

**Zeitschrift:** Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis : eine Veröffentlichung der Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, Lehr- und Forschungsinstitut für Alte Musik an der Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel

**Herausgeber:** Schola Cantorum Basiliensis

**Band:** 34 (2010)

**Artikel:** Reading, memory, listening, improvisation : from written text to lost sound

**Autor:** Bent, Margaret

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-868900>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 18.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# READING, MEMORY, LISTENING, IMPROVISATION. FROM WRITTEN TEXT TO LOST SOUND<sup>1</sup>

by MARGARET BENT

## 1. *Lost Sound*

For old music we are in the same position as for ancient literatures; if we have anything at all, it is a written text. Whatever we may know about old pronunciation, anecdotal descriptions of old performances, physical knowledge of instruments and playing techniques, we can have little or no idea what these actually sounded like; we do not and can not have the sounds. That may be a truism for musicians; but it sometimes comes as a surprise to colleagues in other disciplines who think of music as existing only in sound. The separation between written text and the sounds it represents is an unfortunate reality of the time gap that separates us from those sounds. The separation did not exist in earlier times, when only recent music was performed, but nor did our antiquarian enterprise of recovery exist in relation to polyphonic repertoires, where styles changed as fast as they do in popular music today.<sup>2</sup> Memory has always played a crucial role in performance and its preparation, especially in those non-verbal performative arts whose notation was – and still is – incomplete: music, and the even more fragile arts of dance and cookery.

With a few rare exceptions, such as the evidence from carillons, pinned barrels or punched rolls, to recover actual sounds from the era before sound recording, to pluck them back from the ether, is as unthinkable as it was to put a man on the moon a hundred years ago. Even the evidence from musical automata and early sound recordings needs to be used with care. Claims to have recovered authentic sound are usually fraudulent. One preposterous example relates to the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Rosslyn chapel near Edinburgh, famous for its masonic associations and more recently from Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. The claim, evidently taken seriously by some, was that 'music of the cubes' could be retrieved from interpreting Chladni patterns as indicating harmonic ratios of a medieval composition deliberately encoded in its stones. The result, which still needed to be processed by a modern musician (transcribed, ordered, texted and orchestrated), is an inane piece of chordal homophony that bears no relationship to what can be certainly known of

<sup>1</sup> I was honoured by the invitation to present this keynote paper at the conference *Werk, Werkstatt– Handwerk. Neue Zugänge zum Material der Alten Musik* at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, in November 2010. Some readers may notice echoes from and overlaps with other work of mine, unavoidable when trying to draw many threads together, as here. I thank Jeremy Llewellyn for helpful comments on a draft of an earlier version of my text.

<sup>2</sup> Excluded from this statement is liturgical chant, whose legendary divine authority gave it a status different from newly composed music, and where periodic reforms (notably that of the Cistercians in the 12<sup>th</sup> century) sought to remove impurities and maintain continuity.



15<sup>th</sup>-century music.<sup>3</sup> Despite its claim to recover music from stones, it reflects a profound confusion between raw sound, on the one hand, and structured music, on the other, and deserved to be more robustly denounced. We perforce depend on written texts, with only partial access to the 'software' that can make them intelligible to performers and listeners. By software, I mean an understanding of the musical grammars that unlock the sense of particular repertoires, in the same way that reconstruction of the verbal grammar of lost languages unlocks their literature. But even partial access is better than nothing; in both cases we can recover something of the sense, albeit without the sounds in which that sense was originally clothed.

## 2. Reading and Memory

Reading takes its place in several complementary pairs of terms: not only reading and memory, reading and listening, but also reading and writing, reading and dictation. Of the five parts of classical rhetoric, most attention has been paid to the three that are manifest in a written work: invention, arrangement, style. The last two parts, memory and performance, are not recoverable from written texts, and figure very little in books on historical rhetoric, indeed until recently, most notably in the work of Mary Carruthers,<sup>4</sup> they have often been explicitly excluded, as they are from Lausberg's monumental *Handbook*.<sup>5</sup> This omission has driven a wedge between the different but comparable practices of words and of music, and how they are perceived. Even some who readily accept the silent reading of verbal text find it hard to believe that music can be mentally processed in the same way.

Too much musicological debate has emphasised contrasts: improvisation *versus* composition, reading *versus* memory, as if one excluded the other. In these and other pairs, the reality must lie somewhere between them, as points on a spectrum, not polar opposites, as I have argued (not without controversy) for counterpoint and composition.<sup>6</sup> Anna Maria Busse Berger argues powerfully for a defining role for memorisation in the composition, transmission and performance of medieval polyphony, whether its primary transmission was oral or notated. But her argument leaves little room for the use in performance of

<sup>3</sup> The so-called 'Rosslyn motet' is described on the web, and can be downloaded. See for instance <http://www.crystalinks.com/stuart07.html> (02.07.2014).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 2008; eadem, *The Craft of Thought. Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik. Eine Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft*, Ismaning: Hueber 1960. English translation: *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric. A Foundation for Literary Studies*, ed. by David E. Orton et al., Leiden etc.: Brill, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Bent, 'Resfacta and Cantare super librum', *JAMS* 36 (1983), 371–391, reprinted in eadem, *Counterpoint, Composition, and Musica Ficta*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, where the pages 46–57 of the introduction address criticisms and debates arising from this article.



