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Rebirth and Reinvention: The Influence of Italian Humanism on Tinctoris' Musical Treatises

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The "rebirth" of classical ideology in Renaissance Europe was not exclusive to non-musical disciplines. Composer and theorist Johannes Tinctoris (1435-1511) addressed his awareness for the development of a "new art" in Europe by the end of the fifteenth century in accordance to his distaste for the music predating the past forty years. His twelve musical treatises¹, written between 1474 and 1484 during his time serving the Aragonese court of King Ferdinand I, serve as an outstanding showcase of the changes in musical criticism, practice, and composition of fifteenth-century Europe, as well as connections suggesting both direct and indirect quotations in classical Greek and Roman writings. How did a new understanding of musical scholarship develop in a composer such as Tinctoris in their geographical, societal, and educational contexts? This "new art" would not have been attainable in the field of music without a wave of revitalized thinking across Europe. Selections from Tinctoris' treatises illustrate a humanist "rebirth" of classical antiquarian rhetoric and theory in polyphonic music. This is evident through his application of Ciceronian oratory as a framework for his theory on counterpoint — varietas — and his own discourse on humanist and classical ideas. The application of these literary and musical elements suggests a link between his own music's superiority and the artistic and literary "glory" of classical Antiquity.

The Framework for Humanism

Humanist ideology lies on the theory and practice of attachment to classical studies and the consideration of classical antiquity as standardization in which most, if not all, aspects of <u>De Arte Contrapuncti</u>, "Johannes Tinctoris: Complete Theoretical Works," prologue, http://¹earlymusictheory.org/Tinctoris/texts/deartecontrapuncti/#pane0=Translation.

cultural activities would be most important. Humanist concepts of rediscovery, translation, and ² reintegration of classical theory and texts were dictated by early Italian humanists Petrarch and Boccaccio in the preceding century. Its pervasiveness in Italian society certainly sparked intellectual reconsideration for the concepts in which humanists and polymaths approach their own scholastic methods, which is evidently found throughout examples of humanist writings in art, sciences, technology, and music.³⁴

In an attempt to understand the role humanism played in its influence on Tinctoris, as both a student and a teacher of Renaissance music, it is essential to first understand the roots that allowed for its growth in a sociopolitical context. The middle of the fifteenth century served as a pivotal stimulus for success within the Italian Peninsula. The Treaty of Lodi in 1454 and an alliance of Italian city-states helped institute sociopolitical security following continuous territorial friction between Venice and Milan, as well as diplomatic strife in Rome as the papacy sought to reclaim Rome against the city nobles. Despite these conflicts, the latter half of the century following resolutions saw the establishment of a stable environment which promoted humanist thought and academics to flourish. The courts of Milan, Mantua, Naples, and Modena began to adopt competitive tendencies amongst each other in this timeframe, through the construction of new chapels and recruitment of Franco-Flemish musicians from the north. ⁵ ² Willem Elders, <u>Humanism and Early Renaissance Music: A Study of the Ceremonial Music</u> by <u>Ciconia and Dufay</u>. *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 27.2, 1977, 69.

³ Iain Fenlon, "Music in Italian Renaissance Paintings," Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Music, ed. Tess Knighton and David Fallows (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992),197-198. Elders, <u>Humanism and Early Renaissance Music</u>, 71.

⁴Klaus Pietschmann, "Musical Institutions in the Fifteenth Century and Their Political Contexts," The ⁵ Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music, ed. Anna Berger and Jesse Rodin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 416-417.

The growing foothold of Italian humanism in society may have attributed its qualities of individualism to the courts of Ferdinand I, Sixtus IV, and Galeazzo Maria Sforza, and helped establish a rise in artistic competition.⁶ It is clear the administrative artistic improvements made amongst the courts resulted from economic solidity to fund the various cultural components glamoured by humanism.

Humanism's theoretical character in the scholastic study was certainly an attractive quality in consideration for its adoption as the primary method of education and thinking in the fifteenth century. The cultural model of humanism was structured in the education of the commoner and nobleman alike, which created a coherent framework the ideal person could use to achieve well-roundedness and fulfillment as educated individuals. The *studia humanitatis*, the classically influenced principle study of secular literacy and academics, was composed of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, moral philosophy, and history. The synthesis of subjects employed the Ciceronian concept of harmonious equilibrium in the perfection and enhancement of oneself, to which the ultimate goal culminated in the search for citizenry and the engagement in a civic lifestyle through articulations, rhetoric speech, and logic.⁷

