
The Era and Its Terms

AN ERA WITHOUT MUSIC

The emergence of the concept of the musical work fundamentally changed the ways in which human beings form relationships and interact with music. This change was one of the most salient moments of the fifteenth century. To be sure, a great deal of artful music, much of it transmitted through written means, existed for many centuries prior to this period. But these earlier forms of music were of a different character, closely related to rites, ceremonies, or occasions that shaped their form, and were often preserved in records at considerable historical remove from the moment of their creation. Without a doubt, notable traces of these developments can be discerned in fourteenth-century music, whether in its new forms of notation (themselves dependent upon thirteenth-century innovations), distinct modes of written transmission, or a new and more sensitive system of genres in which secular multivoice songs were especially prominent. Nevertheless, the conceptualization of music as an unchanging and self-contained work was clearly a product of the fifteenth century. This concept did not arise through any distinct foundational act, however, but was rather the end result of lengthy and complex processes that played out across multiple spheres of cultural activity and production, sometimes in isolation but just as often in tandem, among them writing and literacy, authorship and professionalization, historicity and historical memory, the position of music in the nascent system of the arts, and more. These activities redefined and sometimes expanded the parameters of what music could be, even as they were not always concerned with music alone. This fundamental change took place within the era most commonly referred to—thanks in no small part to the writings of Jacob Burckhardt—as

the “Renaissance.”¹ But Burkhardt’s account almost completely excluded music from its inquiries, except to discuss it as a locus of sociological activity, and thereby introduced doubts and uncertainties about the relationship between this period and its music. Nietzsche subsequently seemed to validate this exclusion, ascribing to music a certain intractable chronological belatedness. In a similar manner, Heinrich Bessler, building upon the work of Martin Heidegger and aware of the atrocities of the twentieth century, could not resist using the philosopher’s concept of negative ontology to ascribe an intense pathos to the fifteenth century, characterizing it as an era in which a “humanization” of music took place.² At the same time, he was a harsh and unrelenting critic of the larger term “Renaissance” and regarded its use in music history as misguided.

As a result, ever since Burckhardt’s 1860 *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*) matters have become ever more muddled. An era called the “Renaissance” exists, however one wishes to define it, and without which even the intentionally destabilizing interventions of postmodern cultural historiography, often operating by negative definition, would be unthinkable. But music in this era finds itself consigned to the margins of history, and even its liminal presence remains quite precarious. In the twentieth century little changed on this front in spite of unprecedented growth in research into both the “Renaissance” and music. Amid the many inquiries that have questioned the underlying structural power of historical eras—often heralded with loud and gleefully deconstructive fanfare—the problematic position of music has yet to be taken up and questioned. In fact, the assumption that music brought little if nothing to bear on the wider history of the period remains a perversely consistent feature of “Renaissance” historiography. If music did exist in the “Renaissance,” it figures in it as a mere accident of history, at best a diffuse efflorescence of the social order that is historiographically meaningful as it relates to a certain subset of creative elites (as it is treated in Peter Burke’s 1972 *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy*, for example). Indeed, the history of the “Renaissance” has remained oddly content to adopt the contradictory position of being if not a history entirely without music, then a history at a certain remove from music. As a result the history of music, whether belated or not, has existed as a history apart from the “Renaissance.” In Gustave Reese’s landmark 1954 *Music of the Renaissance*, Burckhardt’s name is not mentioned once, and in several other surveys of the period (many conceived of as handbooks), this conceptual problem is solved by consigning it to an introductory paragraph and gestur-

ing to a history that exists alongside the “Renaissance.” Only a few authors, notably Ludwig Finscher in his 1989–90 *Die Musik des 15. und 16. Jahrhundert* (Music of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), have explicitly brought Burckhardt’s viewpoint to the foreground, and even then only to corroborate his misgivings.