the kinds of books that have come down to us.<sup>7</sup> Charles Hamm and Martin Staehelin were not prepared to believe that performers could have used most surviving 15<sup>th</sup>-century quarto manuscripts for performance, a view echoed by Laurenz Lütteken, and roundly discredited by those of us in Basel, Oxford and elsewhere, who regularly sing from facsimiles of these repertories.<sup>8</sup> Attempts to explain large musical compilations, such as the Trent codices, by analogy with humanist literary anthologies, do not stand scrutiny. Whereas some humanist manuscripts collected texts that were set to music, a book of polyphony notated in parts was no use except to musicians who were able to read and sing from it, creating the only kind of putting-together of the parts available to them, what I have called a 'sounding score'. Nor will it do to argue that such manuscripts could only have been library repositories, partly on grounds that they contain errors. Those errors would have been reproduced in performing parts made from such reference copies; errors and careless copying are no more and no less a problem in manuscripts and prints that were unquestionably intended for use in performance than they must have been in preliminary copies, extant or not. Some of the owner-compilers of such books did indeed have literary humanist interests, but that does not consign their musical passions to solo armchair contemplation. Of course those musicians could and did read and sing from their own manuscripts, and there is no need to interpose a hypothetical layer of practical materials that have left no trace; but with a more limited repertory than we deal with, and with their well-trained memories, the dependence on reading, for a particular piece, would decrease on acquaintance. Even for us, repeated readings are 'emprentid in remembraunce', as in the title of Walter Frye's song. The piece thus wholly or partly remembered could also undergo elaboration with embellishment, added or alternative voices. To recognise a strong role for memory need not mean that books were redundant when singing half-remembered pieces, nor that they were unsuited to sight-reading. As for the preparation of a polyphonic piece, a singer could certainly make a preliminary construal of his part alone, and indeed with the notes more firmly attached to their text syllables than they might be for a musician reading the piece from a modern score. But only when all the parts sounded together could many performance choices be made:

<sup>7</sup> „Polyphonic compositions were sung by heart“: Anna Maria Busse Berger, *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005, 199, 212–214 and passim. This statement is less nuanced than the work she cites by Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and Jessie Ann Owens. I also have long maintained that aligned scores were not used by composers of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and have suggested a range of compositional strategies for multi-voice and complex composition (for one demonstration, see the article cited in n. 27 below).

<sup>8</sup> Charles Hamm, „Manuscript Structure in the Dufay Era“, *AMl* 34 (1962), 166–184; Martin Staehelin, „Trienter Codices und Humanismus“, in: Nino Pirrotta and Danilo Curti (eds.), *I codici musicali trentini a cento anni dalla loro riscoperta. Atti del convegno, Laurence Feininger, la musicologia come missione*, Trento: Provincia Autonoma di Trento, Servizio Beni Culturali, 1986, 158–169; Laurenz Lütteken, „Padua und die Entstehung des musikalischen Textes“, *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 24 (1997), 25–39.



*ficta* inflections, details of texting, and the resolution of errors or notational ambiguities. Inflections would undergo coordination and refinement through repeated readings, and disagreements or bad choices could bring a reading to grief; but the music would not fall apart if words were absent or syllable placement differed between different singers. It could be positively disadvantageous to learn one's part of a new piece in a fixed way in advance of this communal process; much better, an open-ended or provisional kind of learning, with default readings that could be adjusted in successive refinements, as context required, and as familiarity with the piece increased. The same applies, to a lesser extent, to a modern instrumentalist rehearsing alone from a separate performing part, where the eventual context cannot always be anticipated, albeit from notation that is more fixed and prescriptive. While recognising that repeated renderings may have made the book progressively less necessary as a piece took shape in sound and memory, reading by singers, including sight-reading, cannot have been abnormal in the early stages of learning it.

Some languages, at least English and French, say 'by heart' (*par cœur*) to mean 'from memory'. This usually means, for us, and sometimes for them, artificial or mechanical memory. The Aristotelian division of human functioning between heart and brain has persisted, at least metaphorically, for 2000 years, the brain for some neurological functions, but the heart for vital passions, including much that we now attribute to the brain. The Latin *cor*, or *recordare*, gives the English word which fixes material mechanically or in writing: *recording*. Images for memory are shaped culturally and technologically, with metaphors such as 'photographic memory'. Augustine in the fourth century praises a friend's ability to retrieve material on any topic, and to recall verses of Virgil out of context or even backwards. Data retrieval, random access: our new tools of computer memory, material stored in bits and pieces, and searchable out of context, are remarkably similar to ancient and medieval conceptualisations of human *artificial* memory, and how it is accessed. Memory topics were mentally distributed among places, *loci*, from which they could be recalled.<sup>9</sup>

But despite such impressive accounts, not all memory was so literal. The medieval arts of memory were more flexible than rote learning.<sup>10</sup> We talk metaphorically of digesting information; accounts of memorising texts by eating them in a more literal sense will be familiar from *The Name of the Rose*, if not from the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Hugh of St. Victor, one of Eco's sources. They were quite at home with our postmodern idea that reading texts changes them, just as eating changes the chemical constitution of food. Like food, the texts become part of you, to be reused in other ways, including forgetting, or