The self-proclaimed humanist equilibrium had begun to expand into new disciplines such as mathematics, natural sciences, and other branches of philosophy. Music had not been included in the primary concerns of study to humanists for some time. As a discipline, music lacked a traditional connection to the center of humanistic studies, as neither Petrarch nor Boccaccio in

Pietschmann, "Musical Institutions," 418.⁶ Elders, <u>Humanism and Early Renaissance Music,</u> 69.⁷

their writings provide primary evidence of inquiry on the subject. However, the common motivations for its inclusion in the *studia humanitatis* include a humanist desire for comprehensiveness, balanced education, a parallel "rebirth" compared to other fields such as art or writing, and the cultivation of individualistic competition amongst contemporaries as musicians and composers.⁸ The motivations for inclusion reflect further on the courtly atmosphere of the latter half of the fifteenth-century. ⁹ This environment likely would have been a principle source for the promotion of discussion of contrasting fields of humanist studies, and in fact promoted a synthesis amongst humanist contemporaries of the time.

Music's eventual inclusion in the *studia humanitatis* contributed to the application of humanist research methods in the context of musical analysis, as well as the revival and rediscovery of ancient texts on the subject. Petrarch's foundation for research surged the interest in musical humanists to seek previously ignored antiquarian musical texts. The majority of manuscripts rediscovered and translated consisted of Greek texts on music theory and harmony, which would lay the foundation for theoretical concepts on Renaissance musical composition. ¹⁰

historical time periods. In his treatise Proportionale Musices (c. 1473), Tinctoris categorized

three distinct historical periods: a pre-Christian period, a church period, and a chapel period

Fenlon, Music in Italian Renaissance Paintings, 197.⁸

Reinhard Strohm, "Music, Humanism, and the Idea of a 'Rebirth' of the Arts," In <u>Music as</u> ⁹<u>Concept and Practice in the Late Middle Ages</u>, ed. Reinhard Strohm and Bonnie J. Blackburn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 361.

James Hankins, "Humanism and Music in Italy," The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music, ¹⁰ ed. Anna Berger and Jesse Rodin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 241.

Hankins, "Humanism and Music in Italy," 242.¹¹

influenced by Christian princes and worthy of the title *ars nova*. The inclusion of such scholastic concepts further propagates the positive extent of humanist influence on music, not only as an administrative concept in courtly function, but also perceivable in areas such as history and rhetoric, principal components of the main humanistic studies. ¹² As this essay will explore, humanist traces can be further found through analysis of Tinctoris' treatises through his application of historiography, and application of classical rhetoric in relation to musical theory and academic philosophy.

The inspiration of the individual pushed the boundaries for musical humanists in their studies and well-versed education. As they looked to Aristotle's writings in *Politics* for perspective on music in elite education, they would find controversy in and beyond the canonical text. Questions arose surrounding the proper method of educational philosophy for the student versus the performer. An abundance of texts, contrary to desire, led to a number of disagreements on the proper "completed" education, especially on topics of age in education, musical theory, and societal function of the musician. Individualism, as a byproduct of humanism, further fueled

disagreements amongst humanists and musicals alike, who struggled to agree on a centralized approach.^{13 14}

The motivations for music's "rebirth" into the *studia humanitatis* sparked new visions beyond disagreements, which focused on the centralization of collecting music, pushing the limits and boundaries of musical composition, and the abilities of the musician as a competitor.

Proportionale Musices, Thesaurus Musicarum Latinarum, 153, http://www.chmtl.indiana.edu/tml/15th/ ¹² TINPRO.

Hankins, "Humanism and Music in Italy," 234.¹³ Strohm, "Music, Humanism, and the Idea of a 'Rebirth' of the Arts," 361.¹⁴

The concept of a "completeness" in music was a goal in attempts to produce fulfilled portraits of composers and musicians. This can also be attributed to a shift in secular humanist thought, which clearly showcases a disregard for dedicated monastic life and the anonymity of sacred medieval vocal music, and an appreciation for the previously disregarded complex forms of polyphony (multiple contrasting voices together) and secular song in the late fifteenth-century.¹⁵ Towards the end of the 1470s, Tinctoris began to exhibit a greater extent of appreciation towards classical concepts, specifically abstractions of Ciceronian rhetoric in speech writing, in addition to other antiquarian writings on rhetoric.

