Introduction

> Back in the 1400s people used to walk around going "this is a long time ago."
> Gilbert Gottfried[1]

Gilbert Gottfried was on to something – our understandable tendency to essentialize, idealize, dismiss, revere, demonize, and mystify the past. Who were these people of the 1400s, and how did they manage without lightbulbs?[2] The question may sound facetious, but when transposed to their music it becomes totally serious: Who were these people of the 1400s, and how did they manage without regular access to scores? This book wants to understand their musical world empathetically, to think of it not as a far-off, objectified, or Hollywoodified place, but as a sometimes loud, sometimes messy, geographically and chronologically dispersed assortment of dining halls, bedrooms, town squares, gardens, taverns, dance halls, royal tents, chapels, and cathedrals in which people with real thoughts and urgent feelings created and performed what they took to be, and what remains, some of the best music on earth.

At bottom this book is a theory of how that music works on the ears. But it is also a plea to rip away the distancing effects of nonnative musical notation, manuscripts whose oldness overwhelms us, and monumentalizing recordings, to go as far as we can down the path of causing roughly the same successions of sounds that Guillaume Du Fay, Johannes Okeghem, Josquin des Prez, and their contemporaries imagined, vocalized, inscribed, and heard to create in us a similar range of analytical, sensorial, and emotional reactions. The book wants to find out what happens when we let the music move through our bodies and souls both ecstatically and while engaging the intellect – that is, while fusing back together what, in line with a long-standing evaluative

[1] Available among other places from Gottfried's 18 February 1988 appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman* (findable on YouTube). Throughout the book, introductory footnotes drawn from jokes by modern comedians aim to bring sometimes stiff- or serious-sounding subjects back to earth. Jokes can help neutralize the distancing effects of modern academese and remind us of the everyday, sometimes silly, and one way or another deeply human quality of music-making. For people in the 1400s, it wasn't a long time ago.

[2] The real answer is of course: much the same way millions do today. That having been said, most readers of this text could tell at least one lightbulb joke.

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framework, Richard Taruskin broke apart into "text" and "act" and Carolyn Abbate has segregated into "drastic" and "gnostic."[3] How can we hear the music as an unfolding drama?[4] How can we access what Marion Guck describes as "the interaction between the sound and the body-and-mind of an individual"?[5] Can we read scores as what Bettina Varwig calls "somatic scripts"?[6] Adopting Joan Scott's idea that "experience is at once already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted," I take as a given that you can feel the music while thinking about it and think about it while feeling it.[7] By pondering the special ways in which polyphonic music from roughly the second quarter of the fifteenth century until ca. 1520 happens in time, this study wants to invite new ways of doing both.

To get at the music's temporal happening, these pages privilege what can loosely be called musical flow – how a given piece handles motion, energy, density, intensity, and charge across its sounding duration.[8] Analysts of the repertories under discussion have historically been interested above all in texture, cadences, and various aspects of musical repetition. I share these interests, only I want to abstract from individual compositional details to observations about larger trajectories. Flow, shapes, ramps, bursts, whispers, and evaporations: Here is a new arena in which to explore how musical texts, channeled through proximate throats, can matter.

Although the book's center of gravity is the historical record, there is no escaping the genesis of the ideas presented here in sometimes very personal experiences that include reading, listening, and performing. Throughout this study I have endeavored to subject my hunches and gut feelings to dispassionate analysis and devil's advocacy. Nonetheless, it seems important to acknowledge that some of these thoughts were nascent during my first encounters with this repertoire. From the start, being inside polyphonic textures as they emerged from thin air began to shape the sorts of stories this book will tell.

[3] Taruskin, *Text and Act*; and Abbate, "Music – Drastic or Gnostic?" A case for reuniting these binaries is made in Mak, "String Theory," 53–54 and throughout, notwithstanding an unhelpful distinction between scholar–performers and "real" performers (54n5). See also Fischer, "What Is an Ideal Hearing?"; Quinn, "Minimal Challenges"; and Swinkin, *Performative Analysis*, 37–38.