<sup>9</sup> Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (see n. 4). For musical mnemonic diagrams, see Joseph Smits van Waesberghe (ed.), *Musikgeschichte in Bildern*, vol. III/3. *Musikerziehung: Lehre und Theorie der Musik im Mittelalter*, Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1969.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to her other works cited, see, most recently, Mary Carruthers, 'Ars obliionalis, ars inveniendi. The Cherub Figure and the Arts of Memory', *Gesta* 48 (2009), 99–117 and plates 1–4.



elimination. It is a more physical version of Eliot's „the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past“.<sup>11</sup>

Both Tinctoris and Martin le Franc used the period of about forty years to assert the superiority of music of their own time. I have suggested elsewhere that this corresponds roughly to the span of living memory. Without sound recording, only someone who was there, as Martin reports, could say with authority: „I heard those excellent musicians, and I can affirm that ours today are better“.<sup>12</sup> Immediately before his famous statement that only music composed within the last forty years was judged by the learned to be worth hearing, Tinctoris (in 1477) famously dismissed written copies of old anonymous songs:

And if I may refer to my own experience, I have had in my hands certain old songs, called apocrypha, of unknown origin, so ineptly, so stupidly composed that they rather offended than pleased the ear. Further, although it seems beyond belief, there does not exist a single piece of music, not composed within the last forty years, that is regarded by the learned as worth hearing.<sup>13</sup>

This was presumably not, as has been implied, because there was a sudden change of style in 1436 with the composition of Du Fay's *Nuper rosarum flores* – and after all, some of his admired authorities started composing well

<sup>11</sup> T. S. Eliot, „Tradition and the Individual Talent“, first published in 1919 and soon after included in *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, London: Methuen, 1920.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Bent, „The Musical Stanzas in Martin le Franc's *Le champion des dames*“, in: John Haines and Randall Rosenfeld (eds.), *Music and Medieval Manuscripts. Paleography and Performance*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, 91–127. For the text, see Martin Le Franc, *Le Champion des Dames*, ed. by Robert Deschaux, Paris and Geneva: Honoré Champion Editeur, 1999 (Les classiques français du Moyen Age 127–131). Two relevant studies appeared after mine was in press: Rob C. Wegman, „New Music for a World Grown Old. Martin le Franc and the ‚Contenance Angloise‘“, *AMI* 75 (2003), 201–241, and Reinhard Strohm, *Guillaume Du Fay, Martin le Franc und die humanistische Legende der Musik*, Winterthur: Amadeus, 2007. See also Reinhard Strohm, „Music, Humanism, and the Idea of a ‚Rebirth‘ of the Arts“, in: Reinhard Strohm and Bonnie J. Blackburn (eds.), *Music as Concept and Practice in the Late Middle Ages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 (The New Oxford History of Music, vol. III/1, new edition), 346–405, 368–385. See also Margaret Bent, „Performative Rhetoric and Rhetoric as Validation“, in: Laura Iseppi De Filippis (ed.), *Inventing a Path. Studies in Medieval Rhetoric in Honour of Mary Carruthers*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2013 (Nottingham Medieval Studies 56 [2012]), 43–62, and eadem, „Grammar and Rhetoric in Late-Medieval Polyphony. Modern Metaphor or Old Simile?“, in: Mary Carruthers (ed.), *Rhetoric Beyond Words. Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 78), 52–71.

<sup>13</sup> Translation from Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History*, New York: Norton, 1950, 198–199; *Johannis Tinctoris opera theoretica*, ed. by Albert Seay, [Rome]: American Institute of Musicology, 1975–1978 (Corpus scriptorum de musica 22), vol. 2, *Liber de arte contrapuncti I*, 12: „Et si visa auditaque referre liceat nonnulla vetusta carmina ignotae auctoritatis quae apocrypha dicuntur in manibus aliquando habui, adeo inepte, adeo insulse composita ut multo potius aures offendebant quam delectabant. Neque quod satis admirari nequeo quippiam compositum nisi citra annos quadraginta extat quod auditu dignum ab eruditis existimetur.“



before then – but because composition was always moving on, together with the living traditions that sustained it, leaving old compositions lifeless, like seaweed out of water. For Tinctoris, music, even written music, was inseparable from performing conventions from which we are perforce cut off; we have to breathe what modern life we can into his ‚apocrypha‘. He would not have begun to understand why some of us devote our lives to reviving old music. Memory is inseparable from the native familiarity taken for granted by notators who were writing mainly for performers with whom they shared the same unwritten expectations. Cases of notational translation and other changes, then as now, doubtless attest to the adaptation of music to accommodate stylistic evolution, or to suit a different performing group.

Too much emphasis has been placed on authenticity of sound, an impossible goal, as I stated at the outset. As Richard Taruskin and others have rightly said, revival is a modernist enterprise, and we remake old music, each generation, each decade, as we like to hear it. We should not deceive ourselves that it ever sounded like that in the past. We surely would not have liked their performative rhetoric any more than we would have liked their food. Today's tastes are for the ‚lite-bite‘ nouvelle cuisine of McCreesh and Gardiner rather than the cholesterol-rich performances of Klemperer and Furtwängler. Without sound recording, only older people would now be able to compare performances across a generation.