The humanist development of musical criticism stemmed from an earlier origin by example of Alberti's analyses of painting; however this wouldn't occur until the mid-fifteenth century in an attempt to establish moral criteria between good and bad music. The acceptance of music in the *studia humanitatis* enhanced an already existing development in music away from the pre-modern period, the *ars nova*, as polyphonic music began to hold its ground as the dominant compositional technique in Europe. Musicologist Gustave Reese in *Music in the Renaissance*, suggests the basis of evidence for humanist influence in the Renaissance can be found in cinquecento-madrigal composition, an early sixteenth-century secular vocal song sung in the vernacular with an expression of emotion evoked as a reflection of the words of the set poem.^{16, 17, 18}

Elders, Humanism and Early Renaissance Music, 73. ¹⁵ Hankins, "Humanism and Music in Italy," 245. ¹⁶ Hankins, "Humanism and Music in Italy," 251. ¹⁷ Gustave Reese, Music in the Renaissance (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1959), 311-313. ¹⁸

However, the origins of this application of a humanist compositional technique can be traced to Tinctoris' most extensive and complex treatise *Liber de Arte Contrapuncti* (c. 1477), where Tinctoris addresses the state of the field on polyphonic music of his day. The treatise carefully attributes classical influence to the rationale for the music of his day to be the most "superior" to that preceding the past 40 years. The notion of musical "rebirth" is presented in such a way that invalidates previous concepts of composition in the European Christian Medieval era. Tinctoris' framework for new compositional technique, evidently influenced by ¹⁹ classical quotations on rhetoric, served as the fundamental guide for how to compose the most in, what he considered, the most important genre of the Renaissance.

If humanism had evident presence and significance in the musical criticism of music education, then how did Tinctoris through his education engage in civic life, in addition to seeking personal achievement? Methods of education in the common society are present. The classical revival of the notebook and commonplace book brought their utility as a method for the printing of music. In addition, the success of the printing press in the 1440s contributed to the large-scale distribution of music, educational books, and even transcriptions of manuscripts for study. This technological feat would have boosted the ability to transmit these teachings across Italy and other various neighboring regions. ²⁰ In addition to its role as a distributor of music and teachings, there was also the capacity for the printing of guidebooks to play a role in the public perception of music. In various cases, guidebooks would have been used by the noble and commoner alike in the dissemination of classical perspectives on music. Several of these

De Arte Contrapuncti, prologue.¹⁹

Anthony Grafton, "The Humanist and the Commonplace Book: Education in Practice," In Music Education in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, ed. Russell E. Murray Jr., Susan Forscher, and Cynthia J. Cyrus (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 142.

guidebooks stressed the necessity to educate children in the performance of an instrument, the therapeutics of listening to song while healing, and restrictions on the musical education of girls. The examples of works often followed the Greek classical writings of Plato and Aristotle, ²¹ while also considering the contemporary approaches for self-remedy on their own various topics.²²

The Application of Humanism Through Tinctoris' Biography and Treatises

Tinctoris's biography, while vastly incomplete, offers significant insight into the development of his own opinions on music, composition, and education through his years working at French cathedrals and influence from Italian humanism during his time living in Naples. The incompleteness of his biography is often attributed to an evident lack of primary source documentation on his life, leaving little to no noteworthy information regarding his origins. Tinctoris' birthplace had been attributed by a secondary biography written in his time by historian Trithemius as the small town of Braine-L'Alleud, located in the dioceses of Cambrai. ²³ Despite an evident gap in his chronology, Tinctoris is said to believe to have been involved in an

educational role at the Cambrai Cathedral in 1460, possibly linking his education to his success as one of the most recognized and celebrated musicians of the Renaissance.²⁴ He is seen again two years working as a student in The University of Orléans, furthering his compositional techniques.²⁵

Rudolph M. Bell, "How to Do It" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 185, 193. Bell, "How to Do It," 169.²²

Ronald Woodley, "Johannes Tinctoris: A Review of the Documentary Biographical Evidence," Journal of the American Musicological Society 34, No. 2 (Summer 1981): 217.

Reese, Music in the Renaissance, 138-139.²⁴

Alexis Luko, "Tinctoris on Varietas," Early Music History 27 (2008): 99. 25

His role in both of these academic functions does not suggest any real connection to a dedicated humanist education and was perhaps more focused on music and pedagogy. The slow progression of humanism and significant religious presence in the northern sectors of Europe, specifically the Low Countries and Northern France, of which Tinctoris spent half of his life, attributed to a lack of assumption on that part. Tinctoris' departure from Northern Europe is unknown, as the period between his enrollment at the University of Orléans and arrival at the Aragonese court in Naples around 1472 is lost or undocumented.²⁶ The lack of any notable humanist writings from universities in the Low Countries and northern France until the fourth quarter of the fifteenth-century allude to Tinctoris receiving none, if any, humanist education until the 1470s with the cultivated influx of Italian humanism spreading across all disciplines in a search for elegance, clarity, and style.^{27, 28}

