



Julie E. Cumming

The Motet in the Age of Du Fay

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During the lifetime of Guillaume Du Fay (*c.* 1400–1474) the motet underwent a profound transformation. Because of the protean nature of the motet during this period, problems of definition have always stood in the way of a full understanding of this crucial shift. Through a comprehensive survey of the surviving repertory, Julie Cumming shows that the motet is best understood on the level of the subgenre. She employs new ideas about categories taken from cognitive psychology and evolutionary theory to illuminate the process by which the subgenres of the motet arose and evolved. One important finding is the nature and extent of the crucial role that English music played in the genre's transformation. Cumming provides a close reading of many little-known pieces; she also shows how Du Fay's motets were the product of sophisticated experimentation with generic boundaries.

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Contents

<i>List of tables</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of musical examples</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Notes to the reader</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
Part I Models and methods	5
1 Approaches and analogies	7
2 Subgenre, interpretation, and the generic repertory	24
3 Fifteenth-century uses of the term “motet”	41
Part II Motets in the early fifteenth century: the case of Bologna Q15	63
4 The motet section of Bologna Q15 and its ramifying roots	65
5 A new hybrid subgenre: the cut-circle motet	99
6 Other new hybrid subgenres	125
7 The motet in the early fifteenth century: evolution and interpretation	147
Part III Motets in the mid-fifteenth century: the case of the Trent Codices	165
8 Motets in the Trent Codices: establishing the boundaries	167

Contents

9	English and continental cantilena-style motets	185
10	Motets with a tenor cantus firmus <i>c.</i> 1430–1450	206
11	Freely composed four-voice writing in transition	228
12	The four-voice motet <i>c.</i> 1450–1475	254
Conclusion		288
<i>Appendix: Widely disseminated motets</i>		304
<i>Notes</i>		306
<i>Bibliography of books and articles</i>		357
<i>Modern editions of music</i>		374
<i>Sources and sigla</i>		379
<i>Notes on the index of works</i>		382
<i>Abbreviations for subgenre identifications</i>		382
<i>Index of works</i>		384
<i>General index</i>		400

Tables

2.1 Relative voice ranges for the motet and their generic associations	<i>pages</i> 30
3.1 Settings of antiphon texts in Modena X.1.11	50
3.2 Fifteenth-century manuscripts containing more than five motets	56–7
4.1 Subgenres of the motet in Bologna Q15	69
4.2 Italian motets in Q15	72–3
4.3 Subjects of motet texts from fourteenth-century Italy (before Ciconia)	81
4.4 French isorhythmic motets in Q15	83–4
4.5 Subjects of Latin-texted motets from fourteenth-century France	85
4.6 English cantilenas in Q15	86
4.7 Motets and cantilenas in the Old Hall Manuscript	89
5.1 Cut-circle motets in Q15	110–11
5.2 Three related works by Du Fay	120
6.1 Declamation motets in Q15	126
6.2 Continental cantilenas in Q15	131
6.3 Unus–chorus motets in Q15	133
6.4 Retrospective double-discantus motets in Q15	135
6.5 Devotional double-discantus motets in Q15	139
6.6 Other double-discantus motets in Q15	142
6.7 Borderline motets in Q15	143
6.8 <i>Song of Songs</i> settings in Q15	145
7.1 Representation of the Q15 subgenres in other contemporary manuscripts	149
8.1 Dates and provenance for the Trent Codices	168

List of tables

8.2 Liturgical genres in the Trent Codices	173
8.3 Cantiones and Leisen in the Trent Codices	175
8.4 Secular contrafacta in the Trent Codices	178–9
8.5 Sacred contrafacta in the Trent Codices	180
8.6 Subgenres of the motet in the Trent Codices and Modena X.1.11	182
9.1 English cantilenas in the Trent Codices and Modena X.1.11	187–9
9.2 Three-voice continental cantilena-style motets in the Trent Codices and Modena X.1.11	196–7
10.1 Four-voice isorhythmic motets in the Trent Codices and Modena X.1.11 with triplum and motetus voices in the same range	207
10.2 Four-voice isorhythmic motets with unequal triplum and motetus	209
10.3 Three-voice tenor motets	216
11.1 Double-discantus motets copied in mid-century	229
11.2 Transitional four-voice non-isorhythmic motets with a single discantus	232
11.3 Constructing a four-voice texture	247
12.1 Four-voice song motets	255
12.2 Tenor motets	258–9
12.3 Chant-paraphrase motets	267
12.4 Hybrids of the tenor and chant-paraphrase motets	271
12.5 Freely composed motets	279
C.1 Subgenres, with their antecedents and descendants	298–301
C.2 Genres outside the motet that influenced the motet	302
C.3 Map of motet subgenres and other related genres over time	303

