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## THE END OF THE ARS SUBTILIOR

by DAVID FALLOWS

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Tom Binkley, who had very clear ideas on virtuosity in medieval music. Those ideas were about professionalism and they were ultimately connected with his views on the *Studio der Frühen Musik* as being in the late 1960s the only fully professional early music group in the world. What he meant by that was that nobody in the *Studio* earned their living by any other means: no part-time teaching position to make financial ends meet (this was of course before their years here at the *Schola Cantorum*) and almost no outside professional engagements. To justify that claim of unique professionalism it seemed necessary constantly to face new challenges. That is part of the reason why they always performed from memory, part of the reason for their occasional extremes of tempo, and most particularly part of the reason for a certain concentration on the music of the ars subtilior. After all, the music of this late-fourteenth-century tradition is in many ways more intricate and harder to perform than any other music before the twentieth century. There is other music that can be used to display speed and agility, other music that can far more easily astonish and dazzle a large audience, but nothing else that quite so consistently draws the admiration of other professionals.

It is easy enough to suggest that the music of the ars subtilior arose itself from that same drive: a need for professional musicians to assert their superiority over a growing body of skilled musical amateurs. Machaut, in his *Voir dit*, expects his love Tutebelle to be able to sing his songs; the *Paradiso degli Alberti* reports three courtiers performing a song by Landini in the composer's presence; and *Il saporetto* reports how a young nobleman sang all kinds of music. These are fictional accounts, but they were surely intended to express at least a plausible reality of musical life in the late fourteenth century. There were now plenty of amateurs apparently able to perform sophisticated polyphony, and there was at the same time a growing tradition of fully professional performing musicians. There seems wide agreement that part of the reason for the more complex notational style known as the ars subtilior was that this was music that could be read and performed only by those with a thoroughly professional grounding.

There are six main features of exclusivity in this music. The first is quite specifically in the way it was written down. Quite often there are simpler ways of notating the music: the written symbol was to some extent a puzzle and a challenge. Perhaps the classic cases of this are the three diagrammatic pieces: Baude Cordier's heart-shaped *Belle, bonne, sage*, Cordier's circle-shaped *Tout par compas* and Senleches' *La harpe de melodie*



written in the shape of a harp. There are more straightforward ways of notating all three.

The second feature concerns the extremely complicated cross-rhythms of the repertory. Not just elaborate proportions, but densely complicated syncopations of a kind that can be performed only as a result of the most intensive rehearsal. Here the most famous examples are Ciconia's *Sus un' fontaine*, perhaps composed around 1390, Zachara da Teramo's *Sumite karissimi*, and Matteo da Perugia's *Le greygnour bien* perhaps from around 1410. It was, incidentally, *Sumite karissimi* that Apel described as „the acme of rhythmic intricacy in the entire history of music“.<sup>1</sup> He published that remark in 1942, when the world was yet to see the complexity of early Stockhausen and Boulez, let alone that of a Brian Ferneyhough; but it was true at the time.

A third feature of this repertory is the inclusion of sudden startling runs moving at astonishing speed that contrast with the relatively slow music around; again, one of the most famous examples is in *La harpe de melodie* by Senleches, though it was to be a more prominent feature of the probably later music in the French repertory known only from the manuscript copied in Cyprus.

A fourth matter is in the use of strange and perplexing chromaticism, as in the most famous of all late-fourteenth-century songs, Solage's *Fumeux fume*.

Related to that is the fifth feature, the use of poetic texts that are symbolic, allusive, descriptive or entirely incomprehensible. Again *Fumeux fume* could stand as an example of the text that is hard to understand. Of the descriptive texts, one might mention the way Baude Cordier's *Tout par compas* describes itself or how the text of Guido's ballade *Or voit tout en aventure* stands as a manifesto for the entire first generation of ars subtilior composers.

Finally, a sixth feature of these works is that in many cases the text seems entirely smothered in the music. It is hard to imagine any singer managing to convey even the words, let alone the form or the grammar, of a song like *Sus un' fontaine*. This presents an enormous challenge; but even in the most skilled performance the listener will need to return to the written music to get any clear sense of what is happening. As in much other music of the fourteenth century, the written document is an important part of its cultural resonance. That is, only the musically literate listener can gather more than a glimmer of what is happening.

And it is this last feature that seems particularly important for the next generation of songwriters in the early fifteenth century. It would be too simplistic to say that the Binchois generation was reacting specifically

<sup>1</sup> Willi Apel, *The Notation of Polyphonic Music 900–1600* (Cambridge MA, 1942), p. 432.



against the *ars subtilior* – too simplistic both because the chronology is more complex than that and because there was a tradition of extremely simple and more or less syllabic songs that runs through the full second half of the fourteenth century. But it is true that Binchois, Dufay and their contemporaries knew this music of the *ars subtilior*; and they knew all its notational techniques from the theory treatises; but in general they carefully avoided all six of the features I have just mentioned. Even from the manuscripts it is easy to see the new care with which words are matched to notes, the way every effort is made to project clearly the sense of the words, their grammar and their poetic form.