Tinctoris' arrival at the court of King Ferdinand I of Naples marked the catalyst for the

cultivation of his humanist influence and education in Italy. The relative cultural stability of Naples in this time aided the recruitment and hospitality of humanists who would have likely come into contact with Tinctoris during their stay at the court of Ferdinand I.²⁹ It was during this time where all twelve of Tinctoris' musical treatises were written. The Aragonese court, of which Tinctoris was positioned court tutor and legal advisor, was a brilliant center for the societal Christopher Page, "Reading and Reminiscence: Tinctoris on the Beauty of Music," Journal of the American Musicological Society 49, No. 1 (Spring 1996): 6-7.

Reinhard Strohm, "Fifteenth-Century Humanism and Music Outside Italy," The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music, ed. Anna Berger and Jesse Rodin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 269-270.

Elders, <u>Humanism and Early Renaissance Music</u>, 70. ²⁸ Woodley, "Johannes Tinctoris: A Review of the Documentary Biographical Evidence," 229. 10

flourishment of Italian humanism. In contrast to the world of northern scholasticism, where focus lay primarily on the Christian life, the humanistic social atmosphere had shown to be much more significant in influencing his academic studies and teachings.³⁰ Tinctoris' writings evidently illustrate clear musical cultivation to stimulate musical achievement in composers and musicians alike. In the introduction to his *Proportionale Musices*, Tinctoris demonstrates an understanding of humanist significance to oneself. He addresses the role of music in education and its contribution to living a happy life, as "the artists derive glory and riches from their own expertise." Further analysis of several of Tinctoris' treatises suggests his consistent usage of a variety of classical references evokes a mind able to access an assortment of specified texts, in addition to a number of translations available to cross-reference with one another in a scholarly context.³¹ This would be supported by the evidence of a cultural stimulation under Ferdinand I's

court, inspiring humanists and other writers alike to access the classical and modern documents available to them.

Tinctoris' treatises are grounded on an education in humanist ideology and the application of those studies in their presentation of musical technique, form, and criticism. They showcase a great aptitude for understanding musical theoretical principles synthesized with antiquarian rhetoric. Through his texts, Tinctoris attempts to address what is perceived as a wide and complicated range of issues surrounding musical theory and intellectualism, while addressing the perception and generalization past music Tinctoris criticizes the music preceding the past forty years, citing a number of extravagant composers of recent times, including his contemporary Woodley, "Johannes Tinctoris," 231-232. ³⁰ Proportionale Musices, 153-154. ³¹

Dufay, of whom he believed could serve as the new model for monumental musical achievement. The employment of harsh musical criticism towards the predecessors in music, in accordance with the presentation of material composed by himself as textual examples, exhibits a conscious application of the discussed characteristics found from the *studia humanitatis*. ³²

The advancements in compositional philosophy in the latter half of the fifteenth-century beyond *ars nova* are significant through the lens of Tinctoris' monumental achievement in his treatises. Two of Tinctoris' earlier works, written between 1443 and 1476, *De Imperfectione Notarum* and *Proportionale Musices*, emulate Ciceronian expository writing, demonstrating the free-play between grammar and rhetoric when applied to music. Tinctoris uses the rhetorical format in *Proportionale* to discuss the chronology of music, as well as present a clear historical narrative. In this, he explains the reverence of ancient music is glorified for its philosophical and

theoretical principles, however, it had lost its importance since the compositions of the Greek classics no longer exist. Rejection of Christian music of the medieval era is explained in both treatises as the result of the Christian Church's written tradition, such as music theory, Gregorian chant, and recitation rites that had been greatly disseminated throughout Europe, diluting its significance as a performed genre inseparable from its sacred ritual.³³ Instead, Tinctoris' own teachings, backed by humanist influence and training, are to be seen as the perfection of composition.^{34, 35}

De Arte Contrapuncti, prologue. ³² Proportionale Musices, 153-154. ³³ Strohm, "Music, Humanism, and the Idea of a 'Rebirth' of the Arts," 366. ³⁴ De Arte Contrapuncti, Prologue - I.i. ³⁵

As classical rhetoric influenced Tinctoris' scholarly criticism, it also functions in his compositional treatises on the rules for polyphonic counterpoint. His monumental treatise *Liber de Arte Contrapuncti*, written in 1477 with a dedication to King Ferdinand I, is split into three books which analyze and discuss various contrapuntal techniques and the ability to employ them properly. Quotations by Horace in the prologue tell of the King, or any reader of this treatise, to "acquire more knowledge about musical composition." The first two books pertain to the structure of a classical grammar treatise, emphasizing how to construct a "correct" composition, whereas book three uses rhetoric directly to analyze how to compose "well" in the style of Cicero's treatise writings.³⁶ Book three presents eight rules of counterpoint, with each rule creating a contrapuntal technique based on the rhetorical style. The rules outline sequentially, beginning with the perfect consonances and ending with stylistic rationale, and progress from simple definitions to the more complex concepts of constructing effective counterpoint.³⁷ The

eighth rule of book III indirectly quotes a rhetorical concept from Ciceronian grammar treatises.

