

ABSTRACT

Fifteenth-century music theory seems remote from fifteenth-century composition. Florid polyphony in three or more voices stands in contrast to the rhythmless, note-against-note consonant progressions in two voices found in counterpoint treatises, making it difficult to analyse composed music in terms of the contrapuntal theory of the period.

This dissertation proposes a new analytical framework for one form of fifteenth-century composition, the four-voice *cantus firmus* mass of the 1460s and 1470s. Research of the last twenty years has substantially reshaped our understanding of medieval musical training and practice and by combining this new awareness with tools for digitally-assisted musicology, it becomes possible to test the relationship between the surviving compositions and counterpoint teaching. The opening chapters summarise this research and describe these tools. This summary leads to a method of analysis that allows a prestigious, coherent body of repertoire—the early masses on the *L’homme armé cantus firmus*—to be measured against the most comprehensive statement of fifteenth-century counterpoint, Johannes Tinctoris’s *De arte contrapuncti*.

Analysis reveals that Tinctoris provides an accurate description of elements of fifteenth-century compositional practice but that his teaching considers only one of several contrapuntal techniques at work within the *L’homme armé* masses. A comparison of passages with and without *cantus firmus* permits a description of these other forms of counterpoint, while an awareness of this contrapuntal variety enables an understanding of mass composition as the interaction of distinct contrapuntal techniques based on changing voice-pair relationships. Further analysis based on cadential voice pairs confirms the relationship between counterpoint and composition through the effective elimination of divergences from Tinctoris’s teaching

The conclusion presents a general theory of four-voice polyphonic texture as a compound contrapuntal entity. Through its two-level structure, this theory provides an opportunity for the empirical analysis of compositional style and has further potential applications to the problems of source criticism, attribution and reconstruction.