Features like this go in cycles. By the late fifteenth century composers were once again moving towards a far more melismatic setting of the words, returning more to a kind of song in which the music had an existence of its own. Obviously generalizations need to overlook specific cases. But most songs that seem to have been composed in the years between 1410 and 1440 have features that explicitly reject the style of the *ars subtilior*. They aim at clarity, elegance and lightness of touch.

My subject, however, is those few pieces that do not; the small tradition of works that carry on the *ars subtilior* through the whole fifteenth century and beyond. My title, 'The End of the *Ars Subtilior*', is obviously an allusion to Ursula Günther's famous article of 1963, 'Das Ende der *ars nova*', the article in which she proposed the term '*ars subtilior*' for the music previously known just as '*mannerist*'.<sup>2</sup> But my use of the word 'end' is different from hers. Professor Günther used it as a way of saying that the *ars nova* style had come to an end and was replaced by something else, the *ars subtilior*. On the contrary, I am saying that the techniques and style of the *ars subtilior* had a far longer history that continued for another hundred years and more.

First in that trickle is a piece by Hugo de Lantins, *Je suy exent*, which opens the last-copied fascicle of the Bodleian Library manuscript Canon. Misc. 213, copied probably in the early 1430s.<sup>3</sup> Starting with all voices marked cut-0, it has several mensuration changes in all voices (3, 0, reversed-C, C-dot, reversed-cut-C and 2), it has cross-rhythms (3-2, 4-3 of various kinds); and each line of the music has its own individual character. From a transcription it is easier to see other features. It has sudden changes of pace, and it has fast runs as well as jagged outlines: notational complexity, vocal virtuosity and expressive mannerism go hand in hand here. It is a most remarkable piece to find in the 1420s.

<sup>2</sup> Ursula Günther, 'Das Ende der *ars nova*', *Die Musikforschung* 16 (1963), pp. 105–20.

<sup>3</sup> The song is famous through the publication of a facsimile in Apel, op. cit., p. 177, but a better facsimile of the entire manuscript is now available, ed. David Fallows (Chicago, 1995); the piece is published in C. van den Borren, *Pièces polyphoniques profanes de provenance Liégeoise* (Brussels, 1950), p. 53.



The recent discovery that Hugo spent much of the 1420s at the Malatesta court in Rimini<sup>4</sup> prompts one to put *Je suy exent* alongside Dufay's ballade *Resvelliés vous*, composed for a Malatesta wedding at Rimini in 1423. Taken by itself, *Resvelliés vous* could be seen as hinting gently back to the *ars subtilior*: rhythmic changes, but no more than many „grandes ballades“ of the early fifteenth century, short passages of extreme virtuosity, passing cross-rhythms. It is a dazzlingly resourceful work, but its most striking feature from an aesthetic point of view is that each line of the text seems to carry a new set of musical ideas. That is in some ways a feature that is harder to find in the true *ars subtilior* generation, but it is just as surely something that represents a bold and irrational approach to musical composition. It refreshingly challenges the notion that a work needs uniformity of style and economy of material to be satisfactory.

A few years ago I drew attention to several works that seem to show Dufay and Hugo working together either as colleagues or in direct competition: works by both marking Cleofe Malatesta's departure for Byzantium in 1419; motets by both celebrating St Nicholas of Bari; and, most strikingly, a Gloria by Hugo paired with a Credo on similar materials by Dufay, giving the strongest evidence of collaboration or even rivalry.<sup>5</sup> I now believe that the similarities between *Je suy exent* and *Resvelliés vous* can be added tentatively to that list: direct contact between the two pieces may go no further than their voice-ranges; but both refer back to the techniques of the *ars subtilior* in ways that are most unusual for their time.<sup>6</sup>

With Dufay and Hugo de Lantins working apparently together in Rimini and adopting elements of the *ars subtilior* style, the figure of Ugolino of Orvieto becomes interesting. A mere thirty miles from Rimini lies Forlì, where Ugolino lived from 1411 until political circumstances forced him to flee in 1430. He was a man of considerable local importance: he had represented the city of Forlì at the Council of Constance in 1415 (though it would be stretching a point to suggest that he could have encountered the

<sup>4</sup> Alejandro Enrique Planchart, „Guillaume Du Fay's Benefices and his Relationship to the Court of Burgundy“, *Early Music History* 8 (1988), pp. 117–71, on pp. 124–5.

<sup>5</sup> David Fallows, *Dufay* (London, 1982), pp. 175–7, and the biographical entry for Hugo in the revised editions (London, 1987, and New York, 1988) p. 248.

