

I The music of the past and the modern ear

I The good, the bad and the boring

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Considering how readily musicologists criticize one another – witness the merciless footnotes (and reviews) of so many books and articles – the innocent bystander must find it strange that they remain unwilling to venture judgments about the quality of the music around which they work. The explanation for the anomaly lies partly in fear of contradiction (which is why scholars feel safer pointing to evidently good pieces than to bad); partly in the view of surviving compositions as ‘documents’, and thus sacrosanct, unsuitable to be engaged at an interpretative level; and partly (and quite properly) in the difficulty of understanding enough of the technical basis of medieval styles to enable valid judgments to be made. If only the last of these is fully justifiable, all are understandable concerns. But it is hard to see what can be the purpose of musicology if not to advise people on what to hear and how to hear it. Separating out the good, the bad and the indifferent, and helping listeners enjoy the best, is surely the least we can offer society in return for our keep.

Certainly there are any number of reasons for avoiding the problem. By whose standards are we to judge quality? How can we take account of period views without written authority for them? What evidence is there for medieval musical aesthetics? And yet, on closer inspection not all these difficulties appear insuperable.

Is it really the case, for example, that quality is ‘period-dependent’; or, to put it another way, that only those alive around the time a piece of music was composed were capable of arriving at a valid judgment of its quality? If we can leave to one side the insidious moral slant to this question (do we have any right to criticize the work of other cultures?) then there seems good reason to doubt that music is meaningless beyond its own time and place. Even a brief acquaintance with medieval polyphony reveals that its forward motion is generated by juxtapositions of dissonance and consonance: melodic lines start in a consonant relationship (for example, a fifth or an octave apart), then move up or down by different amounts to produce a more dissonant sonority (say a third and a sixth above the lowest note), the tension in which then seems to require resolution into another consonance (in this case, outwards to the nearest fifth and octave). That this was the experience of medieval listeners is amply confirmed by their own theories of counterpoint; and for us the principle is clearly comparable to that which underlies most music of subsequent centuries.

Similarly, a hierarchical relationship of structure and decoration, such as has been laboriously if incontrovertibly demonstrated for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century repertoires, is equally apparent in medieval music. Notre Dame organum and the fourteenth-century motet (to take only the simplest examples) are clearly nothing but decorations of an evident structure (their chant and the consonances strategically placed around it). Again, the observation can be confirmed as valid for the music’s contemporaries by their manuals on composition and improvisation.

The counterpoint treatises offer such crucial evidence that it is worth pausing for a moment to look at some examples. The early (?) thirteenth-century Vatican

Organum Treatise¹ provides in its text instructions for making well-formed progressions over any likely pair of adjacent chant notes, using two voices. The result of applying these rules would be a sequence of two-voice chords – a harmonization of the chant. But what the accompanying music examples illustrate is a range of elaborations, in the added voice, of the simple progressions described in the text. Thus the reader is instructed verbally in those matters which can be expressed simply in words – the basic principles of good voice-leading – but by example in those aspects which allowed an almost infinite variety of possibilities, namely the possible decorations of those basic progressions.

We find exactly the same dual approach in the fourteenth-century counterpoint treatise of Petrus frater dictus palma ociosa (Brother Peter of the Withered Palm?).² The text outlines the essential principles of good progression, but, explaining that ‘of innumerability it is impossible to have certainty’, Peter leaves his music examples to demonstrate what can be done with counterpoint when (in his delightful phrase) it is ‘adorned with flowers’. And just as the Vatican examples illustrated patterning typical of contemporary organum, so Brother Peter’s show how a simple harmonization of a Mass chant may expand into a setting typical of the fourteenth-century motet. Clearly, composition was taught in terms of structure and decoration. And therefore an essential assumption (perhaps the essential assumption) about the way music ‘works’ is common to them and to us.

We can say that evidence of period taste exists, then; at least in so far as it can be deduced from writings designed to aid medieval teachers of music. In addition a certain amount can be deduced by examining composers’ priorities during the composition process. Examples have to be very detailed to be worthwhile,³ but essentially it is possible in certain types of strictly ordered compositions (mostly isorhythmic) to see composers being forced into choices between the competing demands of melodic writing, rhythmic schemes and good counterpoint; and from their eventual choices some indication of each composer’s priorities is available to us. Such study is in its infancy; but there seems good reason to suppose that in time we will find that the music is a richer source of evidence about itself than any surviving documentation.

