problem is related to the question to what sort of historical reality the Renaissance concept actually corresponds. A medieval mind would presumably have explained what happened around 1400 entirely in medieval terms. It is the people born two and three generations later who reacted to the feeling that a change had taken place by identifying themselves with a new age, and it is us who try to explain those things that do not fit our view of the Middle Ages by constructing a new historical 'period'. Perhaps, the Renaissance exists in so far as we need it to rationalize our image of earlier periods.

Today, we are aware of music through performances, recordings, the media, books, conversation, education. Knowledge, taste and fancy make us choose and reject types of music. Musical sounds are part of our culture, and they decorate – or deface, as the case may be – our homes. This situation is not given by Nature, but has developed historically in the context of the privatization and individualization of the arts in late medieval Europe. Johannes Tinctoris may have rejected the music of earlier centuries (although his statement is highly rhetorical), but the fact that he had access to it, and exerted his critical judgement on it, already connects him with the humanistic, enlightened and historicist culture of our century. This century's cultivation of 'Early Music' is nothing but a further step towards the appropriation of all music by all people, as critical individuals.

II

An introduction should presumably tell the reader what to expect from the book and what not. This is difficult in the present case, because it is uncertain what anyone should expect from a single-author book on the history of European music in the fifteenth century. Charles van den Borren's *Etudes sur le quinzième siècle musical* (Antwerp, 1941) stands alone in making this century its sole subject, but it does not cover the areas which its eminent author had not studied first-hand. Even greater excellence but also greater selectivity is found in Manfred Bukofzer's *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Music* (New York: Norton, 1950): a bundle of scholarly essays mainly on fifteenth-century topics, each of which has profoundly influenced later researchers. Bukofzer had developed his approach as a critical response to the German leader in the field, Heinrich Besseler. From Besseler's survey-volume *Musik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (Potsdam: Athenaion, 1931), Bukofzer borrowed really only the view, expressed in the title, that the Middle Ages and the Renaissance should not be separated too sharply.

Most other authors have preferred to tie the fifteenth century together with the sixteenth, usually presenting these 200 years as the 'Renaissance' period of

music. One great scholar avoided the label: André Pirro in his *Histoire de la musique de la fin du XIV^e siècle à la fin du XVI^e* (Paris: Renouard, 1940). Pirro worked without grand patterns and periodizations. He was the only one who could envision musical thought and musical life in a true synthesis, arising from the endless diversity and detail found by him in archival documents, contemporary literature, works of art and musical scores. By contrast, the tremendous achievement of Gustave Reese's *Music in the Renaissance* (New York: Norton, 1954) lies in its control of modern scholarship: the book covers that generation's knowledge of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century music to a degree which it will be impossible to reach in the future due to the further rapid expansion of scholarship. Historiographically, the view presented by Reese is that of an expanding musical 'language' which originated in central areas (France, Netherlands and Italy) but then reached the other parts of Europe by way of 'diffusion'. Since this diffusion took place mainly in the sixteenth century, the two centuries logically belong together under the criterion of musical 'language', i.e. style. It must be acknowledged straightaway that it was Gustave Reese's book which, by taking the concept of 'diffusion' seriously, put an end to the reign of music histories that had focused on only three European countries.

In the present book, I accept Reese's geographical model of centrality and diffusion as one possible way of looking at the subject. The model has been used in altered forms, and for more than one historical development. Also, the meaning of the essential term may have changed a little since Gustave Reese. In the 1990s, we can more easily acknowledge that 'diffusion', from the point of view of the 'peripheries', also means their participation in, and contribution to, a common history. Reese's rigid periodization of music history on the sole basis of polyphonic musical style has been rejected. The growth of certain polyphonic styles is presented with an awareness of their relative weight in a cultural framework. For example, the observation that traditional, unwritten practices of minstrels and choristers began to surface in learned compositions of the Dufay period (in these matters we have learned much from Besseler and Bukofzer), is also used as a judgement on the role of music in society.

The 'Renaissance' is interpreted in this book as a consciously created socio-cultural environment, not a style characteristic of music. To describe this environment to its full chronological extent was not really my task, and the music heard in sixteenth-century Renaissance environments differed, for my ear, sufficiently from that of the preceding century to require a fresh chronicler. Besides, the Renaissance environment was not universal in Europe around 1500, and many medieval ways of life were indeed just disappearing then. Thus, consideration of both musical art and musical life made it feasible to unhook the fifteenth century from the following one, and to free it from the precursor's role it has to play in most books on 'Renaissance music'. It is admitted, of course, that the rise and expansion of the dominating polyphonic language was still far from settled around 1500. Many histories of music devote a chapter to 'Josquin and his contemporaries' in the decades 1480-1520. It can

perhaps be accepted that this book does not descend to all the epigones, but closes on a high note provided by Josquin des Prez himself.

While the narrative thus fails to reach the new departure of the German Reformation (1517), its starting point (c. 1380) is defined in terms of ecclesiastical history. This inconsistency can be defended: not only do successive historical periods rarely begin by virtue of the same criterion,² it is also possible to view the Great Schism as more momentous for music history than even the Lutheran reform. In any case, music was in 1520 more emancipated from the life of the Church than in 1380, and the specifically musical roots of Protestantism – congregational singing, for example – lie in the fifteenth century (see p. 271). In the first chapters of this book, the social and spiritual disruptions of the Schism, which harboured the beginning of religious reform, allow us to sketch a context and contrast for stylistic departures in music around 1400. They are also presented as the historical trigger for the long-lasting leadership of Netherlands musicians south of the Alps – probably the phenomenon that best characterizes the situation of music in Renaissance Italy.

How should one divide the history of music in Europe between 1380 and 1500? The reader will find that my basically chronological outline is interrupted (in Part III) by a non-chronological discussion of practices of musical life, under the heading of the ‘common traditions’. These traditional practices, which developed at a different pace from that of polyphonic styles, are considered first in terms of institutional history, i.e. as musical services to organized communities, ecclesiastical and secular. Then, the musical genres of monophonic chant and vernacular song, simple polyphony and instrumental music are outlined. These were not the only types of music serving communities, but the implication is that instrumental playing and composing, for example, was in the fifteenth century still a ‘non-authorial’ art, less subject to individualization than vocal polyphony. This statement may be a simplification, but it has suggested itself in the absence of better documentary and analytical control of such music. In any case, the reader may find in this Part the seeds for further research on subjects such as musical education, the relationships between music and theatre or music and liturgy, instrumental versus vocal music (a difference of practices at first, later also of repertoires), or written versus unwritten music (always a difference of practices, not of repertoires).

In the other Parts of the book, the chronological frame is overlaid, to varying degrees, with a geographical organization. Before explaining the interplay between the two principles, I must confess that the self-imposed task of a wide geographical spread was also the one I felt least adequately prepared for. The references to regions such as Scotland and Scandinavia are token acknowledgments; the music of the east-central European countries is not sufficiently described, although its growing attachment to the rest of Europe is emphasized.

² The relationships between ‘periods’ of history are so inconsistent because each of them has been carved from different primary material by different generations of scholars with different criteria in mind.