<sup>6</sup> Ursula Günther draws attention to further examples of mannerism and historical awareness in Dufay, see „Polymetric Rondeaux from Machaut to Dufay“, in Eugene K. Wolf and Edward H. Roesner, eds., *Studies in Musical Sources and Style: Essays in Honor of Jan LaRue* (Madison WI, 1990), pp. 75–108. In particular she notes that in Dufay's *Belle que vous ay je mesfait* the three simultaneous signatures O, C-dot and C appear to reflect the simultaneous C-dot, O and C in Machaut's *Quant ma dame les maus d'amer m'aprent* (which is also partly isorhythmic) as well as perhaps the C-dot, O and C in the *secunda pars* of Antonello da Caserta's *Dame d'onour c'on ne puet esprixier*. Moreover she in fact notes that Dufay's piece has similarities with his *Resvelliés vous* and proposes a similar date.



young Dufay among the tens of thousands present); and in 1427 he served as vicar while the Bishop of Forlì was away in Rome. Moreover, the recent discovery that a large quantity of Ugolino's compositions exists in the Florence manuscript, San Lorenzo 2211, copied by about 1420,<sup>7</sup> places Ugolino as perhaps one of the most senior and eminent composers in the decade after the death of Ciconia (1412), Matteo da Perugia (by 1418), Bartolino da Padova (after 1405), Zacara da Teramo (c1413) and Andrea da Firenze (c1415). San Lorenzo 2211 effectively contains the last examples of the Italian trecento style. Whether Dufay and Hugo actually met Ugolino is neither here nor there: what is important is that they were living so close to this distinguished figure and can hardly have been unaware of the fact. I am suggesting, in short, that their knowledge of Ugolino's proximity may have been one of the factors in their apparently joint decision to write music in this older and more florid style.

Unfortunately the Ugolino songs in San Lorenzo 2211 have been scratched away so that the parchment could be reused: they cannot be read. The only legible compositions by him are three two-voice songs that appear in an apparently later manuscript, Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, 2151, at the end of a copy of his true claim to distinction, the extensive treatise *Declaratio musice discipline*. These three songs actually pose reading problems of their own: for one of them only the discantus line survives; for all three there are blotches on the paper that render large passages effectively untranscribable (the opening of his Latin song has been variously given as *Et videar*, *Si videar* and *Si et videar* by a single author); and at least one of them leaves reason to think that there should probably be a third voice deduced canonically (though I have not managed to find it). However, what can be said with confidence about all three pieces is that they use the most elaborate and complex rhythms.<sup>8</sup>

Three features of Ugolino's pieces are relevant here. The first is that their style hints back to the first quarter of the century: long and almost lazy phrases, an apparently open texture reminiscent of the late trecento, expansive opening melismas; all this along with the cross-rhythms and proportions that include constantly changing mensurations and the exploitation of four-against-three rhythms. The second, to which I shall return, is the use of a very rare mensuration sign, a circle with three dots inside. And the third feature is that in this apparently late fifteenth-century source – the theory treatise it contains was not finished before 1430 – the music is copied in full-black notation with red coloration. The only other conti-

<sup>7</sup> John Nádas, „Manuscript San Lorenzo 2211: some further observations“, *L'ars nova del trecento* 6 (Certaldo, 1992), pp. 145–168.

<sup>8</sup> The only full discussion of them is in Albert Seay, „Ugolino of Orvieto: theorist and composer“, *Musica disciplina* 9 (1955), pp. 111–66.



mental source from the second half of the century to use full-black and red is the manuscript now in Oporto, Biblioteca Pública Municipal, 714. I have proposed elsewhere that the notation of the Oporto manuscript, perhaps from the early 1460s, relates to the strong English influence in the large proportion of works there by English composers;<sup>9</sup> but I now feel inclined to think that there may also be some significance in the fact that it was almost certainly copied in Ferrara, where Ugolino was resident from 1430 until his death in 1457.

There is, however, an English composer who must have had some contact with Ugolino and may therefore have spent some time in Ferrara.<sup>10</sup> This is John Hothby, perhaps the strangest music theorist of the century. One of Hothby's treatises is a digest of Ugolino's *Declaratio*. The known compositions of Hothby now survive only in the Faenza codex, among the many additions made in 1473–4 by Johannes Bonadies. Although no archival documentation on Bonadies has been found, there are two hints: one is that he describes himself as a Carmelite; and the other is that the Faenza codex ended up in the Carmelite Abbey of St Paul in Ferrara. Nor is there any clear indication of Hothby's whereabouts before he was in Lucca as choir-master, though he states that he travelled widely and studied at Pavia.<sup>11</sup> Hothby was also a Carmelite; and Albert Seay has noted that there seems a chance that Bonadies had actually studied with Hothby: his additions to Faenza include not only nine pieces that he ascribes to Hothby but also five short theoretical passages by Hothby.<sup>12</sup> Briefly, then, there is a chance that Hothby was in Ferrara, that he in some sense studied with Ugolino, and that in turn he instructed the apparently younger Bonadies.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> David Fallows, „Robertus de Anglia and the Oporto song collection“, in Ian Bent, ed., *Source Materials and the Interpretation of Music: a Memorial Volume to Thurston Dart* (London, 1981), pp. 99–128.

<sup>10</sup> The hypothesis of Hothby having lived in Ferrara was originally proposed precisely on the basis of his prominence in the Faenza codex; it has been doubted (e.g. in Reaney's excellent MGG article on the composer), but seems worth reconsidering in the present context.