Yet it is common to write about our access to old music as though its necessarily modern sound has the same power as the lost original:

One of the most remarkable aspects of earlier fifteenth-century music is its sound. By sound I intend not so much timbre or counterpoint as what resonates amidst them, or through them: the identity, or impression of identity, formed by the blending together of notes.<sup>14</sup>

[...] the sound of medieval music, as interpreted today, has the power to influence our aesthetic and intellectual apprehension of the Middle Ages [...].<sup>15</sup>

On the contrary: „it is our tastes that [inform and] are informed by modern performances, our ears that we develop, not those of the Middle Ages“.<sup>16</sup> Rather than pursuing the futile – and easily caricatured – quest for authentic

<sup>14</sup> The opening sentence of Graeme M. Boone, „Tonal Colour in Dufay“, in: Jessie Ann Owens and Anthony M. Cummings (eds.), *Music in Renaissance Cities and Courts. Studies in Honor of Lewis Lockwood*, Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 1997, 57–99, 57.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Page, *Discarding Images. Reflections on Music and Culture in Medieval France*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, xx.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Bent, „Reflections on Christopher Page's Reflections“, *EM* 21 (1993), 625–633, 630. For further reviews and comments, see Page's response, *EM* 22 (1994), 127–132; Rob C. Wegman, „Reviewing Images“, *M&L* 57 (1995), 268–271; Reinhard Strohm, „How to Make Medieval Music Our Own. A Response to Christopher Page and Margaret Bent“, *EM* 22 (1994), 715–719.



sound,<sup>17</sup> we would do well to devote more energy to recovering the grammars of music before 1500, to the point where we can detect, within the norms of each style, wrong notes, wrong canonic resolutions, recognise that incompatible alternative parts should not be used together, distinguish between onward motion and closure, and inflect appropriately. All of these errors are multiplied when editors approach them with 20<sup>th</sup>-century eyes rather than our nearest approximation to trained 14<sup>th</sup>-century ears. We have a sporting chance of recovering much of the *sense* of late-médiæval music, its internal logic, even if we – now – have to clothe it in modern sounds, whether actually or imagined, in order to bring it alive.

### 3. Reading and Listening

Tinctoris says that music is understood in two ways – *interius* and *exterius* – „inwardly by an intellective faculty, through which he [the listener] understands appropriate composition and performance, and outwardly by an auditive faculty, through which he perceives the sweetness of the consonances.“<sup>18</sup>

The order is interesting: many writers treat the sensory impact as primary, and it is indeed the first to be perceived; but Tinctoris here inverts the order of importance. Music is understood by the intellect, which considers not only the principle underlying the accord and the cause of the proportion, but also the principles of counterpoint, composition and performance, leading to intellectual delight, and only in second place inducing pleasure by its well-tuned proportion. Such delight can take many forms; obviously in the age of polyphony it applied not only to the ratios of intervals, but to the ingenuity by which interval successions and combinations were managed. Having distinguished internal from external perception, Tinctoris reports the sensory pleasure he derived from the renowned blind virtuoso rebec players.<sup>19</sup> Both kinds of perception have power and value, but not everyone is qualified for intellectual understanding.

Tinctoris's distinction aligns, at least partially, with that between casual or uninformed hearing and educated listening. A recent dictionary distinguishes hearing as perceiving sounds with the ear, and listening as giving one's attention to a sound.<sup>20</sup> The distinction is blurred by our confusing usage whereby

<sup>17</sup> A memorable cartoon by Neil Bennett from the 1980s bore the caption: „We're the London Consort of Surgeons, and we perform authentic operations using period instruments“.

<sup>18</sup> *Johannis Tinctoris opera theoretica* (see n. 13): *Complexus effectuum musices*, 173: „Namque quanto plus in hac arte perfectus est, tanto plus ab ea delectatur, eo quod naturam ipsius et interius et exterius apprehendat: interius quidem virtute intellectiva, qua intelligit debitam compositionem ac pronuntiationem et exterius potentia auditiva qua percipit concordantiarum dulcedinem.“ Christopher Page calls this „something like a phenomenology of listening“, in: idem, „Reading and Reminiscence. Tinctoris on the Beauty of Music“, *JAMS* 49 (1996), 1–31.

<sup>19</sup> For the two pairs of blind virtuosi reported respectively by Martin and Tinctoris, see my „The Musical Stanzas“ (n. 12), and other works therein cited.

<sup>20</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. by Catherine Soanes et al., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; 2003.



hearing can also mean the attentive mental processing of sounds – ,I hear it this way‘, meaning to read, understand or interpret; and listening can be used for minimal or casual attention, as in ,background listening‘. As with Tintoris, these may be points on a spectrum of competence, matters of degree, rather than opposites. A principal focus of recent interest in the phenomenon of listening has been on the physical and physiological process of hearing, and on music’s emotional and aesthetic effects on listeners, as measured by literary anecdotal accounts and psychological testing. These tests often focus on sound and mood without taking account of the preparedness or competence of a listener in the particular musical style or language offered, neglecting the distinction between casual hearing and attentive or competent listening, and thus implying that familiarity and understanding are not at issue. Do comparable tests involving verbal language similarly ignore competence in the language administered? Obviously, the sounds of music can powerfully affect people who are not musically literate, or who do not master a particular musical style. This phenomenon has led to the ever-present fear, not only by amateurs, of admitting that music has intellectual content, as though its affective power would thereby be diminished. An experienced listener to, say, 14<sup>th</sup>-century music will be as irritated by performances which ignore closure, or put it in the wrong places, as they would in an oral rendering which obscured the sense by failing to make appropriate inflections and sense breaks. Innocent listeners, meanwhile, might be happily grooving along to the nice sounds, just as one can be soothed by the sounds of a poetry reading in a language not understood. This formulation provoked one respondent to admit – with defensive and anti-pedantic vigour – that she was a ,groover‘ rather than a grammarian. But understanding is no more incompatible with sensuous pleasure in music than it is with poetry or drama. Native command of a verbal language no more requires a degree in linguistics than a comparable musical command requires musical training. Leonard Meyer put this very well:

Zealous listeners are sometimes heard to protest that they „love“ music but don’t understand it. This is, of course, absurd. People seldom like what they do not understand. [...] What listeners mean is that when they say that they don’t understand is that they can’t read it, name syntactic processes [...] or otherwise explain how music works [...]. Understanding music [...] is not a matter of knowing the technical terms of music theory, but of habits correctly acquired in oneself and rightly presumed in others. Listening to music intelligently is more like knowing how to ride a bicycle than knowing why a bicycle is rideable.<sup>21</sup>

To dismiss the idea of musical grammars is to dismiss the notion that music can make sense, that it can have its own internal coherence and content. That content is communicated to the listening ear that has gained competence in

<sup>21</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, *Explaining Music. Essays and Explorations*, Chicago and London: University of California Press, 1973, 16.



the particular style, the particular grammar in question.<sup>22</sup> The danger with music, when the revival of obsolete styles is at issue, is that performances which construe them as they make sense to us may fail to understand and articulate the musical sense in its own terms, and thus set up a circular mis-training of the ears of performers and listeners alike.

Shai Burstyn writes:

If we accept that the intelligibility of music to a listener hinges on the culturally dependent mental habits and interpretive skills with which he/she processes and decodes – that is, makes sense, that is, *analyses* – the musical stimuli, then this important factor cannot be eliminated from any analyses seeking to elucidate the act of listening. It follows that analysing musical works in their historical context, specifically with the conceptual and perceptual tools available to contemporaries and to the conscious exclusion of later, anachronistic ones, can yield important information. Though out of favour lately, such historically oriented analysis is clearly demanded here [...].<sup>23</sup>

I agree; but it is clear that Burstyn is thinking only of *post-facto* analysis, not also of the kinds of analysis and active listening before and during performance that are equivalent to grammatical and rhetorical preparation for spoken delivery.

Listening to live music usually means, for us, the presence of performers, and enjoyment by a relatively passive audience with a wide range of listener competence. Rehearsal and performance now figure large in discussions of how early manuscripts were used. But who was the audience? A modern concert-situation with private rehearsal and public performance does not apply. The high-art music that has come down to us from the Middle Ages would usually have been performed by singers for their own delight, for the Almighty, for patrons, and for a small circle of connoisseurs or privileged bystanders.<sup>24</sup> Whether in a private or public space, such as a church, only incidentally would it be heard by non-initiates.

Listening competence in words or music could be defined as having sufficient familiarity with a style to detect wrong notes, wrong grammar, and the capacity to discern whether, and how, expectations are being failed, met, or stretched in an interesting or skilful way. That is the litmus test. Then as now, such competence was the preserve of a small minority of those who might have heard the music with pleasure. Even today, many musically untrained listeners can detect wrong notes in Mozart; but how many professionals can do so for Machaut? Editors and performers have been prepared to print and

<sup>22</sup> As Elizabeth Eva Leach has put it: „medieval listeners are under a strong compulsion not just to experience aural data as mere sensation but to employ the intellect to deduce the truth of the matter.“ (*Sung Birds. Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007, 24).

<sup>23</sup> Shai Burstyn, „In Quest of the Period Ear“, *EM*, 25<sup>th</sup>-anniversary issue: „Listening Practice“, November 1977, 692–701, 697.

<sup>24</sup> See Bonnie J. Blackburn, „For Whom Do the Singers Sing?“, *EM* 25 (1997), 593–609.



sing patent nonsense because they were unable to diagnose simple errors in the source. Respect for the musical sense must always come ahead of reverence for the manuscripts.

#### 4. *Reading and Writing*

Isidore of Seville strikingly stated that sounds perish because they cannot be written down unless they are held in the memory. This is usually taken to mean that usable musical notation did not yet exist around 600. That „sound flows by as time passes and is imprinted in the memory“ is much more complex than simply an admission that musical notation in his time was inadequate; writing can be an aid to remembering, not just a way of communicating at a distance. But the actual sounds perish even if the music is notated.<sup>25</sup>

A short survey cannot begin to do justice to this vast topic, but for now I will point to just one aspect of written music: the extent to which medieval notation provides inaudible delights for the eye, *Augenmusik avant la lettre*, not only with the well-known hearts, harps, circles and labyrinths in manuscripts from around 1400, but also with compact tenor notations, riddles and notational virtuosity, things that are not heard, but which both challenge the performers and contribute to their intellectual delight.