We do also have qualitative judgments of specific works surviving from the period. The English writer known as Anonymous IV tells us that Master Perotinus was a better composer of discant clausulae than his predecessor Leoninus, but implies that Leoninus was the better composer of organum – a remark that would be more use today if we knew what Leoninus wrote. Johannes Boen, writing on notation in about 1350,⁴ cites as an example ‘that most excellent motet *Virtutibus*’ – the four-voice *Impudenter/Virtutibus/Alma/CT* (probably) by Philippe de Vitry – and it would be a brave scholar who disagreed with him, for the piece is clearly a virtuoso display of four-part isorhythmic writing. There are also the fascinating

¹ I. Godt and B. Rivera, ‘The Vatican Organum Treatise – A colour reproduction, transcription and translation into English’, *Gordon Athol Anderson: In Memoriam*, Musicological Studies Vol. ix/2 (Henryville, Institute of Mediaeval Music, 1984), pp.264–345, 1.

² J. Wolf, ‘Ein Beitrag zur Diskantlehre des 14. Jahrhunderts’, *Sammelbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft*, xv (1913–14), pp.504–34.

³ See D. Leech-Wilkinson, *Compositional techniques in the four-part isorhythmic motets of Philippe de Vitry and his contemporaries* (New York, 1989) and *Machaut’s Mass: An introduction* (Oxford, 1990).

⁴ Johannes Boen: *Ars (Musicae)*, ed. F. A. Gallo, *Corpus Scriptorum de Musica*, xix (American Institute of Musicology, 1972), p.26.

remarks of Guillaume de Machaut about some of his own songs, recorded in his narrative poem *Le Voir Dit* in 1363–4. The music for his ballade ‘Ploures, dames’ ‘pleases me very much’; that for ‘Nes qu’on porroit’ ‘seems to me very strange and very novel’, and ‘it’s a long time since I made anything as good, in my opinion’, ‘the lower parts are as sweet as unsalted gruel’. An unnamed rondeau, possibly ‘Puis qu’en oubli’, ‘seems to me good’; while ‘Dix et sept’ is ‘one of the best things I’ve made for seven years past, in my opinion’.⁵ Yet despite the rarity value of Machaut’s remarks their interpretation is not easy. Was unsalted gruel sweet, or is this a joke? Is Machaut saying that to him the piece sounds sweet or sour? How did he rank his last seven years’ work in relation to ‘Dix et sept’? We have so few such remarks that we are almost bound to read too much into them.

We need to be wary, too, of relying on a single view of a piece. There will always be maverick opinions, and a surviving view may be one of them. How might the twenty-fifth century approach Romantic opera if the only surviving contemporary view were Nietzsche’s, that *Carmen* was ‘the best opera in existence’⁶? (‘This view is especially valuable since we know that Nietzsche was a close associate of Wagner. We must surely conclude that even those closest to the composer were in no doubt that Bizet was the greater figure . . .’) It need hardly be said, in the light of such a possibility, that period views need confirmation from study of the music, not vice versa.

The wider field of medieval aesthetics has relatively little to offer. Medieval writing about musical beauty tends to be abstract (concerned with the power of music in the ancient world) rather than specific (this is a good piece because . . .). In the rare cases where examples of musical effects are offered, they tend to be drawn from the repertory of ecclesiastical chant – a reflection partly of the clerical background of author and audience, but also of the fact that while chant was heard on a daily basis – was, in fact, the primary musical experience of most literate people – polyphony was relatively rare, confined for the most part to festal occasions in a few of the wealthiest institutions. Despite providing the main area of compositional activity it played too insignificant a part in the lives of the writing classes to stimulate detailed speculation. Its higher mechanisms were taught verbally and by example. Although composed polyphony required literacy for its practice, there was little need for high level speculation about compositional technique, still less for a generalized theory of musical perception.

As a consequence, it has sometimes been assumed that medieval composition is better thought of as a craft than an art – the application of rules rather than the creation of beauty⁷ – and, therefore, that discussion of medieval music should be limited to description of its evident form. Such a distinction is meaningless. Unless he is composing by numbers (an option which treatises do offer to the inexpert), a composer cannot help writing what to him sounds good: it is, after all, his only way of achieving job satisfaction.

⁵ These remarks are considered in greater depth in my forthcoming study of *Le Voir Dit*. A good (and available) introduction is S. J. Williams, ‘The lady, the lyrics and the letters’, *Early Music*, v (1977), pp. 462–8.

⁶ Letter to Heinrich Köselitz, 8 December 1881, published in G. Colli and M. Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche Briefwechsel*, Abt. 3, Bd. 1: *Januar 1880–Dezember 1884* (Berlin, 1981), p. 147.