<sup>11</sup> The statement in NG and earlier editions of *Grove* that he had taught in Oxford is without foundation, as noted by Reaney in MGG and as confirmed in A. B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500* (Oxford, 1957), p. 969. In fact a far more promising identification of the composer would be with the John Otteby, Carmelite Friar of the Oxford convent, who was ordained subdeacon on 18 December 1451, see Emden, op. cit., p. 1409.

<sup>12</sup> Though not bearing directly on my argument here, it is intriguing to recall that Hothby's *Amor* (also in the Faenza codex) is one of the most subtle of all identified parodies based on Bedyngham's (I believe) *O rosa bella*.

<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately it remains hard to identify either Hothby or Bedyngham with the two English musicians at Ferrara called Johannes. Hothby appears to have been ordained deacon as late as 1451. Bedyngham could just be one of them: I am happy to concede that the biography of him I sketched out in NG (s.v.) hangs on a very thin thread indeed; but the likelihood that Bedyngham was in Ferrara and the fact that there were two Englishmen there with the commonest of all fifteenth-century first names hardly provide enough to break that thread.



One of Hothby's nine Faenza pieces also belongs in the mannerist tradition I have been discussing: *Ora pro nobis*.<sup>14</sup> Its notation is in fact void. The tenor line is notated on the top of the right-hand page initially in quadrupled note values with the signature 022; and at the bottom of the page is a renotation of that tenor in normal note-values to help the reader. This is plainly to some extent an example of notational complexity for its own sake. The discantus line begins fairly tamely, with some relatively simple proportions; and in general I would suggest that the work is hardly a masterpiece of riveting musical invention. But towards the end it includes 3-against-4, 4-against-6, 5-against-4, 9-against-4 and even 7-against-8.

ex. 1: John Hothby, end of „Ora pro nobis.“

<sup>14</sup> Albert Seay, ed., *John Hothby: Collected Musical Works*, Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae, ser. 33 (1964), no. 2; there is a facsimile of the piece in MGG, s.v. „Hothby“.



At this point the story must move on to a manuscript copied just before 1600, the commonplace book of the singing-man John Baldwin, now in the British Library, R.M. 24.d.2.<sup>15</sup> It is entirely in the hand of John Baldwin, famous also for having copied three other important manuscript collections:<sup>16</sup> first, 'My lady Nevell's Book' (still in private hands), containing most of William Byrd's early keyboard music, apparently copied under the composer's own direction; second, a set of partbooks, Christ Church mss. 979–983, containing a wide range of English motets, particularly work by Byrd and John Sheppard; third, though, and strangest, he is the copyist of one partbook in the famous Forrest-Heyther partbooks, apparently from around 1530 – evidently Baldwin recopied a much earlier partbook that had fallen apart. That in itself shows that he had an unusual interest in music from the first half of his own century.

Baldwin's commonplace book contains three complex mensural pieces ascribed to 'Mr: Jo: Bedyngheham'; and the question to be confronted is whether this could be the famous fifteenth-century composer John Bedyngheham, composer of some of the most successful songs of the years around 1450, among them, as I have recently tried to prove, the most famous of all fifteenth-century songs, the setting of *O rosa bella* often thought of as by John Dunstable.<sup>17</sup> At first glance a source of the 1590s may not seem a very likely place to find music by a composer who died in 1460; after all, three-quarters of the book is taken up with music by Baldwin's contemporaries, among them Byrd, Tallis, Monte and Marenzio. But a second glance shows that this collection contains an extraordinarily wide range of music. It contains music by composers from the very earliest years of the sixteenth century, among them Taverner, Fayrfax and Dygon; and it also includes the only known motet of King Henry VIII, his *Quam pulchra es*. Stranger still, it ends with a piece that must have been copied directly from the Eton Choirbook of around 1500, in which it was also the last piece. Since Baldwin was a lay-clerk of St George's Windsor, just across the road from Eton College, it is easy to see how he gained access to the manuscript; what is strange is that he chose to copy the piece at all if it was ninety years old. This is the thirteen-voice canon *Jesus autem transiens* by Robert Wilkinson (fig. 1); and it seems likely that his reason for copying it – among all the pieces in the Eton Choirbook – was precisely because it was a thirteen-voice canon of some complexity. Now there are two more remarkable features about that copy. First, that Baldwin has copied it in

<sup>15</sup> This endlessly fascinating volume is now available in facsimile, ed. Jessie Ann Owens, in the series *Renaissance Music in Facsimile*, vol.8 (New York, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> See NG, s.v. „Baldwin“, by Norman Josephs.

