

**The ‚Renaissance‘ of the Phrygian mode  
and the Rise of Negative Affect in Sacred Music, ca. 1460-1520**

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On 22 November 1488, the feast of St. Cecilia, a town trumpeter of the city of Ghent by the name of Willem Obrecht died. Sometime after that, Willem’s son Jacob Obrecht, one of the most important composers of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, composed a memorial motet in honour of his father.<sup>1</sup> This famous piece, known by its initial words as *Mille quingentis*, tells us important biographical details about Willem and Jacob; but it also has another story to tell. For obvious symbolic reasons, Obrecht constructed his motet around a melody from liturgical chant quoted as *cantus firmus* in the tenor part: the Introit, or Entrance chant, from the Mass for the Dead, the famous “Requiem aeternam”.

In adapting it to his polyphonic composition, Obrecht changed the modality of the chant.<sup>2</sup> The Requiem Introit is in the sixth mode, the tritus plagalis, or hypolydian, with F fa ut as its tonal center.<sup>3</sup> But Obrecht transposed the melody into the Phrygian mode,<sup>4</sup> with the tonal center on E mi la. This resulted in an almost complete distortion of all intervallic relationships of that chant—and in a corresponding change of character, or affect.

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<sup>1</sup> The motet was probably intended for the annual commemoration of Willem’s death starting in 1489. Rob Wegman, *Born for the Muses*, 23.

<sup>2</sup> He also had to rhythmize this *cantus firmus* by adjusting a series of note values which are first read in perfect and then in imperfect time. This is a practice reminiscent of the older motet and which Margaret Bent has termed “homographic”. See Bent, What is Isorhythm?. Obrecht’s motet is a late, but particularly instructive piece for the problems that arise with the use of the concept of “isorhythm” with relation to the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>-century motet. See also Dammann, Rolf. "Spätformen der isorhythmischen Motette im 16. Jahrhundert." *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* (1953): 16-40; Brothers, Thomas. "Vestiges of the Isorhythmic Tradition in Mass and Motet, ca. 1450-1475." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* (1991): 1-56. Neither Dammann nor Brothers discuss Obrecht’s motet, though Dammann refers to it very fleetingly and indirectly on p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Though this mode—just as its counterpart, the fifth or Lydian mode—was construed by some theorists as containing a b natural, or *b durum*, as its fourth step, its practical use in monophonic as in polyphonic music almost always called for the use of a b flat, or *b molle*. When he constructed his system of twelve modes, thus distinguishing between “true” Lydian/Hypolydian (with b durum) and “Ionian” transposed on F (with b molle), Heinrich Glarean had troubles to find examples of its use both in monophony and polyphony. He had to ask some composers, like Sixtus Dietrich or the Belgian composer Gerardus a Salice, to compose some examples for him. To explain his contemporaries’ ignorance of (his concept of) Lydian/Hypolydian in chant, Glarean attributed the use of b flat to the corruption of the original melodies. Concerning polyphony, he resorted to an interesting esthetical-moralistic argument: “Nostris in eo tertiam diapente speciem fa fa, in quartam ut sol commutarunt, haud leui per Herculem momento, nempe qui hoc pacto in Hypoionicum incidat, qui non parum hoc concinnior atque mollior est Modus. [...] Adeo nostrae tempestatis molliculae aures nihil paulo asperius pati possunt.” (III, 15, Basel 1547, p. 280; compare III, 21, p. 328, and the more extended discussion on monophony in Book II.)

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use “the Phrygian mode” as an umbrella term for both third and fourth mode, which are much more similar in ambitus and melodic movement than the other ecclesiastical modes, and only differentiate between them when appropriate.