[4] See Maus, "Music as Drama," with reference to examples like Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*.

[5] Guck, "Music Loving," 346. See also her "Analysis as Interpretation"; Dubiel, "Analysis, Description, and What Really Happens"; and Agawu, "How We Got Out of Analysis."

[6] See Varwig, *Music in the Flesh*, xviii, in the context of Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body*, esp. 24–26; and Cook, *Beyond the Score*, esp. ch. 8.

[7] Scott, "Experience," 37. See also Berger, "Musicology according to Don Giovanni," esp. 497.

[8] Particularly intriguing is Varwig's idea that the musical text is "a peculiar type of written record that arguably inscribes acts of bodily engagement more determinedly than many others." See *Music in the Flesh,* xx, in the context of the caution at xxi.

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Encounter with the Unfamiliar

I'd been singing since toddlerhood – but I had never heard, let alone sung, a note of fifteenth-century vocal polyphony until my second semester at the University of Pennsylvania, where, having been accepted into the worryingly named "Ancient Voices" under the direction of William Parberry, I found myself assigned to the bass voice in Okeghem's unfamiliar and seemingly impossible *Missa De plus en plus*.[9] This was a sight-reading trial by fire: I vividly remember bringing my score binder to the dining hall each Tuesday before rehearsal, where I would regale anyone who would listen with tales of long, wide-ranging melodic lines, and of complex rhythms notated in ludicrously large note values ("the whole note gets the beat!"). It was exciting because the repertoire dovetailed with a survey course on music before 1750 I had just taken with the masterful Norman Smith. It was exciting because of the effect that was produced in rehearsal when all four independent voices were locked together. And it was exciting because it was hard. With limited exposure to so-called Renaissance polyphony, and having only recently begun to study music theory formally, I became obsessed with the question: Can I do this?

It turned out I could, but only once I hit on the idea of squeezing my toes to mark the start of each beat (left foot) and off-beat (right foot). This technique proved effective even during the concert, where half note after half note I squeezed and resqueezed – and held on for dear life. (It was of some comfort to learn that Okeghem himself sang bass and that, perhaps for that reason, many of the most challenging passages in the mass lie at the bottom of the texture.)

What made the concert especially fun was that I had begun to actually know the music. Semesters at Penn are about thirteen weeks long, which means I'd had thirteen two-hour opportunities to get the sound of the mass in my head. Mastery of fifteenth-century polyphonic practice this was not. Still, early childhood experiences singing and listening to many different musics, usually without the aid of notation, had given me a knack for memorizing melodies. And so by the time of the performance I had a good sense of my own line, especially in places where lively rhythms had helped impress the music on my memory, as well as a growing if still hazy idea of how my line related to the polyphonic complex.

[9] Editions: OckBenthem 2/1; and, albeit without text, JRP Oke1005. Throughout this study, works hosted by the Josquin Research Project (josquin.stanford.edu or josqu.in) are identified, as here, by their searchable work identification numbers.

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Parberry clued me in to two features of the style: a tendency for sections to begin slowly, lulling you into a sense of complacency that was dangerous as hell if you didn't pull yourself together in time for always somewhere-to-appear fast notes; and the way the music would sometimes come out of the bag, with explosions of pent-up energy no one in the ensemble could fail to miss.