<sup>17</sup> David Fallows, „Dunstable, Bedyngheham and *O rosa bella*“, *Journal of Musicology* 12 (1994), pp. 281–305.



the rhomboid-shaped note-heads of the years around 1500; and second that he also added a calligraphic initial at the beginning of the piece, again copying a style not used for nearly a century.

fig. 1: Robert Wilkinson, „Ihesus autem transiens“<sup>^^</sup>

canon: 13: voc: —

**I**hesus autem transiens: credo in de- ū patrem omni-  
 potentem creatorem celi et terre, et in ihesū cristū filiū eius vni-  
 cum dominū nostrū quiconceptus est de spīritu sancto natus  
 ex maria virgine, passus subponcio pilato crucifixus mortuus et sepultus descendit  
 ad inferna tertia die resurrexit a mortuis, ascendit ad celos sedit ad dextram  
 dei patris omni- tis indeuenturus est iudicare viuos et mortuos, credo in  
 spīritū sanctū sanctam catholicam sanctorem communionem remissionem peccatorum  
 vt supra: m: wilkinson: —

**A**men: —

hūmīs distinctas muse totis sumito partes  
 margine quotis paruo nōia sēpta vides



There is only one other calligraphic initial of this kind in Baldwin's manuscript, and this is on the perplexing puzzle piece *Holde faste*.

fig. 2: John Hothby, „Holde faste“ (London, BL, R.M.24.d.2., fol. 104).

The image shows a page from a manuscript, folio 104, containing musical notation. The notation is written on five-line staves. The first staff begins with the text "a. m. voc:—." followed by a series of notes. The second staff begins with a large, ornate initial "H" followed by the text "olde faste:—." The third and fourth staves continue the musical notation. The fifth staff begins with a large, ornate initial "H" followed by the text "olde faste:—." The sixth and seventh staves continue the musical notation. The eighth staff begins with the text "Tenor:—." followed by a series of notes. The ninth staff begins with a large, ornate initial "S" followed by the text "Se tenor cantet retortus per bemolle & diminuendo:—." The tenth staff begins with the text "per h & caueatis de pausacionibz in primis sz nō vltra:—." followed by a series of notes. The page is decorated with various musical symbols, including clefs, notes, and rests.



I cannot offer a plausible transcription of the piece; and I repeat my old offer of a year's subscription to *Early Music* for anybody who can provide a convincing interpretation. Two features jump to the eye, though. First, the melodic style of the two transcribable voices is very much that of the mid-fifteenth century. Second, the puzzling tenor is plainly concerned with hexachords on unusual pitches. One of the oddest details in John Hothby's theoretical writings is the passage in his *Calliopea legale* where he proposes hexachords on A, B-flat, D, E-flat, F-sharp, A-flat, B, D-flat and E.<sup>18</sup> It is tempting to think that *Holde faste* is either by Hothby or intended as an exemplification of what he was describing. It is in any case clear that, apart from its baffling notation, this piece follows the *ars subtilior* tradition in having some very strange chromaticism.

Now the context of *Holde faste* within Baldwin's manuscript is important. On the very next page he copied the first of the three pieces ascribed to Bedyngham. The other two Bedyngham pieces appear on the next two openings; and, to judge from style, it looks very much as though all the music on folios 103v to 107 is from the mid-fifteenth century. Among the reasons are not only the melodic and contrapuntal style, the use of characteristic fifteenth-century mensural signs (including, on folio 103v the circle with three dots found earlier in the piece by Ugolino), but also the manner of the only other three-voice piece here, Bedyngham's *Salva Jesu*, in which the two lower voices occupy the same range, as happens in most music before about 1450 (including all the Bedyngham music in fifteenth-century sources) but very little music of the sixteenth century. Moreover the discantus and the tenor function precisely as in all mid-fifteenth-century music, making a complete contrapuntal unit between themselves and approaching cadences by step whereas the contratenor has more angular movement, bridging the gaps between phrases in the other voices and even including an octave-leap cadence.<sup>19</sup> Every detail of the musical syntax here points towards the middle years of the fifteenth century. And the *secunda pars* opens with one of those overlapping-triad moments that are so characteristic of Bedyngham's style. There is no question in my mind that all seven pieces on folios 103v–107 of the Baldwin manuscript are from the mid-fifteenth century and that the three ascribed to John Bedyngham are indeed by the fifteenth-century composer of that name.

A slightly broader context explains why they are here. The first 89 folios of the manuscript are filled with music in score. Then comes a group of two-voice pieces (fols. 89v–100), the last two of which are extremely florid: a textless piece by Baldwin himself and John Taverner's *In women is rest*, some seventy years old at the time. Then begins a group of four highly

<sup>18</sup> NG, s.v. „Hothby“.

<sup>19</sup> This voice is specifically marked „Contratenor“, a word found only once otherwise in the manuscript: for King Henry VIII's *Quam pulchra es*, where the label is attached somewhat halfheartedly: „Secundus: Contratenor“.



complex works: two by Baldwin and the others by his contemporaries Thomas Woodson and Nathaniel Giles, master of the children also at the chapel of St George's, Windsor; three of these are based on the hexachord sounded in long notes; the last is Giles's 'A lesson of descant of thirtie eighte proporcions of sundrie kindes', and it is a piece of baffling complexity and floridity. Then follows the group of fifteenth-century music, after which come further florid and proportional pieces, this time in three voices, by Baldwin and Giles; and the section closes with Thomas Tye's famous proportional exercise *Sit fast*. Apart from Woodson and Tye, all these sixteenth-century contributions are by Giles and by Baldwin himself; and their contrapuntal style is entirely different from that of the fifteenth-century group, in their use of imitation, in their contrapuntal techniques, in their linear movement, even though they all use the most outrageous proportions. It seems legitimate to suggest that Giles and Baldwin, while colleagues at St George's, Windsor, had a kind of friendly rivalry in writing such complex proportional music; and it is equally likely that an interest in these problems prompted Baldwin to copy out these fascinating examples from the fifteenth century. Perhaps, like Wilkinson's *Jesus autem transiens*, they were in the Eton College collection; if so, nobody has found them there today.