In significant ways, these challenges that the Renaissance has presented for music history remain unexplored, especially where the musical work concept is concerned. The era has been the subject of innumerable studies from a diverse array of cultural-historical disciplines and methodologies, including history, literary studies, and art history. (I understand “cultural history” not in the sense of any specialized or innovative methodology, but rather grounded on the simple and perhaps quaint premise that the activities that people undertake together in any given time and place must somehow relate to one another.) Music history, by contrast, has for the most part seemed content to confine itself in recent years to artistic or stylistic studies that only tangentially gesture to relevant external sociohistorical factors. And the decisive change that the musical work concept brought about—the most significant development since the emergence of notation—and the expansion of musical consciousness that it ushered in remain strangely decoupled from its wider context. An inquiry into the role of the work concept as it applies to music by no means forecloses other related inquiries, whether into the quality and production of music, its presence in writing versus performance, its meaning as a cognitive, emotional, or scholarly practice, or the changing meaning of non-notated or “nonartistic” music in the social, mental, and emotional activities of humans. But the existence of the musical work concept suddenly gives these questions, with which music is intimately concerned, a new and meaningful perspective.

In recent research such a notion has been met with considerable skepticism, with interest in the work concept regarded as elite, elevated, and detached from reality. But in fact the work concept granted musical practices a new dimension in the broadest possible sense, including areas that might seem to exist at considerable remove from one another. It gave rise to more complex and meaningful relationships with music, providing a new reference point that affected the priorities of both contemporaries and later generations. The relationship of humans to music was defined according to new limits, and it attained, whether intentionally or not, a new and distinct quality. What we refer to as the Renaissance—and from this point forward the scare quotes will be omitted—was significantly and profoundly shaped by its

music. And thus any meaningful inquiry into music in the Renaissance, while it should not be exclusively focused on the concept of the musical work, should take its genesis as an important point of departure.

At first glance this approach might seem to once again isolate music, insofar as, for example, the history of painting does not engage with such questions in a comparable manner (setting aside the question of under what conditions it is even possible to make a comparison between music and painting). But upon closer inspection many connections become apparent. Whether the new experience of reality revealed by Masaccio's techniques of perspective or the telescopic detail of Jan van Eyck's oil paintings, whether Leon Battista Alberti's new conceptualizations of space or the new relationship between language and the world revealed by Lorenzo Valla—none of these phenomena are the result of retrospective historiographical "construction." Taken as a whole they offer abundant evidence of something much more significant than Burckhardt's summary of the era as characterized by the "discovery of the world and of man."³ The inflection point that the musical work represented has been previously brought into discussions of other changes in a superficial manner, even though it bears directly upon questions of musical perception, the relationship between language and music, not to mention more localized compositional innovations. It is a question first and foremost of perspective. It goes without saying that the Communion from Guillaume Dufay's *Missa Sancti Jacobi*, with its much-discussed fauxbourdon structure, should not be regarded as merely a discursive exemplar of new forms of perception, and neither would such a viewpoint be ascribed to Masaccio's 1425 Trinity fresco for Santa Maria Novella in Florence. And yet both this painting and mass setting (created around the same time) present a new human-oriented relationship to reality for their viewers and listeners. Such connections have seldom been researched and explored even though they were brought to the fore as much in the practice of music as in the realm of painting.

This effort to understand the music of the Renaissance as a cultural history in its own right, rather than reintegrating it into a larger cultural history, does not mean to assert that music exists as a discrete representational form. Its methods are grounded in the conviction that such a historical delineation, even as it presents certain limitations and must be prefaced by a long string of caveats, also makes good sense, since this "era" needs to be given back its music. This decision also has consequences for how this study must proceed. Its goal is to take phenomenological stock of distinctive situations and

describe complicated processes and sporadic events in a way that reveals relationships and draws connections without resorting to mere analogy. In light of the robust state of research such a goal seems promising and fruitful. Such connections concern not only the context of music, but in an important way the texts themselves. By this I mean a conception of text that is as capacious as possible, which the musical work elucidates in an especially sharp manner. Precisely because it is so difficult to determine what comprises the text of, for example, a Josquin chanson, one can draw such connections with a certain plausibility. For the activities of individuals in the past are revealed as much by the fact that trumpets were used in a royal ceremony as by the abundance of compositional decisions in a motet by Heinrich Isaac. Both presume upon a textual character, albeit with different degrees of density and intentionality. Such norms and practices, premised upon complicated compositional decisions, cannot claim the supposed autonomy of an abstract or “ahistorical” material.