Musical examples

4.1	Cristoforus de Monte, <i>Dominicus a dono</i>	pages 74–5
4.2	Cadence types in three and four voices	76
4.3	John Forest, <i>Alma redemptoris mater</i>	92–3
5.1	Johannes de Sarto, <i>Ave mater, O Maria</i>	106–7
5.2	Characteristic opening for cut-circle motets with F and C finals	112–13
5.3	Florid melismas in cut-circle motets	114
5.4	Repeated-note figure in imitation in cut-circle motets	116
5.5	Power, <i>Salve regina</i> , opening, mm. 1–21	123
6.1	Arnold de Lantins, <i>Tota pulchra es</i>	128–9
6.2	Salinis, <i>Ihesu salvator seculi</i>	137
6.3	Lymburgia, cadences from <i>Tota pulchra es</i>	140
9.1	Du Fay, <i>Alma redemptoris II</i> , mm. 18–26	198
9.2	Du Fay, <i>Ave regina celorum II</i> , mm. 62–81	199
9.3	Touront, <i>Compangant omnes</i>	203–4
10.1	Contrasting introitus sections	210
10.2	Dunstaple, <i>Veni/Veni</i> , mm. 121–35	211
10.3	Sarto, <i>Romanorum rex</i> , mm. 25–35	214
10.4	Anon., <i>Regali ex progenie/T: Sancta Maria</i>	218–19
11.1	Du Fay, <i>O proles/O sidus</i> , mm. 79–83	234
11.2	Du Fay, <i>O proles/O sidus</i> , mm. 14–26	235
11.3	Anon., <i>O pulcherrima</i> , mm. 1–24, three- and four-voice versions	238
11.4	Anon., <i>Anima mea</i> , mm. 7–21, three- and four-voice versions	240
11.5	Puylois, <i>Flos de spina</i>	241–3
11.6	Du Fay, <i>Ave regina celorum III</i> , mm. 138–49	246
11.7	Anon., <i>Missa Caput</i> , Kyrie, mm. 117–33	250

List of music examples

12.1	Anon., <i>Perpulchra Sion filia</i> , tenor	266
12.2	Touront, <i>Recordare</i> , mm. 1–14	268
12.3	Touront, <i>Recordare</i> , mm. 30–53	269
12.4	Anon., <i>Regina celi</i> , mm. 44–50	270
12.5	Anon., <i>Ave beatissima</i> , mm. 55–152	272–3
12.6	Anon., <i>Vidi speciosam, secunda pars</i>	275
12.7	Anon., <i>Gaude regina</i> , mm. 50–4	283

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Notes to the reader

Pitch notation

Where the octave is relevant, specific pitches are indicated in the text according to the terminology of the Guidonian gamut:

[DD EE FF] GG A B C D E F G a b **c** d e f g aa bb cc dd ee [ff gg]

*

* = middle C

Musical examples

Musical examples for which manuscript and folios are given are new transcriptions that I made from microfilm or facsimile of that manuscript. Musical examples for which a modern edition is given are derived from that edition. I have regularized the transcriptions in all the musical examples without comment, according to the following principles:

- The final long is transcribed as a breve in all examples.
- Most examples in Part II (chapters 4–6) use a 4:1 reduction ratio of note values (semibreve = quarter note in the transcription).
- Most examples in Part III (chapters 9–12) use a 2:1 reduction ratio of note values (semibreve = half note in the transcription).
- Where the reduction ratios are different from those given above, the note value equivalencies are shown.
- In complete pieces original clefs, mensuration signs, ligatures, and coloration are indicated. In excerpts these signs are usually omitted, except when they have some relevance to the discussion.

Notes to the reader

Abbreviations for modern editions and manuscripts in the captions are those used in the Index of works and are listed in Modern editions of music and Sources and sigla.

Index of works

This index gives the sources, modern editions, and subgenre assignments of all the motets listed by name in the book, as well as related Masses and chansons that receive some discussion.

