Journal of the Royal Musical Association, 150.2, 623–628
doi:10.1017/rma.2025.10053

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Review Article

Margaret Bent on Motets

DAVID FALLOWS

Margaret Bent, *The Motet in the Late Middle Ages*. Oxford University Press, 2023. xxxviii + 735 pp. ISBN 9780190063771 (hard cover); 9780190063801 (digital).

Another scholarly journal has apparently decided that no book should be reviewed by somebody named in the book's acknowledgements. Margaret Bent has over seventy names in her main list, and she warmly thanks or praises dozens of others in the course of her book, which is a definitive report on the state of play in research on the motet repertory of the years 1300–1420. It is safe to say that nobody who is at all qualified to review the book is omitted. That is partly because Bent has been inviting authorities from across the world to speak at her monthly All Souls seminars for over thirty years, and since the time of the Covid lockdown the seminars have been seen internationally on Zoom, with respondents also from across the world. An astonishing and massive public has contributed to making her book what it is. (Declaration: I am indeed named, but I learnt so much from the book that I feel required to make my statement.)

What we have here is a collection of essays, some of them up to forty years old, many totally new. The older essays are all updated to take account of how the subject has changed over the years, with the updatings for the most part clearly signposted (though you need to know the dates of the more recent literature, often cited but never dated except in the main bibliography). Some of the new essays are older material that just happened not to be published at the time (particularly a group on the 'musicians' motets', to which I shall return); some are newly written to clarify the state of the subject and to fill gaps in the narrative. In addition, many of the musical examples are available only online, partly because there is much in the nature of motets that renders straight page-publication far less than ideal, whereas the online editions can spread at will (and they are beautifully set by the late Timothy Symons).[1] The only problem is that if you have a monitor much less than thirty inches, the music will be more or less unreadable.[2]

Email: david.fallows@manchester.ac.uk

[1] Most were already available in modern editions, many of them edited by Frank Ll. Harrison, who was famously stingy with editorial accidentals; Bent has been famously generous with editorial accidentals in the past, but in most cases here is only marginally more generous than Harrison. I would have been inclined to be more generous in a fair number of cases (even though I am generally more stingy than most).

[2] Actually, there is a further problem. Tables 5.1 and 25.1 are also online but presented landscape, with no clue as to how they can be turned into portrait. Since both have a stern message 'OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF Thu Aug 10 2023', it looks as though someone was aware of the problem but never returned to fix it. These tables are unreadable as they stand.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal Musical Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2025.10053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Plainly the title *The Motet in the Late Middle Ages* is a misnomer. For one thing, the book says almost nothing about the extremely complicated story of the motet before 1300, though that is fairly well covered in *A Critical Companion to Medieval Motets*, edited by Jared C. Hartt (Boydell, 2018). For another, it says almost nothing about the even more complicated story of the motet after 1420, which is well covered in the much older but still enormously useful *The Motet in the Age of Du Fay* by Julie E. Cumming (Cambridge University Press, 1999). For yet another thing, 'late middle ages' could mean almost anything, though to be fair, Bent usefully and clearly describes her scope in the introductory chapter — while becoming so cautious in her definition of what a motet may be that she is reduced to the formulation 'music with words' (p. 2), which gets us nowhere at all. Broadly speaking, we can surely agree that her topic is mainly songs with at least two simultaneous texts and some kind of metrical organization. There are exceptions even in this book, but they are so plainly in the same (seriously eccentric) ballpark that we have no trouble including them as motets.[3]

'Seriously eccentric' may at first blush seem a wilful characterization. But where else in western music do we get music with two texts that in general have nothing to do with one another? Certainly we get operatic scenes where the characters have different texts that they sing simultaneously, but the composers generally do what they can to make it possible for the listener to perceive all those texts. Not with the motet. Bent writes that 'some readers may find the enterprise of identifying these strategies cerebral', and she stonily adds, 'this book is not for them' (p. 14). That I would massively dispute. This is a book for anybody with curiosity about how a highly refined culture — whether musical or not — can function.