If one is to define the Renaissance as an era that was meaningfully defined by its music, the question arises as to what that might mean. While the musical work stands as the focus of inquiry, it cannot be the actual object of such a history, which would result in a kind of musical art history. A more fruitful approach is to attempt to circle in on the object by exploring significant areas of meaning. And in the interests of clarity one must set certain chronological and geographical boundaries and work within these limits to see what they yield. The chronological end of the period in question is easier to discern than its start, a somewhat unpredictable occurrence that nevertheless achieved a normative power within a remarkably short period of time: the invention of monody and figured bass around 1600. The changes that accompanied this occurrence are considerable. In the age of polyphony, three, four, or multi-part settings were conceived of, at least in theory, as a network of equally significant voices, a rule that was somewhat conditionally suspended in the madrigal. In its place arose a completely new compositional idiom, in which the primary interaction was between the upper voice and bass lines and the unfolding of an underlying harmonic progression. The context and consequences of this shift will be considered later, but for now it is important to note the fundamental change in perspective that it fostered. Artful music was no longer sublimated into a polyphonic texture articulated by multiple people, but was instead the affective vehicle of an individual. This transition to a new mode of musical representation, toward the identification of the musical with a singing individual, provided the underlying premise for what

is arguably the most successful genre innovation in music history: the invention of opera. Much more could be said about the influence of this development in other areas, including instrumental music, non-notated music, the conception of musical affect, and the perception of music in general. These changes between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries should be considered, admitting certain reservations, a paradigm shift on the model of the concepts of Thomas Kuhn.⁴

Deciding upon a comparably clear starting point is a more difficult prospect. The changes that took place around 1600 offer a bit of help, insofar as the polyphonic modes that were ultimately displaced by monody must have achieved dominance at some distinct moment. With a reasonable degree of certainty, the first twenty-five years of the fifteenth century present themselves as such a point in time. In fact multivoice music was polyphonic from the very beginning, and the introduction of multivoice features in the secular songs of the fourteenth century stands as a significant guidepost. But in the early fifteenth century the conception of polyphony underwent a decisive change. This was manifest first and foremost in the fascination borne out in a new conception of consonance using the intervals of the third and sixth. Whether this phenomenon was English in origin—as attested by two fifteenth-century witnesses, the chronicler Ulrich von Richenthal of Constance and the canon Martin Le Franc of Lausanne—can quickly be thrown into doubt by examining music created around 1400 in Italy. But more decisive than this conception of consonance is a related change in technique, whereby the relationship between consonance and dissonance was regulated in a new way. Polyphonic settings no longer consisted of a more or less open field between fixed points of consonance; instead, dissonances had to be prepared such that polyphonic settings led to them, and they were subsequently resolved via a more procedural operation. This shift can be observed in paradigmatic fashion in two motets of Guillaume Dufay (musical examples 1a and 1b). *Ecclesie militantis*, one of only a few five-voice works from before 1450, was written in 1431 for the coronation of Pope Eugene IV in Rome and shows, at least in principle, the “old” format, attributable perhaps to the challenges that a five-voice setting presented. The four-voice *Nuper rosarum flores*, composed for the same client in 1436, who consecrated the Cathedral of Florence during his exile, shows clear evidence of the new procedures. The contrast between the introductory duets of these two works illustrates a fundamental change in musical perception that will be discussed in greater detail later.

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1A. Guillaume Dufay, *Ecclesie militantis* / *Sanctorum arbitrio* / *Bella canunt* / *Ecce* / *Gabriel*, measures 1–14 (ed. Heinrich Bessler). Both motets, written only a few years apart, show quite different structures at the start. They begin with a duet of the higher voices. The older piece, *Ecclesie militantis*, is canonic (a hallmark of Dufay) and relies mostly on fifths and octaves within an octave range. The later work, *Nuper rosarum flores*, proceeds according to a fifth range, a melodic and sonic profile foreign to the earlier work.

1. Ec - cle - si - ae mi - li - tan - tis,
 1. San - cto -

Contratenor
 Tenor I
 Tenor II

Detailed description: This block shows the first four measures of the motet 'Ecclesie militantis'. It features four staves: Contratenor (soprano), Tenor I (alto), Tenor II (tenor), and a bass line. The music is in 3/8 time and G major. The Contratenor and Tenor I parts are active, while Tenor II and the bass line are mostly silent. The lyrics are '1. Ec - cle - si - ae mi - li - tan - tis,' and '1. San - cto -'.