The rule states that *varietas* must be sought in all music, but not excessively.³⁸ Various

fifteenth-century and classical translations of this phrase exist, each with variance based on their context. Scholars had come together to understand the phrase as "diversity" in melody, rhythmic changes, and harmonic variance. The phrase exists in context of the treatise as an application of Cicero's speech philosophy on rhetoric in *De Oratore*, as the structure of musical composition as proposed in the musical treatise is modeled after a Ciceronian influence on

De Arte Contrapuncti, Prologue. ³⁶ Luko, "Tinctoris on Varietas," 108-109. ³⁷ De Arte Contrapuncti, III.viii. ³⁸

speech, structured on the relationship between subject, composition, writing, and delivery. The goal of the treatise was to institute a solution for a compositional paradox where unifying sound could be established without the blandness of excessive repletion, just as *De Oratore* highlights persuasiveness through unified speech, without excessive word patterns and language choices.³⁹ *Liber de Arte Contrapuncti* functioned as Tinctoris' attempt to create a systemic linkage between classical theories on rhetoric, and his own innovate theories on counterpoint.

Musicologist Alexis Luko discusses how Tinctoris' desire for connection between oratorical rhetoric and conventions of contrapuntal technique, through varietas, are supplemented by rules 6 and 7 of book III, which attempts to establish a model for employing the contradicting concepts of repetition and variety. The accompanying example to rule 7 offers a complex answer to what appears to be a simple explanation for the achievement of effective counterpoint.⁴⁰



Figure 1 illustrates a modern-notated example of the mensural-notation example provided by Tinctoris in his treatise. The upper voice of counterpoint contrasts the drawn-out tenor line, and features three marked cadences. What is striking in regards to this example is Tinctoris' exclamation condemning consecutive cadences and contrapuntal repetition in the previous lines before providing his own example of proper technique.⁴¹

However, the concept of *varietas* in rhetoric establishes the coexistence of variety through combination of ideas and arguments, while retaining a non-repetitive dialogue. In the way the orator must connect their thoughts and ideas together to create a unified argument, which simultaneously avoids excessive repetitions of linguistic motifs, Tinctoris suggests this is achievable by variance in the *way* of cadencing. Luko addresses examples from the identified cadences showing a 7-6 suspension (bars 8-9), resolution to the fifth (bars 12-13), and a refigured octave resolution (bars 18-19). The ambiguity of Tinctoris' example sheds itself from the shroud of contradiction as the analysis of the rule's application becomes evident when

considering its musical technique in context.⁴² The presence of rhetorical technique and inspiration exists not only through Tinctoris' discussions in his treatises' prologues and epilogues, but substantially in his approach to create a framework for exceptional composition in the timeline of his identified "new art."

As such, it is clear Italian humanism and the rebirth of classical theory greatly influenced Tinctoris' writings and development of new compositional style, as well as his cultivated perspectives on music as a historical and critical study. The surviving musical treatises of De Arte Contrapuncti, III. vi-vii. ⁴¹ Luko, "Tinctoris on Varietas," 117. ⁴²

Tinctoris suggest a strong linkage between classical thoughts on rhetoric, theory, and music's incorporation in the *studia humanitatis* as a considerable field of study for scholars. Tinctoris' twelve treatises serve as exemplary works which stand today as influential manuscripts. They bring meaningful discussion when examining the spread of Italian humanism in the fifteenth -century, as well as the techniques of "new art" polyphonic counterpoint. The geographical and sociopolitical climate of Italy at the time of the latter half of the fifteenth-century were essential in understanding the context for the cultivation of Italian humanism, as well as its inclusion in the *studia humanitatis*, and its likely influence into the education of Tinctoris. Application of classical research methods and rhetoric in musical criticism and academic study strengthened the identified presence of humanism in musical education and composition. The awareness and pursuit of a "new art" by means of influence and radical change in education showcased an individualistic and humanist approach in musical scholarship.

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