After two preliminary chapters explaining the essence of the motet and the problems with the word 'isorhythm', Bent sets out in earnest with a group of essays on the *Roman de Fauvel* and Philippe de Vitry, which were largely prompted by the facsimile of the 'musical' *Fauvel* manuscript (F-Pn fr. 146) edited by Edward Roesner and others in 1990. (Sadly, this facsimile, particularly in its photographic detail, is far less good than the fastidious earlier facsimile edited by Pierre Aubry in 1907, though the more recent scans online at Gallica are magnificently clear.) With much reference to the most recent scholarship, she picks her way through the motets plausibly by Vitry. Famously, this is a fraught topic: from a certain viewpoint, Vitry can disappear from sight entirely, rather like the painter Giorgione two centuries later. At the end of the day, Bent refrains from any definitive picture (though she came close to it in her 2001 *Grove* article with Andrew Wathey), but as compensation she finds so much revealing detail in all these pieces that one really wants them all to be by Vitry.

Then she moves on to a series of chapters on the motets (mostly) of Guillaume de Machaut. Here she begins quietly, with a relatively simple article that originally marked the deaths of two great scholars, John Stevens and Philip Brett. After scintillating discussions of other Machaut motets, Bent puts the focus on his *Bone pastor/Bone pastor* and particularly the vexed question of its date. On the face of it, this should be for Guillaume de Trie's appointment as archbishop of Rheims in 1324. Another possibility is his inauguration, which was a year later, especially since the text states that he already has the mitre on his head, but Bent notes that Guillaume's

[3] A famous exception here is Dufay's through-composed *Vergine bella*, setting the first stanza of the last poem in Petrarca's *Canzoniere.* Bent ('Petrarch, Padua, the Malatestas, Du Fay and *Vergene bella*', in *Essays on Renaissance Music*, ed. by Fabrice Fitch and Jacobijn Kiel (Boydell, 2011), pp. 86–96) believes this to be a motet, as does Alejandro Enrique Planchart ('What's in a Name? Reflection on Some Works of Guillaume Du Fay', *Early Music*, 16.2 (1988), pp. 165–75), perhaps because of its devotional text. I fail to follow their arguments. Certainly there is nothing else quite like it, but that is what you could expect of Dufay. Calling it a motet explains nothing.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2025.10053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

deteriorated relationship with the canons after that makes later dating in Rheims most unlikely. On the other hand, Machaut seems not to have been in Rheims that early, so Lawrence Earp has now proposed that the motet was composed for an event in Paris in 1332. Whatever one concludes, this would be an unusually early date for a work by Machaut, so that leads Bent into a new and surprising broadside (pp. 254–59), challenging recent work by younger scholars who have been seeking to propose later dates for quite a few compositions and treatises of the ars nova generation. In particular she confronts a proposal by Karen Desmond that the original version of *Bone pastor* was shorter than that in its earliest known manuscript, and her main statement here could stand as a summary of everything that this book has to say (p. 259):

> It is a central premiss of the present book that at least the most sophisticated motets are finished and rounded constructions of text and music, often with the mutually reinforcing integrity of a Chinese puzzle or a crossword, leaving no room for addition, subtraction or substitution, as attested by densely packed structural, numerical, melodic, rhythmic, citational and symbolic text–music relationships.

A group of essays on English music begins with three reprinted chapters on the fragments from Yoxford and the last two motets in the Old Hall manuscript. Then she offers new material on the latter, starting with the crucially important matter of the date of its main layer, which she had originally dated 1413–15 but then (after Roger Bowers's important 1976 essay on Leonel Power) dated to after 1421.[4] Six years may not seem very much. But with a newly established death date for John Cooke (provided by Andrew Wathey in 2022 by email; see p. 472), she is able to restate her original tentative guess — now with added emphasis and absolute conviction — that much of the material in the second layer of Old Hall is autograph of four composers in Henry V's chapel, thus establishing the earliest known composer autographs from anywhere.