Bibliographical abbreviations (see also Modern editions of music)

- AH Guido Maria Dreves and Clemens Blume, eds. *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi*. 52 vols. Leipzig, 1886–1909. *Register*, ed. Max Lütolf. 2 vols. Berne and Munich: Francke, 1978.
- DTÖ Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich. Vienna: Artaria.
- EDM Das Erbe deutscher Musik. Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel.
- EECM Early English Church Music. London: Stainer and Bell.
- MGG Friedrich Blume, ed. *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. 17 vols. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1949–86.
- NG Stanley Sadie, ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 20 vols. London: Macmillan, 1980.
- REM Reinhard Strohm. *The Rise of European Music, 1380–1500*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Abbreviations for music manuscripts and prints: see Sources and sigla

Abbreviations for musical terms

- A antiphon
- B bassus
- cpf* *cantus prius factus*
- Ct. contratenor
- D discantus
- Mot. motetus
- N new text
- R responsory
- SoS *Song of Songs*
- S sequence
- T tenor
- Trip. triplum

Spelling of composers' names

I have chosen in several cases to use spellings different from those found in most dictionaries and library catalogues. The scholars who have worked on these composers believe that the standard spellings are not true to the documents. My decision to follow their lead was made in recognition of these scholars' research.

Du Fay (not Dufay), as advocated by Alejandro Planchart
Dunstaple (not Dunstable), as advocated by Margaret Bent
Busnoys (not Busnois), as advocated by Richard Taruskin
Puylois (not Pullois), as advocated by Pamela Starr

Introduction

The age of Du Fay (*c.* 1400–1474) was a time of transition. Viewed both as the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, the fifteenth century saw the continuation of the fourteenth-century chanson in the *formes fixes* and the birth of the new genre of the Mass Ordinary cycle. In the motet – the genre that occupies a middle position between the chanson and the Mass both in terms of size and place in the genre hierarchy – we see both continuity and change: while the fifteenth-century motet had strong roots in the fourteenth-century motet, it also underwent a radical transformation of style, text types, and texture over the course of the century. Study of the motet provides a unique view into the musical world of the fifteenth century.

Two related problems make study of the fifteenth-century motet difficult. The first is the radical transformation of the genre: from the late medieval motet to the motet of the Josquin generation – from a motet in which several new texts are sung simultaneously over a slow-moving tenor, to a motet in which a single pre-existent liturgical text is sung by all voices in a homogeneous contrapuntal texture.¹ This transformation is not well understood. For the crucial decades around the middle of the century most of the surviving motets are anonymous, and many are not yet available in modern edition. Du Fay seems to have focused his compositional energies in this period on liturgical chant settings, especially Mass Proper cycles, and then on the new four-voice tenor Mass. There is thus a gaping hole in our history of the genre: the question of how we got from early Du Fay to Josquin has gone unanswered.²

The second problem is one of definition. How do we decide which fifteenth-century compositions are motets? Contemporary definitions of the term are extremely vague and there is little scholarly consensus in the twentieth century on the nature and function of the fifteenth-century motet: the boundary with

liturgical music is especially problematic.³ At one end of the spectrum are the scholars who use “motet” loosely as a catch-all term for the many kinds of Latin-texted polyphonic music other than the Mass; on the other end are the scholars who treat the “motet” as a residual category, containing only pieces without pre-existent liturgical texts (i.e. with new texts, or pre-existent texts whose original genre or function is difficult to identify).⁴ The closest thing to a definition of the motet in terms of shared characteristics – a through-composed composition with a sacred Latin text – is both too broad and too narrow: many pieces answering to this definition are not motets (such as Mass movements or Vespers antiphon settings), while some fifteenth-century motets have secular or vernacular texts. Even when we limit ourselves to pieces in motet sections of generically organized manuscripts such as Bologna Q15 we find a bewildering variety of styles, textures, and text types. The problem is compounded by the transformation of the genre: a definition that applies to one decade may not apply to the next.

If we try to define the motet in terms of function the problems are just as great.⁵ The little evidence we have suggests that motets were used in numerous contexts, almost none of them liturgically prescribed: as filler during Mass or at Vespers; for special devotional services for the Virgin Mary; during processions or while welcoming visiting dignitaries; or as recreational music for voices and instruments to be performed in the home. In the sixteenth century, and surely before, motets were performed during dinner in the papal chambers.⁶ Part of the genre’s *raison d’être* seems to have been a kind of functional indeterminism which makes clear definition almost impossible.

The transformation of the motet and the difficulty of defining it lead to other problems. The failure to understand the changes in the motet is a failure to understand central issues of music history in the fifteenth century such as the role of English music, the development of homogeneous four-voice textures, and the expanding role of polyphony. The lack of a coherent definition of the genre makes it almost impossible to interpret individual works: without a basis for comparison, extensive knowledge of repertory, and a set of generic expectations we cannot tell if a work is normal or unusual, innovative or traditional, central or peripheral. Nor can we identify its field of reference – to the history of the genre, to other genres and to specific compositions.

In attempting to solve these problems I have drawn on ideas from a variety of disciplines; my basic methodology is laid out in Part I (chapters 1–3). In thinking about problems of definition I have turned to category theory in the