Somewhat perversely, in all extant sources of the piece, even the frame interval common to both species, that is, the fifth, is further distorted by the accidental of b molle instead of of b durum at the highest notes of the cantus firmus, always underpinned with a B flat or G in the bassus.<sup>5</sup> This was probably just to avoid an infelicitous melodic progression. While the chant, in its original mode, sounds quite naturally, in its transposed version it progresses in the melodic tritone, also known as *diabolus in musica*, that would result from the melodic movement b natural–g–f.<sup>6</sup>

Why did Obrecht insist of transposing such a melody patently unfit to the Phrygian mode?<sup>7</sup> Let us have a look at another composition that must have originated around a decade later, Josquin des Prez' *Nymphes des bois/Requiem aeternam*. Josquin's piece is also a lament, this time on the death of the arguably greatest composer of the preceding generation, Johannes Ockeghem (in 1497). Like Obrecht, Josquin cites the Introit to the Mass of the Dead by transposing it in the Phrygian mode. Though Josquin rhythmicizes the chant in a different way than Obrecht, he also uses a b flat in the fifth degree, at least according to the more authoritative source, Tielman Susato's *Le septiesme livre* of 1545.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, when Josquin himself died in 1521, one of the most important composers of the next generation, Nicolas Gombert, wrote a lament *Musae Iovis/Requiem* that uses the chant melody in exactly the same rhythm (but without b flat),<sup>9</sup> thus referring to Josquin who was referring to Ockeghem (and probably to Obrecht), effectively building up a kind of genealogical line.

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<sup>5</sup> Of the three sources of the motet, Segovia has only one b flat at the first melodic peak, Florence C at the second peak, and Petrucci, Motetti C, which writes out (somewhat superfluous) the *resolutions* of the two different readings, has both in the first reading and only at the first peak in the second. Taking account of the fact that compositional accidentals often got lost in transmission, this is quite convincing evidence that the piece was originally intended with a bflat in the tenor voice, though only locally notated. Otherwise, the Phrygian mode is very much emphasized and all the other voices use the b natural throughout.

<sup>6</sup> However that may be, the result is what theorists called a *commixtio tonorum*, or mixture of tones, at four points in the motet, a local flavour of a sound more related to the original Lydian mode, or even a Dorian mode transposed on G, a strange cross-relation that should inspire composers of the next generation. This kind of modal oscillation should become a trademark of compositions in the Phrygian mode, and especially Pierre de la Rue was very fond of it. See Meconi, Art. La Rue NGr<sup>2</sup>, quoting the ending of the Sanctus of his Missa Nunca fué pena mayor. See also his Regina celi, and the anonymous setting of *Dulces exuviae* in the „big“ chanson album of Marguerite d'Autriche (B-Br 228). Scholars have tended to ascribe this composition (also in London Royal 8.G.vii) to La Rue and I concur. These two motets are, as far as I know, the only compositions around 1500 in E phrygian than incorporate one part—and only one—with a B flat signature.

<sup>7</sup> Transpositions were far from uncommon in both monophonic and polyphonic repertoires. To quote a secular example, the famous *L'homme armé* tune was used both in Lydian and in Dorian, sometimes even in Mixolydian versions in the many masses composed on this cantus firmus. But there are few mass settings with the tune in Phrygian mode, and one of these is by Jacob Obrecht. Depending on datings, Obrecht's mass may be the first to use the tune on E. Alternatively, the credit for this goes to Loyset Compère. Two later settings in the Phrygian mode are by Robert Carver and Cristobál Morales. I am indebted to Kirsten Pönnighaus (Weimar) for discussing the modal issues in *L'homme armé* masses with me.

<sup>8</sup> *Le septiesme livre contenant vingt & quatre chansons a cinq et a six parties*, Antwerpen: Tielman Susato, 1545.

<sup>9</sup> At the relevant points, Gombert always has an E in the bassus, thereby making a b flat impossible or at least improbable.