5
 Ro - ma, se - des tri - um - phan - tis Pa - tri sur - sum si - de -
 - rum ar - bi - tri - o Cle - ri - co - rum pro - pri -

Detailed description: This block shows measures 5 through 8. The Contratenor and Tenor I parts continue with the melody. The lyrics are 'Ro - ma, se - des tri - um - phan - tis Pa - tri sur - sum si - de -' and '- rum ar - bi - tri - o Cle - ri - co - rum pro - pri -'.

10
 - ra Ta - men cle - ri re - so - nan - tis
 - o Chor - do me - di - tan - ti; Ne - quam ge - nus a - tri - o

Detailed description: This block shows measures 10 through 14. The Contratenor and Tenor I parts continue with the melody. The lyrics are '- ra Ta - men cle - ri re - so - nan - tis' and '- o Chor - do me - di - tan - ti; Ne - quam ge - nus a - tri - o'.

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1B. Guillaume Dufay, *Nuper rosarum / Terribilis est locus iste*, measures 1–10 (ed. Heinrich Besseler).

1. Nu - - - per ro - sa - - -

1. Nu - - - per ro - sa - - -

Tenor II

14

14 1/2

Tenor

1,1 Terribilis est locus iste 2

5

- rum flo - res Ex do - no pon - ti - fi - cis Hi -

- rum flo - res Ex do - no pon - ti - fi - cis Hi -

3 4 5

For the time being it serves as the second chronological boundary for this inquiry.⁵

Thus the procedures of the early fifteenth century distinguish themselves quite clearly from the practices of the fourteenth century. Again and again in general research into the Renaissance scholars have sought “origins” in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries (often as a corrective to Burckhardt), often under rubrics such as “Protorenaissance.” This has often been the case in music history, especially concerning music from fourteenth-century northern Italy. In this repertoire one can find many meaningful qualities that shaped the following century, among them the embedding of music in civic-governmental contexts, the differentiation of genres, and the emerging social profile of the figure of the “composer.” And yet the conditions for cognitive and practical engagement with multivoice music shifted so markedly in the early fifteenth century that it seems justified to draw a boundary at this

moment. This is not to say that the motets of Guillaume de Machaut or the ballades of Lorenzo da Firenze should be consigned to an “antechamber” of the history of the musical work (in the sense of a “Protorenaissance”), which would be silly enough. Nevertheless it appears, or at least it is a premise of this book, that the fundamental changes that took place are of greater significance than such continuities. The musical history of the fourteenth century is a history in its own right and should be considered on its own terms. Examples from this previous era will be brought to bear only when they are absolutely indispensable to understanding the phenomenon under discussion.

Geographical boundaries are an even more difficult question. Burckhardt’s already Eurocentric perspective was even more bounded by its focus on Italy, in part so that he could draw pessimistic connections between tyranny and cultural efflorescence as a portent of modernity. In 1919 Johan Huizinga cast a view in a more northerly direction, most notably toward France, and in the provocatively titled *Herfsttij der middeleeuwen* (Autumn of the Middle Ages) explicitly threw into doubt Burckhardt’s premise regarding the origins of modern humanity.⁶ With regard to music history the situation becomes more difficult, in part because it is difficult to answer questions regarding center and periphery. There are musical centers of the fifteenth century about which almost nothing is known, such as Naples, while there are other musical centers, such as Cologne, where it is suspected that the concept of the composed musical work did not hold sway. And there are many allegedly peripheral locales that have suddenly revealed themselves as significant centers of music—for example, the Silesian village of Glogau (present-day Glogow). At the same time, all of the fifteenth century and a good portion of the sixteenth are marked by a high degree of geographic mobility on the part of the compositional elite, which throws into question any sharp regional distinctions that might be drawn. This same caution should apply to smaller spheres of activity—such as cities, courts, cathedrals, and cloisters—which were distinct and yet are marked by identical musical phenomena that make stark systemization all the more challenging. The fact that the international success of the musical institution of the “chapel” has its roots in the curial reforms of the fourteenth century also makes it difficult to narrow one’s focus. In short, while the idea of strict geographical boundaries is problematic, a certain demarcation of scope is necessary and reasonable, even as one must remember that the musical horizons of the sixteenth century encompassed regions beyond Europe.