Of the many moments that captured my imagination, the most memorable was at the words "suscipe deprecationem nostram" in the middle of the Qui tollis section of the Gloria (Example 0.1), a passage that comes alive in a performance by the Clerks' Group.[10] I think I was aware even then of the relatively tame start to this musical section. I was also aware that during the opening passage I had to climb rapidly up and then down (mm. 76–90). And yet on the whole things felt fairly relaxed, thanks to two short breaks in the bass and, I now realize, several arrivals on G, the piece's pitch center.[11]

Then the fun began (mm. 105 ff.): a duet featuring a rising line that atypically introduced internal melodic repetition and imitation. Richard Sherr has described how in this passage the bassus and discantus "obsessively" reiterate a rising motive.[12] For Okeghem such repetition may well have been calculated to seem obsessive. For me the introduction of musical repetition was a lifeline – something of which I could grab metaphorical and physical hold. And so I keyed into this passage, relishing Okeghem's slightly irregular presentation of the rising motive and the way he caused it to expand gradually from a fourth (*d g*) to an octave (*d d′*), the latter phrase leaving me and my fellow basses high, exposed, and ready to rumble.

Even in a small rehearsal room and as a seriously imperfect member of an imperfect gaggle of singers, what happened next was like a shockwave. As I landed on the note *c′* (m. 119), the altus entered a fifth above, filling out a sustained sonority that the discantus soon filled out still further by leaping to a high *e″*. I will come back to this moment, and to the high *e″*, in Chapter 12.[13] For now I will merely observe that it was thrilling to sing my high note while all of this was

[10] See the thoughtful discussion of this passage in Sherr, "Thoughts on Ockeghem's *Missa De plus en plus*." Recording: Clerks' Group, dir. Wickham, *Ockeghem: Missa De plus en plus*. The crucial passage begins at 4:10 – but don't miss the Cum sancto spiritu (5:55 ff.).

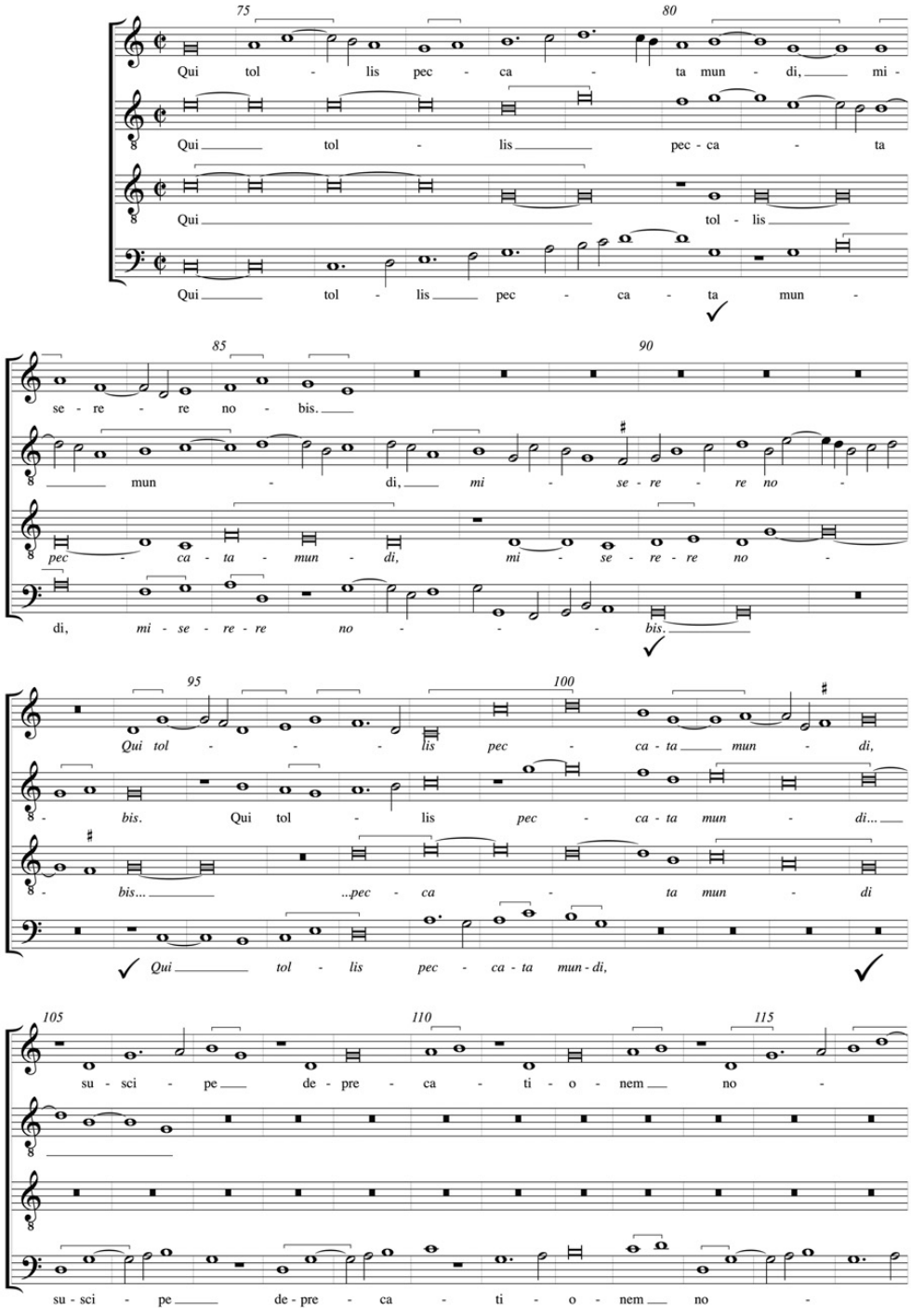
[11] In this and other musical examples in this study, checkmarks of different sizes indicate arrivals of different strengths.