A closer look at Bedyngham's *Vide domine* (ex. 2; fig. 3) can help confirm the early date, albeit with a problematic twist. While the proportions and floridity are all in the upper voice, it is the lower voice, the tenor, that spells out the pattern. This has a perfectly standard ballade structure for the early years of the fifteenth century: three roughly equal sections, opening in major prolation, C-dot, then moving into duple time for a middle section before returning to the original mensuration to close. The main cadences are on B-flat (bars 17 and the end); the main subsidiary cadence is a half close on A and C (bar 35). Like so many songs of the early fifteenth century its first cadence is not on the final but a weak cadence on F (in bar 5); but the general tonality is endorsed by B-flat cadences in bars 10, 27 and 44; and the penultimate cadence is a step away from the final, on C in bar 53. Like most ballades, it has a musical rhyme: in both voices, bars 13–17 are the same as bars 54 to the end.

In fact, it may be unwise to exclude the possibility that the music was actually intended to carry text: there are plenty of ballades in the Turin repertory that are just as florid. An early fifteenth-century ballade would normally repeat back to the beginning shortly before the end of the first section, and that could easily be done from the middle of bar 12. Moreover, it is noticeable how many phrases have a rest soon after they start, as characteristically happens in early fifteenth-century songs with a ten-syllable line, which always has a caesura after the fourth syllable: see not just bars 1–3, but also 18–19 and 36–38. That would suggest that the ballade would have a normal first section of four ten-syllable lines, rhyming ABAB;



fig. 3: John Bedyngham „Vide domine“ (London, BL, R.M.24.d.2., fol. 104'–105).

a: duo: m: Jo: bedyngehm:—

Vide domine:—

sestercia. 4. 3. dupla. 12. 6. tripla. 9. 3.

sestercia. 4. 3. dupla superciculus. 8. 3.

dupla. 2. 1. quadrupla. 4. 1.

sestercia. 3. 2. dupla sestercia. 9. 4.

dupla. 2. 1. subsestercia. 3. 4.

sestercia. 9. 8. sestercia. 9. 6.

tripla. 9. 3.

dupla sestercia. 4. 6.

dupla. 2. 1. quadrupla. 4. 1.

finis:—



ex. 2: John Bedyngham, „Vide domine.“

The musical score is written for a lute and a vocal line. The lute part is in 13th-century notation (square notes on a four-line staff) and the vocal part is in modern notation (square notes on a five-line staff). The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The time signature is common time (C). The score is divided into six systems, each with a lute staff and a vocal staff. The vocal line begins with the text "Vide domine". The lute part features various rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth-note runs. The score includes measure numbers 6, 11, 16, 20, and 23. The lute part ends with a final cadence in common time.

Vide domine



26

30

36

42

48

55



the next section would carry a further two lines; and the final section perhaps three.

If so, the last line of the stanza, repeated in all three stanzas and perhaps containing some kind of a motto, would have been in the phrase that starts in bar 48. This is musically an impressive moment. The discantus line reaches the high A for the first time apart from bar 20, when its appearance had been very brief and almost decorative. And the voice then falls in a slow conjunct line in even notes, contrasting strongly with everything else in the piece. Moreover, the tenor does the same: it reaches its high C for the only time after its brief appearance at the end of bar 46; and it too falls conjunctly in even note-values, approximately imitating the discantus in augmented values.

What this all says is that the design of the piece is that of a ballade from the first quarter of the century, rather earlier than Bedyngham is likely to have been active – since I believe he was probably born in the early 1420s. Two possibilities follow from that: either the song is not by Bedyngham at all, but by some even earlier English composer (and in any case this analysis confirms that the piece copied just before 1600 by John Baldwin was indeed at least a century and a half old at the time); or, in my view more plausibly, John Bedyngham was consciously modelling himself on the style of the early fifteenth-century *ars subtilior* composers. But what lies beyond question, I suggest, is that all of these seven pieces are from no later than 1450 and that their survival in the much later Baldwin commonplace book gives important clues about the survival of the *ars subtilior* tradition.

Bedyngham was apparently rather older than John Hothby; and all his pieces in the Baldwin manuscript look earlier than Hothby's *Ora pro nobis*. That could mean that Bedyngham was also in Italy and influenced by Ugolino of Orvieto or that the florid and proportional style had a rather wider distribution than present sources now suggest. In any case, the very existence of these pieces in the Baldwin manuscript more than doubles the size of the late *ars subtilior* repertory between 1415 and 1480.