A perennial problem of all research into the Renaissance is the question of the era's relationship to antiquity (originally considered of utmost relevance and subsequently downplayed), an issue of renewed importance in recent research. In music history it has long been held, at least since August Wilhelm Ambros, that there is no meaningful evidence of musical antiquity upon which one might build such an argument.⁷ This alleged deficit was first posited by Leo Schrade to justify the exclusion of music from histories of the Renaissance, since the musical legacy of antiquity could be connected to the Renaissance only through written means, and as a result music was the only field for which one could dispute the very concept of a Renaissance.⁸ In fact there is a strong case to be made that the relationship between antiquity and the present is stronger in the case of music than has previously been acknowledged, owing, on the one hand, to changes in approaches to the study of antiquity, and, on the other, to changes in what one considers to be perceptible phenomena, including the concept of the composed work. The specific issues that surround this topic are significant and relevant for the present study.

As noted already, among the least contested issues is the existence of music as a sociohistorical musical reality. But it is considerably more difficult to discern with any precision the various facets of this reality itself and how this reality intersected with other spheres of lived experience. Among the most notable instances of this area of interaction is the emergence of the system of the arts, which in a complicated and productive manner foreground the often dichotomous character of music as an active human practice and an abstract "ars liberalis." During this time the musical elites active in Europe (and beyond) were comprised mostly but not exclusively of composer-singers. There were also renowned singers who did not compose, instrumentalists of all sorts, not to mention areas in which literary social elites were active in an intensely musical way (such as the madrigal) without being part of a musical elite per se. In any case, the creation of musical professionalism—in explicit distinction from the work of "amateurs"—ranks as one of the most significant developments of the Renaissance. The organizational structure of the chapel was decisive in spurring this change, with the performance of complex and demanding polyphonic music understood as the collective enterprise of a group of professionals. The concept of compositional individuality—that is, the immutability of the musical work—is closely tied to the collective organizational structure of this field of production. And all of these endeavors were exceedingly costly, in many cases requiring quite vast sums of money. Indeed, intensive and demanding musical cultures, whether composed

polyphony or any other complex musical endeavor, always bear evidence of both a certain will of representation and significant investments of capital.

Since the Middle Ages the history of music has been a history with dual modes of written transmission—music in written form and writings about music, or put differently, thinking through music and thinking about music. This has resulted in no small amount of critical and interpretive frisson, but far from being a source of stress and contention alone, this situation is also quite productive and dynamic. Broadly speaking, the relationship between these two forms of transmission was brought to a new level during the Renaissance, and while these tensions were by no means fully resolved, there were significant attempts to describe it with more precision and understand it in new ways. This played out in many different spheres, from more specialized and focused treatises on music theory to broader discussions of music in nonmusical contexts, whether in letters or genres such as chronicles. Such “nonmusical” sources should not be understood as existing outside or alongside music, but as musical objects in and of themselves. The complexity of these interactions is reflected in the nuanced system of genres that arose during this time, which while fully embraced by composers who regarded its rules as virtually compulsory, nevertheless did not give rise, as difficult as it might be to comprehend, to a fully realized theoretical framework. It was under these conditions that individuals interacted with music as a medium of expression, in both implicit and explicit dialogue with new categories and genres. And it was under these same conditions that new and more complex levels and systems of musical writing were developed, which, while a distinct manifestation of the larger history of literacy and writing, cannot ultimately be separated from it.

A musically oriented cultural history of the Renaissance must necessarily be attuned to and bound by the era’s modes of perception, which have been transmitted as much through general sources as through the concrete compositional decisions latent in individual musical works. Such modes are not exclusively bound to the acoustic, since serious music has always had a non-acoustic existence in writing. The central premises of such musical phenomena are time (the defining dimension of music as a whole) and space (as the place of its manifestation as an acoustical event). Both emerge as explicit dimensions for compositional engagement in the Renaissance, whether in the isorhythmic motets of Guillaume Dufay (time) or in the use of multiple choirs by Andrea Gabrieli (space). In a fundamental way both concepts require that one confront the relationship between text and context, and the complex and