That leads to a consideration of the linked motets by chapel members Damett and Sturgeon. They are — supremely oddly — linked by a common tenor: *Benedictus qui ve-/ [n]it in nomine Domini*, with the first half being taken by Damett and the second half by Sturgeon. That Damett transposes it down a step while Sturgeon has it at pitch makes the situation even odder. Strangest of all is the omission of the letter 'n' at the beginning of Damett's motet: if it is really autograph this can be no mistake, because the opening 'I' is capitalized and vastly expanded (see the reproduction from Old Hall that she prints on p. 479). So the omission of the letter 'n' must have a real significance, as yet to be identified, and that identification seems to me to be of the highest priority.[5] Plainly the motets belong together, despite being separated by Cooke's *Alma proles* in the Old Hall manuscript. But the full story here remains to be explored.

Moving on to Italian motets, Bent opens with a heavily updated version of her important 1984 paper that defined the special features of the Italian motet for the first time. The matter that remains unresolved and controversial concerns the fourth voice, which almost always appears and almost always conflicts with what most of us would agree were the normal conventions of fourteenth-century counterpoint: Bent later comes up with the term 'bifocal' (p. 556), and it is easy enough to argue that this will merit substantial discussion in the

[4] She credits me (p. 465) with having persuaded her to reconsider the date in about 2017, forgetting that I (together with Alexandra Buckle) had made the earlier date the fundamental building block for a new chronology of Leonel's motets offered in the revised *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* article on him published in 2005. Sadly, the matter of Leonel's chronology does not come within the purview of her new book.

[5] A point made to me forcibly by the late Edgar H. Sparks.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2025.10053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

future.[6] The problem is made harder by the Bologna manuscript Q15, the unique source for a very large portion of Ciconia's motets and copied at least a decade after his death. But when such a massive proportion of Italian motets have these features, we must begin to wonder whether we have misunderstood something fundamental here.

One example of this is the fifth voice that Maricarmen Gómez identified (1985) for the French motet *Apollonis eclipsatur.* Bent states three times (pp. 293, 313–14, and 536) that this voice does not fit and must be for another motet, without ever noting that it is the same length as the others. (Okay: the length of 144 breves turns up several times in this repertory, but it is still a relevant consideration.) Certainly the new voice has many counterintuitive moments, as Gómez concedes, but they are not much worse than the fifth voice for the same piece in the lost Strasbourg manuscript.

Bent ends this chapter (pp. 528–30) with a resounding endorsement of Dufay, rather than Ciconia, as the true unifier of the Italian and French motet traditions. I am not at all happy with that. The available information is that we have a strikingly uniform style in Ciconia's motets, a style outlined in earlier Italian motets but by no means made inevitable by them. What we have from Dufay, in probably a much fuller account of his work, is one motet very much in the Ciconian style, namely *Vasilissa ergo gaude*, and a string of works that owe rather more to the French than to the Italian tradition but remain quite distinct from either. That is to say that I would endorse her praise of Dufay, but in entirely different terms, and I would be unhappy about any view that attempted to downplay Ciconia's importance. So far as I can see, the three known motets of Hubertus de Salinis (discussed in detail in Chapter 27) also have nothing in common with either the French or the Italian traditions.