But Hothby's *Ora pro nobis* brings the story around to five pieces apparently by Johannes Tinctoris included in his *Liber de arte contrapuncti* of 1477. Most of his illustrative examples are in two voices and based on a borrowed chant. But there is a group of five three-voice pieces, all with devotional metrical Latin texts but showing no evidence of a chant basis and running to the characteristic length of a rondeau setting. In the event, they turn out to be fairly simple pieces, merely made to look difficult by the use of changing proportions. They have nothing in common with the general run of devotional pieces from those years: apart from their relative simplicity, they fit happily alongside the Latin song of Ugolino, the three Latin-titled pieces of Bedyngham, and that of Hothby. I suggest that they are all works that merit deeper knowledge and should not be left in the limbo of mere illustrations to a counterpoint treatise.



These examples in their turn provide the connection with the next generation of manneristic pieces, the elaborate duos that seem to find their first coherent collection in the Segovia Cathedral manuscript copied in the years around 1500.<sup>20</sup> Folios 200–205 (in a separate gathering that lacks its first and last leaves) contain a group of twelve pieces that meld together the proportional style with the florid ‘instrumental’ style of the time. All the pieces in this fascicle are in two voices; most of them are based on one voice of a well known polyphonic chanson; and all are surely from after 1480. In the list that follows I have not reported other sources for the pieces: several are found elsewhere, but the point here is that they appear together as a group.

f.200	[Gaudeamus ] Omnes in Domino: Agricola
f.200v	Regina celi letare: Obrecht
f.201	De tous biens plaine: Adam
f.201v	Comme femme desconfortee: Agricola
f.202	De tous biens plaine: Tinctoris
f.202v–203	De tous biens plaine: Roellkin
f.203v	Le souvenir: Tinctoris
f.204	D’ung aultre amer: Tinctoris
f.204	‘Duo’: Tinctoris
f.204v–205	Tout a par moy: Tinctoris
f.205	Fecit potentiam (not mensural): anon.
f.205v	Comme femme desconfortee: Tinctoris

Six of them are by Tinctoris, who had described and briefly illustrated a large range of proportions in his *Proportionale*: whether he gained his interest in such exploits from Bonadies’s pupil Gafori, who spent 1478–80 in Naples and met Tinctoris at the time, must remain an open question, though the Segovia pieces are all likely to date from the 1480s.

Like all the mannerist works mentioned so far, these merit investigation far beyond the mere outline offered here. But three points could be made as an indication of their historical position. First, most of them show a kind of notational complexity that goes beyond the needs of the actual music – that is to say that there are usually much easier ways of writing them; they are games. Second, the piece by Obrecht – one of the most complex of all – may just be related to his visit to Ferrara in 1487–8, though the experiments with mensuration found in the apparently north-

<sup>20</sup> For a description, see *Census-Catalogue of Manuscript Sources of Polyphonic Music 1400–1550*, American Institute of Musicology: Renaissance Manuscript Studies, ser.1, 5 vols. (Neuhausen, 1979–88), 3, pp. 137–8, and iv, p. 475; see also Victor de Lama de la Cruz, *Cancionero musical de la Catedral de Segovia* (Salamanca, 1994). There is a facsimile, ed. Ramón Perales de la Cal (Segovia, 1977).



ern music of Domarto and Busnoys have normally been considered the main influence on that aspect of Obrecht's work. Third, however, there may be some connection with Florence in the presence here not only of Agricola but of Roellkin – his famous *De tous biens plaine* setting in which the added voice has a range of three full octaves, a piece also found in two other sources of the time. 'Roellkin' could easily be 'Raulin' named as the composer of three songs in the Florentine manuscript, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Magl. XIX 176.

A further stage in this development appears mainly in the Perugia manuscript 1013, dated 1507 by its copyist Johannes Materanensis and in the slightly later manuscript Bologna A 71.<sup>21</sup> Both manuscripts contain a large number of the mensural examples from Tinctoris's *Liber de arte contrapuncti* alongside many other works of extreme complexity, the most complex of which is Tinctoris's own *Difficiles alios*. Sadly the piece by Gaffurius, *Nunc eat et veteres*, appears not to survive among them.<sup>22</sup> Since many of these pieces have been discussed extensively by both Albert Seay and Bonnie Blackburn<sup>23</sup> it is perhaps enough here to note that there is now a substantial number of such pieces in three voices and that – as in much of this repertory – there are many passages that could easily be notated much more simply than they are here. Like most of the pieces mentioned so far, they lack text but may well have been for singing. The only four-voice piece, the setting of *Conditor alme siderum* by Busnoys, easily carries its text, as can be seen from Richard Taruskin's recent edition.<sup>24</sup> Even so, their prime function was perhaps as notational exercises.