conscious interaction of these areas comprises one of the defining characteristics of the Renaissance. This tension also concerns the significance of text and word, which regardless of the mighty power of fixed instrumental music was a fundamental element of Renaissance music. During the Renaissance a multiplicity of languages (derived mostly from Latin) as well as musical languages engaged in an intensive interaction would result in new relationships between speech and music. Music had the potential to bring new life to poetic language, and music could also, through speech, give rise to ritual and ceremonial realities. Moreover, such rhetorical concepts helped foster a new relationship with reality for a type of music that was previously somewhat accidental in nature: instrumental music. The ennobling of music without words, instrumental music—comparable to the new prestige accorded to painting during the era—is more than just a sociohistorical occurrence but rather a conceptual development of the highest order.

Even Jacob Burckhardt seems to have already understood that the era he was describing was intensely concerned with the creation of historical memory and perception. The way in which this process played out in musical terms has scarcely been examined, even though music provides the ideal parameters for precisely such an inquiry. The entry of music into the sphere of intentional memory gave rise to musical historicity: that is, the idea that music—in part but not only in the guise of genre—possessed its own kind of consciousness. This change can be understood as not just a collective reality, but can be observed in specific individual cases. The transfer of the time-bound art of music into the sphere of memory and history is a development that is at once spectacular and admittedly difficult to describe, and in the end represents a moment of rupture with antiquity that gives rise to a new musical reality. This process eventually laid the groundwork for monody and opera and thus can scarcely be written off as “belated,” but reveals itself as a particularly striking point of inflection between historicity and musical practice, even though the conditions that gave rise to these new practices would ultimately be left behind.

Although all of these dimensions must be brought to bear upon a musical-cultural history of the Renaissance, in the pages that follow they will be sketched out only in part, as most of them require detailed study in and of themselves. The broad overview that follows hopes to make it easier to draw such connections in future studies. In the end, music was as central to the phenomenon known as the Renaissance as architecture, painting, literature, philosophy, and the political dealings of individuals at all levels of society.

The question of when music entered the historical record does not necessarily lead to speculation about the origins of music itself. More pragmatically, the question can be framed in terms of understanding the different ways in which music's entrance into history took place. With additional clarity about this process, which was hardly one-dimensional or linear in its trajectory, a second question can then be posed, namely, from what point in time did music come to possess a history in its own right? Both of these questions are of utmost importance for making sense of a Renaissance in music, even as they rest on certain assumptions (whether intentional or not) about what one attends to when dealing with music. The earliest traces of cultural transmission provide evidence of intense conflicts regarding music. But even as ancient sources speak at great length regarding music, the observations are often somewhat oblique in character, attuned to its effects, its ethical efficacy and dangers, its technical qualities, or its rational underpinnings. The mediated observations found in philosophical texts cannot be clearly differentiated from similar details present in mythological traditions or images and iconography. In the Old Testament—for example, in the songs of praise of Miriam and Deborah recorded in Exodus—music is not a material practice but an affective and ritual act to be completed. For Boethius, whose theoretical writings from the early sixth century would be canonized by Carolingian scholars, music existed as a practice bound to a specific time and place—in his case, Ravenna during the reign of Theoderic the Great—which provided the occasion for his observations. But he does not record in any tangible detail the qualities of the singing he heard in Ravenna around AD 500, described in his prefatory remarks as seizing the ears as much as the soul.⁹ This made it easy for Carolingian intellectuals to draw connections between Boethius's text, which was instrumental in helping Theoderic transmit zither odes to King Clovis, and the music of their own times, chant. The music of antiquity is thus lost not only because it was not recorded in written notation, with the few fragmentary artifacts supplying neither a systematic understanding nor reliable information on their musical realities. This music also disappeared because it was given only mediated presence in secondary sources.