Bent then returns to Ciconia with an essay on his motets, originally written for a planned but aborted paperback reprint of her Ciconia edition (with Anne Hallmark) in the series Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century. That reprint was to be in three volumes. This new statement contains so much new material that the tongue hangs out for resuscitation of the prefaces to the other two volumes.[7]

The volume closes with three articles *rechauffées*: one on papal motets in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, a matter that was never a topic in itself — they share too little to create a genre — and gains nothing from its new version; one on the most tantalizing of all fourteenth-century musical documents, the two leaves of the Trémoïlle manuscript, where she updates the identifications of the pieces listed in the index and gives added importance to this fragment; and one on the manuscript now in Turin containing everything that we know of the repertory at the Lusignan court in Cyprus. On this topic she updates her earlier statement about the style of the motets in that source, and crucially gives what is the most compelling statement so far (pp. 679–81) against the loopy theory that it was copied in the 1430s.[8]

[6] A preliminary discussion appears in Andrew Westerhaus, 'A Lexicon of Contratenor Behaviour: Case Studies of Equal-Cantus Italian Motets from the MS Bologna Q.15', *Plainsong and Medieval Music*, 18.2 (2009), pp. 91–112.

[7] I am obviously gratified that she now shares my view that the motet *O virum omnimoda veneratione* was most likely composed well after 1400, as against the majority view that it was from the 1390s, but she seems to have misread Carolann Buff's doctoral thesis ('Ciconia's Equal-Cantus Motets and the Creation of Early Fifteenth-Century Style', Princeton University, 1995) as accepting the earlier date. Buff's views were the very foundation stone for my own reassessment (2019) of the dates of Ciconia's earliest songs.

[8] As proposed in Karl Kügle, 'Glorious Sounds for a Holy Warrior: New Light on Codex Turin J.II.9', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 65.3 (2012), pp. 637–90.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2025.10053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

But I said I would return to the section on musicians' motets. These are centrally important because she has been pondering this music and talking about it for over forty years, but has never actually published anything extensive on any of them. That is partly because a planned co-publication with David Howlett fell by the wayside when it emerged that Howlett's views on the role of number differed from hers. Her discussion begins from *Apollonis eclipsatur*, a motet that is now known from an astonishing fifteen manuscripts, most of them now fragmentary but stunning evidence of the work's favour across Europe and a substantial rise from the mere eight sources Harrison knew when he edited it (in 1974) for Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century.

Coussemaker first printed the texts in 1869. Over the years since then there has been a stream of documentation about the musicians mentioned, starting with Suzanne Clercx and Richard Hoppin in 1955, then Karl Kügle, Andrew Wathey (in publications over the years but also in a whole string of email messages over the past decade, reported in Bent's footnotes), and others. As the documentation grows, more and more of the thirteen men named in *Apollonis* turn out to be composers, or at least likely composers. Given that we happen to have no ascriptions in musical sources before the fifteenth century, there is a chance that this motet contains some of the missing names. Since Bent now proposes (p. 328 and passim) a date of around 1330 for *Apollonis* and just a few years later for *Musicalis scientia*, there now seems a good chance that we have a far better picture than we thought of the state of musical composition in the first quarter of the fourteenth century.

There is another point here that comes into focus if we consider the fifteenth century. In the early 1470s Loyset Compère composed his *Omnium bonorum plena* with the names of fourteen musicians, of whom all but one are known to be composers. Bent asserts (p. 383 n. 22) that 'some of the names […] alongside the names of Du Fay, Ockeghem, Busnois, Caron and Josquin, are equally unknown to us', but as Rob Wegman's 1996 article shows, every name is known specifically as a composer, with the single exception of Georget de Brelles.[9] The main reason for drawing attention to this is that we can benefit from the fuller documentation that survives from the fifteenth century and see different categories among 'musicians' motets'. Compère's *Omnium bonorum plena* is evidently a 'composers' motet', which I am now proposing may also be the case with *Apollonis eclipsatur.* There is another category which we can call the 'singers' motet', exemplified in the case of Binchois's *Nove cantum melodie*, expressly composed for the baptism on 18 January 1431 of Antoine, son and heir to Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy. The second half of the quadruplum names nineteen singers.[10] All but four of these turn up on the earliest payment list we have from Philip's chapel, dated five years later.[11] The first mentioned, Jacques de Templeuve, had died in 1436, so only three are