Obrecht, Josquin and Gombert are quoting the Requiem Introit in order to lament their predecessors; and for the same reason they took the risk of distorting the sacred chant by transposing it into the Phrygian mode. This was possible because they used it in a symbolic way rather than as a liturgical item proper. And it made sense because the transposition, or modulation, of the chant into the Phrygian mode itself added another layer of significance.<sup>10</sup>

For in the later fifteenth century the Phrygian mode came to be regarded as the adequate modality to express melancholy, pain, extreme love-sickness, mourning, illness, sinfulness and contrition, reflections about imminent death and fear of salvation. Let us call this heterogeneous bundle of emotions, for want of a better term, “negative” or low-spirited affects, not necessarily as a reference to Ficino’s spirit theory, but just in the sense that they are not exactly uplifting. Looking at table 1 on your handout, you will find a list of compositions closing on E mi (or, very rarely, on A mi with a b flat signature) based on texts who articulate such low-spirited affects from the decades around 1500: mourning texts like the *Quis dabit* motets, prayers for mercy such as Ockeghem’s passionate *Intemerata Dei mater* or Josquin’s famous setting of the penitential psalm *Miserere mei, Deus*, prayers memorizing the passion and especially the woe of Mary such as Pipelare’s and Weerbeke’s grand-scale motets, and some secular motets, for instance on Dido’s lament..

I have focused mainly on motets because my interest here concerns low-spirited affects in sacred music, but I have included some melancholy chansons that were used for masses or motets, such as the famous *Nunca fue pena mayor* (Never was there greater pain) by Johannes Wreede or the equally famous *Mille regretz* by Josquin or whoever. Liturgical music based on a chant is disregarded, as the composer could not choose the mode freely. I also have not searched systematically for mass settings because their uniform text cannot be taken as proof that they should express—or raise—sadness and the like. In two or three cases, however, I believe such an intention can be made very plausible: Just like Matheus Pipelare used Wreede’s tenor in his motet on Mary’s sorrows, *Memorare Mater Christi*, the masses of Peñalosa and La Rue may imply the suffering of bereavedness.<sup>11</sup> We may also assume a similar motivation behind Isaac’s *Missa Salva nos*, most probably intended to

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<sup>10</sup> Though outside the chronological scope of this paper, I cannot help but point out a particularly fascinating later example of modal chant transposition, as we may term it: In a *Missa dominicalis* in Brno, Archiv mesta Brna, fond V 2 Svatojakubská knihovna [CZ-Bmb], fond V 2 Svatojakubská knihovna, 14/5, 17v--21r, the usual ordinary chants Kyrie XI and Gloria II in the tenor are transposed from first to third mode (this is possibly also the case with the as yet unidentified models for the Sanctus and Agnus settings). As Martin Horyna and Vladimír Mañas point out, “[t]his is almost certainly due to the Phrygian melody of Luther’s hymn *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*, which occurs in the descant in every section of the Ordinary.” It is even possible that Luther’s choice of mode for this song was motivated by the text. See Martin Horyna, Vladimír Mañas: *Two mid-16th-century manuscripts of polyphonic music from Brno*, in: *Early Music* 40 (2012), pp. 553–575, on p. 561.

<sup>11</sup> It was printed in Petruccis *Misse Petri del la Rue* of 1503. Among the other sources, Jena 22 is also early. though La Rue’s mass is too early to refer to the death of Philipp the Fair in Spain in 1506.

commemorate Lorenzo il Magnifico.<sup>12</sup> Portions of Isaac's mourning motet on Lorenzo, *Quis dabit capiti meo aquam*, are also used in the mass.

The list is far from exhaustive, but it contains many of the most moving and sad compositions of the time. Note also that these are very few pieces compared to the hundreds of motets composed in Dorian or Lydian. The four books of four-voice motets issued by Petrucci shortly after 1500 contain 156 compositions. Of these, just 11 have an ending on E, about 7 per cent, and this is quite a lot. I estimate that at the very best 5 per cent of all music composed around 1500 was set in the Phrygian mode. This mode, as we shall see, had only recently found its way into polyphony, and it seems to have been considered like a strongly flavoured and expensive spice, to be used only with care and restraint.