[12] Sherr, "Thoughts on Ockeghem's *Missa De plus en plus*," 339. (Sherr adds "and idiotically," which might be going a bit far.)

[13] See in particular Figure 12.1.

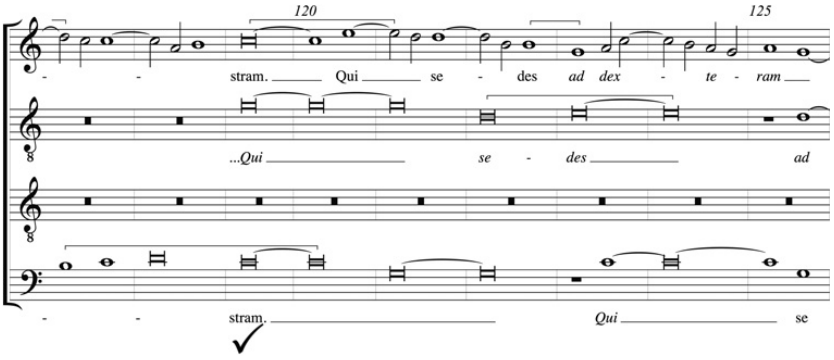
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Example 0.1 Okeghem, *Missa De plus en plus*, Qui tollis, opening.



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Example 0.1 (cont.)



happening, and then to leap down to *g* knowing that in doing so I was catalyzing further activity in the upper voices.

This moment's magic owes to Okeghem's choice to make it the end point of a larger musical shape. The Qui tollis begins by alternating between full and reduced texture, with a relatively light touch thanks to repeated arrivals on the same, comfortable pitch. The motivically driven passage that follows strips things down to two voices while giving the polyphony unprecedented focus. As the duo nears its conclusion, Okeghem engineers a harmonic swerve (m. 119), then dramatizes the arrival with a high-flying altus and syncopation-plus-a-high-note in the discantus.[14] It is the sort of calibrated ramp-up musicians live for – a climax in which the expanding energy of the passage up to that point, coupled with the freshness and exuberance of the arrival, produce an endorphin rush.[15] Okeghem, I was starting to understand in a visceral way, was working in the same affective space, and with the same charge, as the refrain of Mia Martini's "Almeno tu nell'universo" or the last seconds of Stevie Wonder's "I Just Called to Say I Love You." He had infused his music with an emotional intensity that, notwithstanding the chronological distance and foreign compositional language, can still pack a punch.