Yet the tradition continued in the sacred music of the early sixteenth century, most notably in the *Choralis constantinus* of Heinrich Isaac and in the *Mass Ave Maria* of the English composer Thomas Ashwell: both famously contain the most hair-raising proportions. It is important to recognize that these were not in any sense innovations. They grew out of a context and an apparently rich tradition. Moreover, in England at least, the tradition continued right through to the end of the sixteenth century. The complex pieces by Baldwin and Giles in Baldwin's commonplace book are not without context: there is a large group of them by Elway Bevin in another British Library manuscript; and perhaps the most famous example

<sup>21</sup> On both manuscripts, see Bonnie J. Blackburn, "A Lost Guide to Tinctoris's Teachings Recovered", *Early Music History* 1 (1981), pp. 29–116.

<sup>22</sup> Bonnie J. Blackburn, et al., eds., *A Correspondence of Renaissance Musicians* (Oxford, 1991), p. 822.

<sup>23</sup> Blackburn, "A Lost Guide"; Albert Seay, "An 'Ave maris stella' by Johannes Stochem", *Revue belge de musicologie* 9 (1957), pp. 93–108; Albert Seay, "The *Conditor alme siderum* by Busnoys", *Quadrivium* 12 (1971), pp. 225–33.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Taruskin, ed., *Antoine Busnoys: Collected Works, Masters and Monuments of the Renaissance*, ser. 5, part 2: *The Latin-texted Works* (New York, 1990), p. 149.



of all is Thomas Morley's *Christes crosse be my speede*, printed in his *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (London, 1597: pp. 46–53).

Now the main point that could be made about the tradition of notationally intricate music is that the two ends of the fifteenth century are represented by two sources each. From the years around 1400 our knowledge of the *ars subtilior* proper relies almost entirely on the Chantilly Codex and the one in Modena. Without those two sources there would not be enough music to suggest the existence of an *ars subtilior* at all. From the years around 1500, it is almost entirely the Perugia manuscript 1013 and the Bologna manuscript A 71, though we have a small fascicle of such pieces in the Segovia choirbook. It cannot be repeated often enough that the survival of early manuscripts is random and proportionately very small. For the florid tradition from the middle years of the fifteenth century we have only hints in the strangest places: three songs by Ugolino appended to only one copy of his *Declaratio musice discipline*; the single piece by Hothby again appended to a theory treatise, that in Faenza; and the group of seven pieces, three of them ascribed to Bedyngham, surviving miraculously but bizarrely in an English commonplace book copied at the very end of the sixteenth century, some 150 years after they had been composed. I suggest therefore that the tradition was more or less unbroken but that only these little scraps survive – iceberg tips of a repertory that once existed.

Given their difficulty these are less likely to be teaching pieces than ways in which one musician would amuse another. Several of them have a startling wayward beauty and may also have been successful in performance. But their notational essence is more important than in most works. It is a good example, nevertheless, of a music that is not courtly. Though its aim is to charm, though every detail of the repertory turns on graceful compliment, the core of these pieces is exploration for its own sake, intellectual titillation among experts.

There are two further strands to this kind of mannerism in the fifteenth century. One is associated with the isorhythmic motet and, after about 1450, with the cyclic Mass. Very often in these works complicated mensuration signs are used or implied, mainly to denote permutations of the tenor. In general the musical results are relatively simple, despite isolated moments of complexity, such as Dufay's use of four mensurations simultaneously for a very brief passage in his Mass *L'homme armé*.<sup>25</sup> Another trend is in the short musical examples given in proportional treatises,

<sup>25</sup> One further example of complex proportions in Dufay comes in his 3-voice Mass for St Anthony of Padua; could its incorporation there be somehow related to his return to the land of Ugolino after a twelve-year absence?



particularly. None of these lasts more than a few bars or leaves any evidence for believing that they are other than simply abstract demonstrations of how a particular proportion works. A final tradition is that of works that contain some other kind of puzzle: the most famous example is perhaps Ockeghem's *Prenez sur moy*, a clefless three-out-of-one canon of what seems to me quite astonishing intellectual elegance; but others include works such as Busnoys' *Maintes femmes*, which has puzzled many a critic.<sup>26</sup> All of these, too, seem to be symptoms of the efforts of musicians to tease one another.

But even in simplified modern transcriptions – where these are possible – all this music is extraordinarily difficult to perform. Some, like Ockeghem's *Prenez sur moy*, have often been performed in modern times though, in my experience, rarely at all well. Many of the others appear to have been ignored almost entirely.

Returning, then, to the theme of virtuosity, it is odd to note that students and performers of fifteenth-century music seem to have avoided these pieces. The works in the Baldwin manuscript are all still unpublished, as are several of those in Segovia and the later sources. So far as I know the only pieces that have been recorded are Dufay's *Resvelliés vous* and two of the Tinctoris pieces; nor have I ever heard of anybody attempting to perform the others. This is a little perplexing. They present the kind of technical and musical challenge that musicians need, even today.

<sup>26</sup> See my „Prenez sur moy: Ockeghem's Tonal Pun“, *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 1 (1992), pp. 63–75; Helen Hewitt, „The Two Puzzle Canons in Busnois's *Maintes femmes*“, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 10 (1957), pp. 104–110.