#### 5. *Reading and Dictation*

Another complementary pair of terms was reading and dictation, a process involving two people; one uttering or singing aloud, the other listening and writing. Both processes require at least short-term memory. Sending and receiving a letter involved both oral reading and aural listening: it would be dictated to a secretary and then read aloud to the recipient. For music, according to the foundation myth, Western chant was divinely dictated by the Holy Spirit to Pope Gregory, though how he or his secretaries notated it is unexplained. With very rare exceptions, we have no composers' autographs from the late-medieval period. But we do have Machaut's own testimony in the *Voir Dit* that he dictated to a secretary, presumably one part at a time, and that he expected to have a song performed back to him before publication, perhaps as a form of proof-reading; this does not mean that he could not also hear it in his head. In the case of a polyphonic composition, the dictation of successive parts, separately notated, would leave neither the dictator nor the copyist or reader in visual control of the whole texture. It is not the complication of musical notation as such but, rather, the layout of polyphony in separate parts that impedes silent reading. Adepts can of course piece parts together mentally, if not in real time; Cristle Collins Judd's book on examples in renaissance music theory treatises was subtitled: *Hearing With the Eyes*.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Blair Sullivan, „The Unwritable Sound of Music. The Origins and Implications of Isidore's Memorial Metaphor“, *Viator* 30 (1999), 1–13.

<sup>26</sup> Cristle Collins Judd, *Reading Renaissance Music Theory. Hearing With the Eyes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.



If dictation by means of singing was by successive parts, one at a time, so was the pedagogy of dyadic grammar. This musical grammar, the discipline of simple counterpoint, could be fleshed out with ornamented lines and reversed, or reduced back to the underlying counterpoint, in an appropriate analytic process. But conceptual priority does not necessarily align with temporal order. There are many cases where a composer (Machaut, for example) maintains the integrity of a discant-tenor duet while leaving space for an anticipated or already-conceived contratenor part. And analysis can show how a texture conceived in three parts still has an underlying dyadic grammar.<sup>27</sup> A native speaker can utter a complex sentence without building it up from a simple subject-verb-object construction; likewise, an experienced musician can think flawlessly within the grammatical structures of the relevant musical language without consciously reproducing its underlying pedagogy.

Blindness precludes dependence on writing, and provides a rich opportunity for the study of memory. It is reported that the blind poet Milton stored up a day's worth of mentally composed verse, which he then disgorged to his secretary with the same relief felt by a cow when milked. In the case of two blind organists, Francesco Landini in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Italy and Conrad Paumann in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, memory and dictation must have been paramount in the transmission of their music. Paumann was credited with the invention of the non-graphic, letter-based system of German lute tablature which is perhaps better suited to the blind than to the sighted. Perhaps paradoxically, these are two among a tiny number of early musicians whose images survive in stone carvings on their tombs, in Florence and Munich.

## 6. Orality, Memory, Improvisation

Composition and improvisation seem to be different modes of musical creation, but they often lie on a continuum. *Improvisus* means sudden or unprepared, and was an entirely pejorative term in the Middle Ages, absent from music-theoretical approval; the orator should be well prepared. Tinctoris used the noun *resfacta* (= *chose faite*) for composition, and the verbal phrase *cantare super librum* for the singing, or making/doing of counterpoint, singing on the book, often subsequently equated with improvisation.<sup>28</sup> Counterpoint is the foundation of composition. *Resfacta* will usually be written, but it is too simplistic to equate these terms with written versus improvised music. Both composition and counterpoint could be constructed, he says, in writing or in the mind. Counterpoint created in sound, by a group of singers, requires preparation; its rules are, if anything, stricter than for composition; it is not at all a haphazard activity. Why do we find it hard to accept the idea of fully conceived but unwritten composition, in text or in music, when there is am-

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Bent, „Ciconia, Prosdocimus, and the Workings of Musical Grammar as Exemplified in *O felix templum* and *O Padua*“, in: Philippe Vendrix (ed.), *Johannes Ciconia, musicien de la transition*, Tournhout: Brepols, 2003, 65–106.

<sup>28</sup> See n. 6 above.



ple testimony to mental composition, dictated or written out from memory? Both written and unwritten composition are equally subject to change and adaptation by their creators or by those who copy or perform them.<sup>29</sup>

### 7. *Composition*

It has been argued that the profession of 'the composer', and the notion of 'a finished work [of art] that has an existence apart from its performance', came into being only in the renaissance. The prime witnesses are Nicolaus Listenius in 1549, with his much-cited phrase *opus perfectum et absolutum*, a complete and perfect work that survives the death of the author, and Tinctoris's term *resfacta*, in the *Liber de arte contrapuncti*.<sup>30</sup> The idea that a work concept begins to exist only when licenced by a theorist is as absurd as to assert that the making of babies depends on sex manuals. Because we have clear evidence that babies and musical works were made, they need no further theoretical permission. On the evidence of the surviving written works themselves, there are plenty of demonstrably complete and finished works by Machaut, Vitry, Du Fay, that are fixed in writing and artfully worked out to the last detail, meeting all criteria for an autonomous 'work'. Music was often changed and adapted from performance to performance, copy to copy; but so, too, were later works that qualify for *opus* status, not least opera.

### 8. *Improvisation*

There are many cases of cross-over and overlap between the categories of orality, memory, composition, improvisation. Albert Lord argued that south Slavic epic poetry was orally composed – improvised – in the act of performance, but this was challenged by later anthropologists who showed that it varied

<sup>29</sup> Examples include the copies of works by Ciconia and Du Fay in *Bologna Q15*, eagerly collected, but presented there in already changed forms. See Margaret Bent, *Bologna Q15. The Making and Remaking of a Musical Manuscript*, Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2008, vol. I, 146–147 and passim.