Already by the time of our spring concert at a local West Philadelphia church, this music had caught me in its net. The following semester I enrolled in an introduction to Renaissance music taught by Lawrence

[14] Syncopation because the music here flows in breves.

[15] I am grateful to Parberry for sharing with me a digitized concert recording, which confirms that I did not imagine this moment. All these years later I am struck by Parberry's uncommon – but correct – decision to take sections notated under ¢, the Qui tollis included, faster than those notated under O.

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(Larry) Bernstein, a world-class scholar and life-changing mentor. Since then much of what I've done has been devoted to understanding the world out of which this black magic flowed – the people, the institutions, the patterns of thought, the documentary paper trail, and, even more, the stuff of the music, that is, the compositional moves that underpinned the sorts of things I'd experienced in Okeghem and soon began to find in Du Fay, Josquin, and their contemporaries. I gradually came to realize that what I was really after was a deeper understanding, both intellectually and experientially, of their contrapuntal art.

Counterpoint, *The Art of Counterpoint*, and *The Art of Counterpoint from Du Fay to Josquin*

When late medieval music theorists speak of counterpoint, their point of departure is two voices singing note-against-note.[16] As the theorist–composer Johannes Tinctoris defines the term in the first chapter of his famous *De arte contrapuncti* (*The Art of Counterpoint*) of 1477, counterpoint

> is a moderate and reasoned harmony brought about by the placement of one pitch against another. And it is called "counterpoint" [*contrapunctus*] from "against" [*contra*] and "point" [*punctus*], because it is constituted out of one note placed against another, as if one point against another. Hence every counterpoint is made from the mixture of pitches. This mixture either sounds together sweetly to the ears, and thus is a concord, or disagrees in sound harshly, and then is a discord.[17]

Unsurprisingly, the lion's share of Tinctoris's treatise is concerned with concords and discords – that is, with the definition and proper treatment of consonances and dissonances.

But Tinctoris's ultimate aims lie elsewhere. For one thing, his discussion extends to "diminished" (*diminutum*) or, metaphorically, "florid" (*floridus*) counterpoint, which embraces all the possibilities of multivoice part writing.[18] For another, his prologue makes clear the ultimate stakes of his project:

[16] See Fuller, "Organum – *discantus* – *contrapunctus*"; and Wegman, "What Is Counterpoint?"

[17] Tinctoris, *Complete Theoretical Works*, *De arte contrapuncti*, I:1. "Contrapunctus itaque est moderatus ac rationabilis concentus per positionem unius vocis contra aliam effectus. Diciturque 'contrapunctus' a 'contra' et 'punctus,' eo quod una nota contra aliam posita tanquam uno puncto contra alium constituatur. Hinc omnis contrapunctus ex mixtura vocum fit. Quequidem mixtura aut dulciter auribus consonat, et sic est concordantia, aut aspere dissonat, et tunc est discordantia."

[18] Ibid., II:20.

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I have decided expressly to write down those few things that I have perceived by sleepless study concerning the art of counterpoint, which is produced from consonances, ruling (witness Boethius) all delight in music, to the glory and honor of the eternal majesty of him to whom counterpoint itself, as is commanded in the psalm, "is made joyful and comely praise," and the utility of all those who study this outstanding art.[19]

Tinctoris goes on to praise eight composers of his time who practice what he calls a "divine art" (*arte divina*). When he mentions that in his own works he has sought to imitate them "in arranging the concords" (*concordantias ordinando*), there can be no doubt that what he really has in mind is the whole ensemble of technical and esthetic strategies that lies behind polyphony for two, three, four, and five voices. In Tinctoris's treatise, "one note placed against another" is a metonym for "the polyphonic art in all its complexity." This study follows Tinctoris in adopting a broad, metaphorical definition of counterpoint. The book's goal is to probe how the art of counterpoint, which is to say all the technical aspects of composition, conditions esthetic experience.