At first glance it appears that this situation changed fundamentally during the High Middle Ages, with representations of music present in many chronicles and poetic texts. But upon closer examination it becomes clear that these instances for the most part reveal the use of music in rites and

ceremonies or provide fictional depictions of musical functions, contexts, or experiences—for example, in *Tristan*, written by the musically adept Gottfried von Strassburg around 1210. Martin Warnke has demonstrated the relevance of such texts for understanding the sociological meaning of medieval architecture, and Sabine Žak has been similarly able to assemble a remarkable array of musical evidence from the era.¹⁰ Žak consciously placed historical and literary texts side by side, since it was clear that both types of sources were comparably relevant for understanding musical functions. But neither type of text—accounts of ritual or ceremonial uses in historical sources or their idealized representation in poetic works—necessarily has anything to do with musical reality. For example, in 1119 it is recorded that for the occasion of a reliquary transfer, Bishop Landulf of Benevento authorized the use of a vehicle upon which were placed an array of bells, metallic percussion instruments, trumpets, horns, “tympana mirabiliter percussa” (incomparably and wonderfully played drums), as well as strings.¹¹ The document in which this information is recorded is both remarkable and baffling, describing the use of a wide range of percussion instruments, but nevertheless reveals nothing about the musical reality of the event. The *Romance of Alexander* by Ulrich von Etzenbach, from the mid-1280s, contains numerous depictions of music—for example, at splendid feasts at which “sweet” tunes were performed by “many hands” on an array of string instruments (“dā was süezes dōnes vil / von manger hande seitenspil”), all of which are catalogued in scrupulous detail.¹² But from this and other comparable passages a reader gains no real understanding of what this music actually sounded like. The *Remede de Fortune*, written in the middle of the fourteenth century by Guillaume de Machaut—a cleric, diplomat, poet, and a composer to boot—similarly contains a celebrated passage that details a wide range of musical instruments.¹³ But this representation is animated not by a documentary impulse but rather strives to create a poetic ideal, and says nothing about the music itself, including the work of Machaut himself. Similarly, in the work of the scholar Johannes de Grocheo, inspired by Aristotelian concepts around 1300 to explore strategies for understanding perception and reality in general and monophonic and polyphony music in particular, the contours of musical reality remain remarkably unclear, prompting the question of whether Grocheo was even interested in documenting them in the first place.¹⁴

Despite their distance from musical realities, such witnesses nevertheless provide invaluable insights about the musical cultures in which they were active, including the condition and use of musical instruments, the contexts

in which music was produced, and the organization of musical genres. But there exists a rupture in their relationship to musical reality, and they are not characterized by a desire to record concrete musical relations. It appears that only in the late fourteenth and then in the fifteenth century was a process set in motion that would change both the conception of musical reality and the desire to recognize it as such. Music thus became in a new and distinct manner the object of history in the widest sense of the word. The most important witnesses of this shift come from a chronicle and a poetic text, the already-mentioned informant Ulrich von Richenthal (ca. 1376–1436) and Martin Le Franc (ca. 1410–1461). In 1418 Richenthal mentions, whether rightly or not, the special qualities produced by the English music he was able to hear during the Council of Constance. He reports not in generalities but rather of concrete and quantifiable musical effects that arose from specific instances of composed music. The fact that this quality of perception was unusual is corroborated by details related to the transmission of these observations. They were recorded only in the second version of the chronicle, as Richenthal in 1415 described the exact same occasion—the feast of Saint Thomas à Becket—with nearly identical words but without referring specifically to the song. Moreover, these notes are preserved in only one version of the text, lending its transmission a certain philological instability.¹⁵

In 1441–42, Martin Le Franc, the provost of the Cathedral of Lausanne and subject of the Burgundian dukes, authored an epic poem whose fourth book includes a small passage about music. Martin speaks of a specific kind of music, which he contrasts with ancient music (noting that it was not as “auctentique” as the music typically heard at the time). This music had a powerful effect on him, an effect that he memorably labeled “frisque concordance” and “contenance Angloise,” as the new English sound was designated.¹⁶ Thus in his observations, which have been preserved with more philological stability, we encounter not the perception of music as a general phenomenon, but a focus on a specific kind of music. In contrast to Richenthal, Martin connects these impressions with the names of specific composers and the qualities of specific musical works. Although these witnesses have assumed outsized significance in scholarly circles—and their canonization has possibly occasioned more confusion than clarity about their intentions—they have seldom been examined in isolation in this respect. And in fact there are many documents from the first half of the fifteenth century that contain similar dynamics, recording not the overall effect of music nor the mere context of a musical act, but rather the specific impressions of specific kinds of music. For instance, in 1436 the

Florentine politician Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1459) described the highly charged occasion of the consecration of the Florence Cathedral by Pope Eugene IV, including the music that was heard.¹⁷ It is completely unclear what music Manetti is exactly referring to, but in his account of the celebratory mass he describes extraordinary singing and instrumental accompaniment. It is admittedly hard to say how his rhetorical ekphrasis and desire for concrete description relate to one another. Manetti's report nevertheless represents an attempt to describe music not only as fulfilling a ritual function but as contributing to a specific occasion in which its singular qualities were notable.