<sup>30</sup> For a full account, see Bonnie J. Blackburn, 'On Compositional Process in the Fifteenth Century', *JAMS* 40 (1987), 210–284. Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, places the arrival of the work concept as late as 1800. Reinhard Strohm has argued forcefully against this, and for the recognition of independent works at a much earlier date. See, amongst other places, his 'Looking Back at Ourselves. The Problem With the Musical Work-Concept', in: Michael Talbot (ed.), *The Musical Work*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000, 128–152. The case that composition as a recognised career dates to the late 15<sup>th</sup> century is made by Rob C. Wegman, 'From Maker to Composer. Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450–1500', *JAMS* 49 (1996), 409–479, and idem., *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe, 1470–1530*, New York: Routledge, 2005.



so little over time that it must rather be thought of as fixed in memory.<sup>31</sup> The same is true of much early jazz. Pieces apparently improvised by Louis Armstrong have been confirmed, even by him, as being similarly memorised. Occasionally, a „performer's interaction with the unique time, place and human context of his performance“ may attest spontaneity: Richard Widdess described an incident in an Indian performance where the unforeseen sound – *improvisus* – of the horn of a passing car was wittily worked into the raga,<sup>32</sup> and of course such things do happen in jazz. How can we tell if what appears to be spontaneous has in fact been rehearsed many times before? Testimony is rarely available, but, even in those cases, conventions, disciplines and models were also in play. There is an element of chance in what I prefer to call ‚real-time creation‘ of words or music, involving risk and error. Live debate and dialogue may seem to be spontaneous, while including prepared (or prompted) set pieces and formulas, stock phrases or structures, as in political debate or improvised fugues. As with improvisation and composition, improvisation and memorisation are points on a spectrum, not antithetical. We may know that a piano recitalist is playing from memory because we know that a score of that piece exists; but this may not have been true at concerts by Liszt or Thalberg. At a jazz concert where no notated music is in evidence, we might think we are witnessing improvisation, simply because we assume that there is no written score or memorised working-out – and we may be wrong. A listener or observer cannot always distinguish composition from improvisation, improvisation from memory. Oral performance and its listeners cannot simply be aligned with illiterate cultures, silent reading with literacy. This applies both cross-culturally and historically. Oral performance was often preferred even by those who could read, just as we may prefer to go to the theatre rather than read a play silently. Terms for public reading aloud to a patron, or to students, have survived in words such as ‚lecture‘ in English, *praelector* in Latin, *vorlesen* in German. People capable of score-reading do not abandon their pleasure in listening to music. If singers are seen standing round a book, can one always tell if they were reading notated polyphony, or singing *supra librum*, creating new polyphony on the basis of a given chant? Improvisatory categories within composed music, like cadenzas, continuo realisation, and vocal ornamentation, may or may not be prepared or written. Mozart wrote out cadenzas for students, but not when he was going to perform the concerto himself. Even so, much current performance of notated Mozart compositions

<sup>31</sup> Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960, embodying his work and that of Milman Parry, has profoundly influenced the way in which oral traditions are viewed in relation to written, and has been fundamental to musicological studies on oral transmission by Treitler and others, though it has been criticised for transferring Serbian and Croatian models too readily to the Homeric tradition, which left the reciter more freedom of choice. The debate is ongoing.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Widdess, „Who Knows Who's Improvising?‘ *Ethnomusicological and Related Perspectives*“, unpublished paper delivered at a study day of the Society for Music Analysis on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2001.



may be quite incomplete compared to what he would have done, a possibility Andreas Staier has explored in recordings of Mozart sonatas, with extensive elaborations that in places amount to recomposition.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, Palestrina's 19<sup>th</sup>-century editor Haberl deplored contemporary ornamented versions of his works, seeing them as „worms and maggots destroying the creations of the master“, and indeed, we seldom hear these written-out ornamentations, perhaps because of the iconic status of Palestrina.<sup>34</sup> It seems that we have an urge to protect some mythical or presumed purities more than others. A spurious whiteness was imposed on the Elgin marbles in the British Museum, when they were controversially wire-brushed in the 1930s. There is in all periods a grey area in music between what is part of the text, and what unscripted initiatives were implicit in that text. Writing about improvisation, Robert Levin observes that „the task of inventing within the individual languages of the great composers is daunting if not impossible for a performer who has not had extensive training in composition and the grammar, syntax, rhetoric and texture of music (i.e. theory).“<sup>35</sup>

The common short-circuit that equates lack of a script with lack of preparation can be illustrated by the case of a colleague who has only peripheral vision. He works out his lecture material in detail and stores it in his excellent memory, so that he can appear to have eye contact with his audience, rather than lecturing with papers held close to his eyes. But this virtuoso delivery without a visible script or notes distracted students' attention; they assumed that he must be ‚improvising‘, making it up as he went along. This he solved by taking a sheaf of papers, any papers, into the lecture room, and turning one over from time to time, simply to redirect attention from the (presumed) feat to the content. Unscripted performance is not necessarily ‚improvised‘; unwritten does not necessarily mean unprepared.

I have already referred to blindness in connection with dictation, and now I do so in connection with improvisation. The two generations of blind musicians reported by Martin le Franc and Tinctoris came from a highly educated dynasty. It has been assumed that they were necessarily improvising, or even minstrels, because they were blind. That a performance could be fully prepared but unscripted is often discounted. I have suggested elsewhere that the famous stanzas which have generally been assumed to apply to composition, taken in the context of the poem as a whole, are in fact about live performance. At issue is the meaning of terms like *contenance angloise*, *frisque concordance*. Because Martin names known composers, it has been assumed that the influ-

<sup>33</sup> Recording of Mozart piano sonatas K 330, K 331 ‚alla turca‘, and K 332 (Harmonia mundi 2005: HMG 50838889).