Such an understanding of the affective qualities of the Phrygian mode is, to my knowledge, absolutely foreign to medieval theories of mode ethos, even to late-medieval chant theorists such as Henricus Helene or Heinrich Egger of Kalkar. Such theorists consider the second and the sixth mode—hypodorian and hypolydian—as apt to sad songs or able to move us to tears, while the Phrygian and Hypophrygian modes, especially the latter one, are said to be adulatory and bland. It is only with the advent of its polyphonic use that the Phrygian mode is more definitely seen as embodying the low-spirited affects, as in sixteenth-century theorists such as Heinrich Glarean or Gioseffo Zarlino.

It seems tempting to ascribe such a change in evaluation to the single intellectual tendency that is regularly invoked to explain any change in music of the 15th and 16th centuries – humanism. But the humanist reconstruction of the ancient theory of modal ethos does not offer a satisfying explanation. According to Plato and other ancient authors, the Phrygian mode is bellicose: it incites spontaneously to the frenzy of battle, as witnessed in the reports from Alexander's feast. All the medieval *and* humanist theorists who engaged with the question of mode ethos paid lip service to this venerable tradition, but I do not know of any composition in the Phrygian mode that describes war, much less incites to martial action. It may be that the two *L'homme armé* masses in the Phrygian mode by Obrecht and Compère were attempts to redress the balance, yet many more were composed in the Lydian or Dorian mode.

But as Claude Palisca pointed out many years ago, the theorists had a loophole.<sup>13</sup> They could write about the plagal modes, unknown to their colleagues from antiquity, and put in every affective quality they had experienced themselves musically. And some of the more musical humanists would differentiate between the ancient lore and their own experience.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Glarean dutifully reports

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<sup>12</sup> Comparable cases are the four *Missae Malheur me bat* and the two masses on *Maria zart*.

<sup>13</sup> Claude V. Palisca, *Mode Ethos in the Renaissance*.

<sup>14</sup> A most useful collection of theorist quotations on the modal characteristics of Phrygian and Hypophrygian can be found in Anne Smith, *The Performance of 16th-Century Music: Learning from the Theorists*, 180-191.

that Horace calls the Phrygian mode barbarous, Lucianus enthusiastic, and Apuleius religious. And he proceeds to explain the latter characterization: “because this mode has something I don’t know not what tearful and what the souls excites to weeping, such as St Magdalen at the grave weeping, which someone very elegantly composed.” After this digression, he reports coolly that “some people” (quidam) say it incites to anger and war.<sup>15</sup> He describes the Hypophrygian in a similar way.<sup>16</sup> If such characterisations were not based on ancient–or medieval–theory, whence did they come from? Why did the Phrygian mode, in the ears of composers and listeners around 1500, fit so well with sad, “tearful”, “weepy” (and in short, low-spirited) affects?

The answer must be sought in the musical experience itself, and more specifically in the intervallic structure of the mode. Contrary to the three other traditional modes of ecclesiastical chant, the Phrygian mode has a semi-tone above its final, E, and above its fifth B. Now the semi-tone has been called the “plorant semiton”, the weeping halftone, as early as in the thirteenth-century Spanish *Libro de Alexandre*.<sup>17</sup> It is the smallest melodic interval of the Western tone-system and therefore the one that most closely resembles sobbing or weeping. Generally, the sound-structure of the Phrygian mode is characterized by more minor intervals than that of any other mode (minor second, third, sixth). Additional qualities arise when used in polyphonic compositions. On the one hand, the preparatory dissonance in the Phrygian cadence formula is either a minor second or a major seventh, both of them much harsher in sound than the major second or minor seventh in the other modes.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, due to contrapuntal necessities, a Phrygian cadence sounds inconclusive because it is impossible to reinforce it with the usual bass skip a fifth down or a fourth up, and this indecisiveness of the “harmonic” progression gives a Phrygian piececadence a certain

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<sup>15</sup> Glarean II, c. 23: “Horatius barbarum uocat ode 9 Epodon, ubi et Dorij meminit. Barbarum Acro exponit Phrygium, Lucianus uocat [entheon], Apuleius religiosum, quod hic Modus habeat nescio quid lachrymabile et quod animos ad fletum excitet, quo modo Diuam Magdalenen ad sepulchrum flentem quidam oppido eleganter finxit, cuius cantum postea libro sequente referemus. Quidam aiunt eum habere indignantis seueram insultationem, alij pugnas excitare, et uotum furoris inflammare.”