Since my title riffs on Tinctoris's, readers may be expecting a close link between the two texts – particularly considering that, as a perusal of the table of contents makes plain, Tinctoris's writings form the backbone of Chapters 3–6. In fact this book does not aim to explicate *De arte contrapuncti*, nor to apply the treatise's main theoretical agendas to the repertory under discussion. As noted, Tinctoris spends most of his time on compositional nuts-and-bolts. By contrast, *The Art of Counterpoint from Du Fay to Josquin* strives to pick up where Tinctoris leaves off, delving into aspects of musical poetics that move beyond hard-and-fast rules to more abstract esthetic principles.

Even within this framework, clarification is needed with respect to chronology. This book embraces not only the sorts of works Tinctoris had in mind when he wrote his treatise, but also music from the next generation. And yet the central aim is not to trace developments in musical style – that is, to explain how the technical building blocks of contrapuntal practice evolved over time. For that there are already good resources available in the published literature, not least writings that, as with Julie Cumming's apt phrase "from variety to repetition," point toward

[19] The full paragraph reads: "Iam itaque inter cetera de arte contrapuncti, qui ex consonantiis, omnem musice delectationem (Boetio teste) regentibus, conficitur, ad gloriam et honorem sempiterne maiestatis eius cui per ipsum contrapunctum, ut in Psalmo imperatur, 'fit iocunda decoraque laudatio,' ac omnium huius artis egregie studiosorum utilitatem, ea pauca que pervigili studio percepi conscribere omnino statui." Tinctoris, ibid., prologue.

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a significant stylistic shift in the years around 1480: from long-limbed, largely independent melodic lines to what Joshua Rifkin has termed motivicity, that is, the saturation of the musical texture with bite-sized, melodically and rhythmically fixed motives.[20] This late fifteenth-century stylistic revolution, with its transformative implications for how composers composed, is taken on board here and will have a role to play in the discussion.

But for all that Okeghem and his cohort composed in almost totally different ways from the cohort that came next, those differences are ultimately secondary to the argument of this book. Here the emphasis is on commonalities, on a kind of esthetic thinking that unites rather than divides the title figures and their contemporaries while largely separating them from their predecessors and followers. That thinking, I will suggest, pertains to how the building blocks of multivoice music are stitched together into musical phrases, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters, and books – how in this period composers took a new interest in, and found new ways of handling, musical pacing and flow.[21] Probing this sort of thinking, which operates at various levels of zoom, can help us deepen our engagement with and appreciation of their contrapuntal art.

The subject is so large as to prove impossible to treat in all of its aspects. That is because what is being explored here is essentially a new field,[22] and because the argument encompasses too much material to cover adequately even in several monographs. As such the book strives to get at the essence of the main ideas (Parts I, II, and III) while providing heterogeneous examples designed to illustrate possibilities and invite further analysis (Part IV). Notwithstanding a focus on the "big-three" composers (Du Fay, Okeghem, and Josquin) and a handful of prominent genres, these chapters include many discussions of music by other, in some cases today unknown figures, and take into consideration massively more music than can reasonably be addressed explicitly. A related point is that even if at times a given composer's inflection of the musical language becomes central to the argument, at bottom this is not a book about individual

[20] Cumming, "From Variety to Repetition"; Rifkin, "Motivik – Konstruktion – Humanismus"; and Rifkin, "Miracles, Motivicity, and Mannerism," esp. 244.

[21] Here and throughout this study I use terms such as paragraph metaphorically; and I avoid "form," which tends to put the weight on so-called structure rather than flow. Some early roots of these ideas can be found in a section of Rodin, *Josquin's Rome* (pp. 293–303) that compares approaches to musical pacing in motets by Bertrandus Vaqueras and Josquin.