⁷ See, for example, E. E. Lowinsky, ‘Musical genius: evolution and origins of a concept’, *Musical Quarterly*, (1964), esp. pp. 476–8 and 489–90; repr. in Lowinsky, *Music in the culture of the Renaissance and other essays* (Chicago, 1989) pp. 49–50 and 55.

There is a limit, then, to how much of a 'medieval view' of musical values can be recovered. Documentary evidence is rare, and very difficult to interpret. On the other hand, we do have a great deal of music; we know a lot about the grammatical principles on which it rests; and the music itself is a rich source of evidence for the way these principles were built upon in practice. There must be a good case to be made for judging a piece on its success in applying medieval compositional techniques. At the very least, that should provide a firm basis for a wider ranging consideration of quality. To what extent might this already be possible?

Some contrasts are obvious. Few would disagree that, for instance, Machaut's *Messe de Notre Dame* is a far finer achievement than the Mass of Tournai. It is not hard to isolate the towering monuments. We need to be able to deal with less striking contrasts, to distinguish, for example, between better and worse songs and motets. It would be unrealistic to expect, at this stage, to be able to compare between repertories; but we should be able to get somewhere in sorting pieces within each. We should surely be able to offer some indication of which are the best Machaut motets, even if, because of its wider chronological span, it is too early to point to the best pieces in the Montpellier manuscript, for example.

Some basic steps are self-evident. It seems very likely that, through a process of natural selection, the manuscripts offer a high proportion of competent to good pieces. Ascriptions in the manuscripts of pieces to composers may imply fame, and so quality, provided that the composers so named are not local to the copying of the manuscript or, if they are, that their works also occur elsewhere. On these grounds we need to be wary of, for instance, Matteo da Perugia, whose relatively large output is confined to the Modena manuscript. He is a prime example of a composer whose greatness has been assumed on the basis of the large number of pieces surviving and the complexity of their notation. But the quality of his work remains to be demonstrated.

Similarly, the appearance of a piece in many different manuscripts clearly indicates its popularity; but again we need to be wary of converting that into evidence of perceived quality. The anonymous 'Jour a jour la vie' survives, in one form or another, in ten manuscripts; but it has yet to be shown that it owes its popularity to anything more than its amusing metrical contrasts. It may be fun to perform, but is it a good piece?

On the other hand, it may be that really bad pieces – the contrapuntally inept – offer valuable clues as to the way ordinary musicians composed. Isolating them should at least enable us to narrow the field of music worth hearing and studying. But if we are to approach the repertory from this end we need to be careful to distinguish between those pieces which are simply incompetent and those which look odd but which, on closer inspection, prove to be extending the language in ways which work. The latter will be applying principles consistently, albeit principles which differ to some extent from those which are conventionally followed, whereas the incompetent works are more likely to behave irregularly, correctly in some contexts but with evident contrapuntal errors in similar contexts elsewhere within the piece.

There must also be works which, though contrapuntally correct, are simply dull. This is a group particularly susceptible to enlargement through prejudice. It is dangerously easy to assume that anonymous pieces are of less interest than those with composers' names attached, or that two-voice works are of less interest in

repertories where three parts are the norm, or that certain forms stimulate greater compositional sophistication than others (ballade than virelai, for example, or organum than motet). Likewise monophony tends to lose out at the hands of scholars primarily interested in polyphony, and vice versa. But where such prejudices can be overcome, or at least allowed for, it should be possible to begin to identify pieces which do nothing out of the ordinary, or which fail to do the ordinary in an interesting way, monotonously using and reusing a few hackneyed melodic shapes, rhythmic figures and contrapuntal progressions.

In none of the categories so far outlined should we overlook the possibility that a piece which looks odd, or just boring, may succeed in performance. This must be a valid criterion, particularly when so much of our aural knowledge of these early repertories has still to be acquired at the piano or the desk, in either case working (literally or in the imagination) with equally tempered scales. Performances using Pythagorean tuning, period pronunciation, and appropriate voices, can often make sense of sonorities which on paper looked incomprehensible. Equally, bad performances, particularly on record, can do great damage.

It is clear that the kinds of judgments these various categories require must be analytically based. 'Contrapuntal ineptitude', 'extensions of the language', 'monotony' and so on have to be demonstrated, not simply alleged. The critic must convince his audience that his judgment is fair. Of course, analysis cannot prove that a piece is good. What it can do is to point out how a piece functions (or fails in part to function); and appreciation of that may suggest a particular view of the piece and of its composer's achievement. It will certainly affect the way it is heard. For in the end, any estimate of quality depends on a judgment of how a piece sounds. Bias, often of one or more of the varieties outlined above, may prejudice the analyst in advance but, if he is doing his job adequately, should be erased by contact with the facts of the piece.