<sup>34</sup> Franz Xaver Haberl, preface to vol. 33 of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, *Werke*, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1907, VII: „Diese Verzierungskünste verdarben nicht nur die Originalkompositionen, sondern auch den Geschmack für reine Vokalmusik; sie sind gleichsam die Maden und Würmer, welche die herrlichen Gebilde der Meister zerstören. Wir dürfen als sicher annehmen, daß Palestrina selbst zu diesen Verunstaltungen keine Anregung gab.“

<sup>35</sup> *Early Music News* 267 (March 2002), 3.



ence discussed was transmitted in writing; this is in line with the general emphasis, in studies of historical rhetoric, on written manifestations. *Fainte*, *pause*, and *muance* have been sought in written pieces, with no convincing success. They are usually translated as *musica ficta*, rests and hexachordal mutations, things that can be seen in or inferred from the written score. But I believe these terms must apply at least as much to performance as to composition; that *contenance*, *concordance*, *chant*, *fainte*, *pause*, *muance*, *plaisance*, *frisque*, *joieux*, *notable*, *nouvelle pratique*, are terms of performative rhetoric, especially in the context of Martin's advocacy of live arts. They may well come from informal language used by or about performers, the precious and evanescent language used between musicians in preparation or in semi-private music-making.

### 9. Epilogue

A century of recorded sound has, for us, artificially extended living memory. In fifty years we have seen milestone recordings of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* by Klemperer (1962), with the massive opening chorus at a majestically slow tempo, and forty years later (2003), McCreesh taking the same music fully twice as fast, like a gigue, with light scoring and solo singers. How things have changed. Bach is now almost never programmed in the same concert together with 19<sup>th</sup>-century music. He is no longer monumental. Bach has been isolated as the property of early music, with chamber performances removed from whatever is left of a mainstream canon. The aim of Rudolf von Ficker's famous scoring of Perotin's *Sederunt* (1930), as with rescorings by Mahler and others, was not to be 'authentic', but to make older music familiar so that it sounded less 'other'. Early revivals of Bach and Perotin tried to bring them within then-contemporary canons of taste, tastes which may now seem uncongenially alien, in order to rehabilitate old masters so that they could be appreciated alongside more familiar masterpieces. More recent revivals of old music, however, have, on the contrary, tried to make old music sound as 'other' as possible, clothing it in exotic sounds which, paradoxically, were differently and more congenially alien to the new audiences. However faithful the reconstructions of instruments and ornamentation, the rhetoric and the sounds were necessarily modern. The only mistake was to pretend that they were authentic.

Recordings of radio announcers, politicians and actors from fifty years ago sound impossibly mannered and alien to the young of today. Even more extreme are cases from a hundred years ago, instanced in two examples of recorded sound that is therefore not quite lost, one of music, one of speech. First, one of the very earliest recordings of Gregorian chant, from the *Lamentations of Jeremiah*, performed by the last papal castrato, Alessandro Moreschi (1858–1922).<sup>36</sup> The aesthetic of his performance style was contemporary with

<sup>36</sup> This can be heard on <http://www.archive.org/details/AlessandroMoreschi-IncipientLamentatio> (02.07.2014).



the sound-world of the monks of Solesmes, who were charged with restoring the chant to the purity of its earliest manuscripts. What may both repel and fascinate about that recording probably has less to do with how Moreschi acquired or kept his voice, than with the strangeness, to us, of the performance tradition and canons of taste within which he used it. Who would have been able to imagine, from a verbal description alone, not just the sound quality of that voice, but the little swoops and articulations (the ill-defined ,ictus', perhaps), part of the performative rhetoric?

No verbal account of pronunciation can prepare one for the rhetorical delivery of Sarah Bernhardt, the legendary actress born 1844, in a recording of a century ago. „La declaration“ from Racine's *Phèdre*,<sup>37</sup> however dimmed by the early recording, brings a voice from another world, unimaginable to theatre-goers of today. What fascinates or repels us here, again, is the strangeness of the rhetorical delivery. No description of these performances can give any idea of the actual sound. It is striking that we rarely try to reproduce ,authentic performances' of music that can be checked against recordings – who has attempted to revive the singing style of Puccini operas with their first casts, under the composer's direction? And, despite efforts by Roger Norrington and Clive Brown to revive early string techniques, we seldom hear ,authentic' pre-war string glissandi or selective use of vibrato in post-1945 performances of Elgar chamber music or Mahler symphonies. Bold claims have been made for music whose actual sounds are completely irrecoverable; less, significantly, for repertories where recordings could prove us wrong. And if we find old recordings too strange to emulate, or aesthetically unsympathetic, how much less are we likely to have liked the performative rhetoric of 600 years ago? Whatever that music sounded like, we have no access to it, and must content ourselves, as with making ancient drama come alive to a modern audience, with offering modern performances that are historically informed, but make no false claims of authenticity. Nothing goes out of fashion as fast as authentic sound.

<sup>37</sup> A web search for ,Sarah Bernhardt Phedre mp3' produces multiple opportunities to download this track.