[22] Writings on this topic are scattered and often take the form of brief asides. I have found the following especially useful: Clement, "The Approach to the Cadence"; Bukofzer, "*Caput*: A Liturgico-Musical Study"; Fallows, "Polyphonic Song"; Page, *Discarding Images*; Bernstein, "Ockeghem's *Ave Maria*"; and Fitch, *Johannes Ockeghem*.

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composers. Instead this study aims to identify and elaborate a broadly applicable musical poetics that to varying degrees sweeps up all the composers and genres of the period. The focus is unapologetically on notated polyphony – not because that is the only music that matters, but because the surviving repertory of (overwhelmingly) masses, motets, and songs affords esthetic and intellectual pleasure as well as cultural and historical insight of a kind you can't get anywhere else.

What Comes Next

The first chapter sketches the book's central thesis: that in the period under consideration composers cultivated an esthetics of opposition that privileges intensification, deintensification, and dramatic arcs – and that these developments can be contrasted with a more circular, "kaleidoscopic," or "*alternatim*" esthetics common in earlier and later music. Chapter 1 presents these ideas compactly, if rather breathlessly, in order to provide a baseline for what follows.

Part of what has made this book a challenge to write is an almost-complete absence of documentary evidence about the poetics of compositional practice. Chapter 2 digs into this problem, laying out the issues while analyzing some of the writings that do survive and seeking out analogies in other areas of fifteenth-century culture.

Only rarely can such help be found in the writings of music theorists, whose preoccupations, at least in their treatises, were mostly very different from ours. And yet in a passage devoted to the idea of *varietas*, Tinctoris appears to hint at a theory of musical flow. Proceeding from research by Sean Gallagher and a new translation of *De arte contrapuncti* by Jeffrey Dean, the four chapters of Part II offer an interpretation of this concept (nonspecialists may wish to focus on Chapter 4). The discussion begins with a close look at Tinctoris's uses of musical terms and what he means by them (Chapter 3) before presenting a definition of *varietas* that sees the concept as performing important esthetic work (Chapter 4), an analysis of how Tinctoris the musician connects with Tinctoris the theorist (Chapter 5), and a consideration of how *varietas* operates in the pieces that Tinctoris says exemplify it (Chapter 6). As a participant–observer, Tinctoris is one of the best witnesses we have. Although *varietas* is hardly the magic key that unlocks the music, wrestling with Tinctoris's unfamiliar words and conceptual starting points can help illuminate the art of counterpoint.

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Leaving Tinctoris behind, Part III explores several fundaments of musical style – elements that catalyzed the esthetic developments at the heart of this book. Chapter 7 asks what is special in the fifteenth century about the most basic compositional building blocks: rhythm, meter, cadences, and so on. Chapter 8 turns a spotlight on one of the most important engines of musical style: textural contrast. Chapters 9 and 10 argue that the major genres and subgenres of the day offered powerful temporal templates. Together these chapters show how stylistic, generic, and formal conventions facilitated an esthetics of opposition.

Because in Part III the focus is on broad phenomena, musical examples are scarce. Redressing this balance, the bulk of Part IV explores the many different approaches composers took when transforming the compositional parameters into deliberately shaped musical experiences. Chapter 11 addresses issues of musical pacing in songs from across Du Fay's career, ranging from the role of wordless introductions in his early songs to how *Malheureulx cueur* animates the virelai form. The dramatic potential of melodic range comes to the fore in Chapter 12. Chapter 13 delves into a special kind of Osanna setting we find in music by Busnoys and Josquin, Chapter 14 into seven breathtaking conclusions across genres. Chapter 15 pushes at the book's chronological limits, comparing settings of *Pater noster* by Jean Richafort, Josquin, and Adrian Willaert that pursue divergent esthetic goals. A concluding chapter, one of the most accessible to nonspecialist readers (along with 2, 4, 7, 9–10, 13, and 15), considers how modern performance can bring to life the art of counterpoint from Du Fay to Josquin.

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