Principles are no use without example, though the following illustrations of the categories just outlined are no more than objects for debate. If eventually each is shown to be a masterpiece, musicology will at least have acquired a point of view.

Prevalet simplicitas (ex.1), a three-voice song with a Latin text from the early fifteenth century, seems clearly inept. Its tenor is probably a popular song, and above it the composer has written an acceptable if undistinguished cantus line. The second cantus, on the other hand, seems to have been composed separately against

Ex. 1

Ar. de Ructis, *Prevalet simplicitas*

[Cantus I]

[Cantus II]

Tenor

g Prevalet etc.

5

Pre - va - let sim - pli - ci - tas

Pre - va - let sim - pli - ci - tas ac sim -

11

ac sim - plex rus - ti - ci - tas

plex rus - ti - ci - tas

16

de - ri - de - tur qui - a

de - ri - de - tur qui - a fi - de - i

21

fi - de - i mo - di - ci - tas

mo - di - ci - tas

26

a - ni - mi du - pli - ci -

a - ni - mi du - pli - ci -

31

tas pol - let

tas pol - let si - mo -

36

si - mo - ni - a

- ni - a

(Oxford, Bodleian Library, Canonici misc. 213, ff. 128v-9r; Bologna, Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale, Q15, ff. 291v-2r (= celxijv-ijr))

the tenor, after the first was complete and without the first cantus being altered to accommodate it. This explains its lack of melodic logic (see for example the leaps in bars 8 and 32, and its tiresome attraction to figures cadencing around c' , and the parallel unisons and seconds with Cantus I. It is hard to attribute any of these problems to copying mistakes by the scribes of the surviving (or previous) manuscripts – there are no simple changes of pitch level or note lengths which would produce better sense – and one has to conclude, therefore, that the composer was inexpert.

If *Prevalet simplicitas* is a relatively straightforward case of a bad piece, that is largely because its inadequacies are occasional and are recognizable against a background of conventional contrapuntal progressions. The composer is trying to write conventionally, but is not always succeeding. But there are surviving pieces in which this may not be so. A work such as Martinus Fabri's 'Or se depart', (ex. 2) which survives uniquely in the Leiden University manuscript,⁸ makes imperfect sense in terms of the general style of its period. Both of the intended combinations of voices (Triplum – Cantus – Tenor and Cantus – Tenor – Contratenor) contain intervals and progressions which would conventionally be considered poor,⁹ but these recur often enough for their use to seem consistent and intentional, so that

⁸ Published in J. van Biezen and J. P. Gumbert (eds), *Two chansonniers from the Low Countries*, Monumenta Musica Neerlandica xv (Amsterdam, 1985), no. L19, pp. 66–9. (This edition is much preferable to that in G. K. Greene (ed.), *French Secular Music: Rondeaux and miscellaneous pieces*, Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century, xxii (Monaco 1989), no. 7, pp. 12–14.)

⁹ For example: in Tr-C-T, 8–6 chords (bars 2, 7, 18), 8–3 chords on b (bar 6, 17), fourths over the lowest pitch (bars 4, 5, 8, 13, 16), unconventionally resolving seconds and sevenths (bars 4, 5, 17, 25, 29); in C-T-CT, unresolved 6–4 (bar 28), unconventionally resolved 7th (bar 20), seconds (bars 13, 47), fourths (bars 16, 33, 35, 39, 60).

the song cannot simply be dismissed as incompetent. (It is worth remembering, in looking at such a piece, that if Machaut were not famous for other reasons, and if as a result we had only those works of his which survive outside the 'Machaut

Ex. 2
Martinus Fabri, 'Or se depart'

The musical score is written for four parts: Triplum, [Cantus], Tenor, and Contratenor sine triplo. The notation is in mensural style with square notes on a four-line staff. The lyrics are written below the Cantus part. The score is divided into three systems. The first system starts with a '3' above the Triplum staff, indicating a triplet. The second system starts with a '6' above the Triplum staff. The third system starts with a '12' above the Triplum staff. The lyrics are: 'Or se depart li doulz tamps gra - ci - eulx/'. There are some red markings in the original manuscript, which are indicated by superscript '1' and '2' in the score. The '1' is above a note in the Tenor part, and the '2' is above a note in the Contratenor part. There are also some black markings in the original manuscript, which are indicated by superscript '3' in the score. The '3' is above a note in the Triplum part.

Triplum

[Cantus]

Tenor

Contratenor sine triplo

Or

se

de - part/ li doulz

tamps

gra - ci - eulx/

1 orig. in red

2 the first two notes of the ligature orig. in black