The tone of such accounts represents a new quality in intellectual engagement with music, a quality that was previously present only in oblique or intuitive ways. The desire to ensure the precise character of a musical event—even if only rendered through stereotypical representations—presents itself as a different and new way in which music enters into the historical record. It is thus not important whether Manetti wanted to describe a specific piece of music—for instance, Dufay's motet *Nuper rosarum flores*, the only surviving composition that can be conclusively linked to the occasion. It is more important that he situates the music as an integral part of the event he recounts, with the music not reduced to or equated with its ritual functions. This new sense of musical contemporaneity in turn accords music a new place in historical memory. This memory is not limited to the musical work but is dependent upon it. In 1433 the city of Dijon petitioned the Burgundian duke Philip the Good for permission to use trumpets rather than the usual horns as the musical signifier for their Count, and the subsequent ducal permit explicitly referred to the more beautiful sound of the trumpet.¹⁸ Thus in this instance the musical contemporaneity of the sound played an important and perhaps decisive role, and the fact that the decision took place in the sphere of one of most influential court chapels in Europe at the time was by no means random. This new focus on the specificities of sound and occasion became a continual focus of debates over music throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, especially in crises that witnessed intense human conflict. The intentional destruction of musical items during the Reformation in Zurich (1525) or during the Anabaptist rule of Münster (1534), the first modern dictatorship, paradoxically reveals music as grounded in the present moment, insofar as it must be completely done away with once and for all.

The terms by which one can describe such changes—occasion, presence, memory—are admittedly imprecise and disparate, since one must attempt to describe not a set of discrete facts but rather a contentious process whereby

music is “present” in contradictory ways, markedly different from the way it is manifest in the visual arts, for instance. It is by no means the sole province of these written accounts to give form to this new sense of musical contemporaneity. To the contrary, music as an event reveals itself in quite meaningful ways in images, which display clear historical significance even as it manifests itself in unpredictable ways, and this significance shows it was worthy of recording not just because of the particularities of the occasion or “performance” itself that is depicted. One such example is the angel musicians in the 1432 Ghent Altarpiece of Jan van Eyck (fig. 1). These figures comprise part of a wider image that encompasses the instruments of Eve and the figure of Adam as singer. But these musician angels stand not as just another instance of a convention handed down from previous centuries and especially prevalent in Marian iconography. They appear in a new and distinct manner that is attuned to corporeal realities, a hallmark of Van Eyck’s style, offering an embodiment of the sonic reality of a musical event, with concrete and somewhat bizarre and contorted physiognomies for the singers. Music is present in them in a new manner, depicted as the product of active (and reactive) agents.

Beginning in the fifteenth century this new and previously unarticulated sense of musical presence is manifest in numerous paintings. For especially ambitious artists tackling complex images, it can be manifest in revisions, expansions, and refractions without compromising the presence the images contain. A famous painting from around 1505–10 attributed to Giorgione depicts an enigmatic musical scene—two musicians playing a flute and a lute with no reference to contemporary notated or composed music—that was labeled “pastoral” in the eighteenth century and was subsequently given the even more anachronistic moniker “country concert” (fig. 2). Despite the utterly vague and puzzling context and conceit of the painting, music is nevertheless present in a clear and dramatic fashion and legible as a functional act. This sort of functional act had been a hallmark of musical depictions for at least the previous 150 years—that is, of clearly defined ritual or ceremonial contexts—making them available to more than initiated insiders. The distinctive quality of Giorgione’s painting lies in the fact that it makes music present in a new and distinctive manner.

Painters of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries conjure this new musical presence in quite different ways. The inlay work for the Urbino *studiolo* of Federico da Montefeltro (likely completed in 1476) includes depictions of musical manuscripts (a motet and a song) that represent a striking innovation, insofar as they show specific musical works removed from the context of their realization in performance (figs. 3a, 3b). The positions of the two manuscripts