[9] Rob C. Wegman, 'From Maker to Composer: Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450–1500', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 49.3 (1996), pp. 409–79 (pp. 473–74); see also Joshua Rifkin, 'Compere, "Des Pres", and the Choirmasters of Cambrai: *Omnium bonorum plena* Reconsidered', *Acta musicologica*, 81.1 (2009), pp. 55–73. When Wegman wrote, it was still believed that Josquin was in Milan at the time. For Rifkin, this was no longer believed, but the main point of his article was to point out that no other known document or ascription gives Josquin as just 'Des Pres'. My response to that is in the added remarks to the paperback reprint of my *Josquin* (Brepols, 2020), p. 525.

[10] The best version of the text is in Andrew Kirkman and Philip Weller, 'Binchois's Texts', *Music & Letters*, 77.4 (1996), pp. 566–96 (p. 588).

[11] Lille, Archives départementales du Nord, B 1957, fols 381–87; see Jeanne Marix, *Histoire de la musique et des musiciens de la cour de Bourgogne sous le règne de Philippe le Bon* (Heitz, 1939), p. 242.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2025.10053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unaccounted for. I think we can take it that the text includes everybody who sang at the baptism.

That in its turn offers a context for *Sub Arturo plebs.* The real history of this motet dates back to Brian Trowell's article 'A Fourteenth-Century Ceremonial Motet and its Composer', which proposes composition in the 1350s, as against the previously received date of around 1400.[12] Bent first published her doubts about Trowell's date in 1973.[13] In the half-century since then, she has repeated her view many times, and yet again in the present book.

My own history with the motet goes back to 1980, when I wrote about the composer Alanus in the *New Grove* (1980), acknowledging the doubts that Bent and Ursula Günther had about such an early date and reporting Bent's observation that many of the figures identified by Trowell were 'not mentioned in the sources as being musicians, but merely members of the chapel'. I then added: 'But this perhaps dismisses too much as mere coincidence: even if the proposed date must be adjusted a little, it seems more likely that there is still some room for adjustment to received notions of mid-14th-century style or styles.' Sadly, I wrote in the *Revised New Grove* (2001), 'Roger Bowers established, with further research and identifications, that the musicians named cannot all have been active at the same time and that the list must be to some extent retrospective'. Now that I have read Bent's book and re-read the other literature, I cannot accept that view.[14] First, the people named must all have been present at the event, whatever it was, whether as singers or in some other role. Second, the firm identifications are all associated with the households of Edward III and the Black Prince in the 1350s and early 1360s. Among the bullseyes in Trowell's original article were his identification of G. de Horarum Fonte as William of Tideswell (a tiny village in Derbyshire but named already in the Doomsday Book), in the chapel royal in the 1350s; E. de Murisco (Edmund Mirescough), clerk of the Black Prince's household chapel from 1357; Edmund de Bury, attached to the chapel royal from the mid-1350s; William Mugge, in the chapel royal from 1340; and William Oxwick, dean of the Black Prince's chapel by 1357. Every detail of Bent's book goes towards demonstrating that the music and the text in these pieces are inextricably interrelated. To suggest that the music must have been composed later absolutely counters common sense. It is time to move towards a picture of the motet that makes composition of *Sub Arturo plebs* in the 1350s or early 1360s possible.

[12] *Acta musicologica*, 29.2–3 (1957), pp. 65–75.

[13] Margaret Bent, 'The Transmission of English Music 1300–1500', in *Studien zur Tradition in der Musik*, ed. by H. H. Eggebrecht and M. Lütolf (Katzbichler, 1973), pp. 65–83.

[14] Among the key statements were Roger Bowers, 'Fixed Points in the Chronology of English Fourteenth-Century Polyphony', *Music & Letters*, 71.3 (1990), pp. 313–35, and Andrew Wathey, 'The Peace of 1360–1369 and Anglo-French Musical Relations', *Early Music History*, 9 (1990), pp. 129–74.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2025.10053 Published online by Cambridge University Press