<sup>16</sup> Glarean II, c. 18: “Hic modus tristem quandam habet querimoniam, ac supplicem lamentationem, aptissimus sacris cantilenis, ad quem Threni Hieremiae aliquot in locis Germaniae ac Galliae suauissime canuntur, sed ad alia quoque adhibetur.”

<sup>17</sup> „Ally era la musica cantada per rason,/las dobles que refieren coytas del coraçon,/las dolçes de las baylas, el plorant semiton,/bien podien toller preçio a quantos no mundo son [or: a vna prosicion]“, *Libro del Alexandre*, stanza 2139, quoted here after Ian Michael, *The Treatment of Classical Material in the Libro de Alexandre*, Manchester 1970, 273. Michael used the edition *El libro de Alexandre: Texts of the Paris and the Madrid Manuscripts*, ed. Raymond S. Willis, jr., Princeton and Paris, 1934. See Jacques Handschin, *Der Toncharakter*, 14, and Bernhard Meier, *Die Tonarten*, 253.

<sup>18</sup> Strictly speaking, a cadence on E mi is no more „phrygian“ than one on, say, G sol, A la or C ut, if taking place within a phrygian context. To speak of a cadence on mi as „phrygian“ is a turn of phrase from the 19th century, as Arian Jeßulat has demonstrated; see *Die Frage als musikalischer Topos. Studien zur Motivbildung in der Musik des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Sinzig: studio, 2000 (Berliner Musik Studien 21), 63–110. However, the term „phrygian cadence“ for a cadence on mi is handy, especially because the affective character of this particular type of cadence was explored also in non-Phrygian cadences; and the term will be used further without reservations, keeping its anachronism in mind.

floating character.<sup>19</sup> This was probably why not a few composers chose to conclude a Phrygian piece in the related but more stable Aeolian mode, or at least with a sound based on A.

All this—minor intervals, dissonant cadences and a feeling of inconclusiveness—combines to a general effect of sadness and/or harshness, and sixteenth-century theorists as different as Zarlino, Joachim Burmeister would note and comment on these affective qualities of the mode. Zarlino, who was the first theorist to comment on the semantic value of minor—as opposed to major—intervals also commented perceptively on this point. The harmony of the third mode, Zarlino explained, would be “somewhat hard”, if not tempered by the mode on A—Aeolian—and so “the third mode” according to some “moves one to weeping. Hence they have accommodated to it words which are tearful and full of laments.”<sup>20</sup>

And even then, as you can see on column 2 of your handout, there are many musical works that cannot reasonably be said to convey such affects, especially Marian motets. I would like to speculate that the very qualities of minor intervals and dissonant sounds that could evoke low-spirited affects could also make him apt to describe a veneration to Mary full of desire and not seldom tinged with a hint of eroticism. Later phases of European music history, from the Italian madrigal through to Wagner’s *Tristan*, have also played musically on this dialectics of pain and eroticism.

But let us cling to the low-spirited affects, and to the ways composers around 1500 used the Phrygian mode for that. Note that none of the compositions listened on table 1 of your handout is likely to antedate, say, 1480. This is even valid for Ockeghem’s fervent Marian prayer *Intemerata Dei mater*, if we accept Jeffrey Dean’s thesis that this was intended as the composer’s valediction to life (and thus you find it in both tables). The vogue for the Phrygian mode in sacred music is a phenomenon of the last quarter of the fifteenth century, and this is strange to note.

During the earlier 15<sup>th</sup>, let alone the 14<sup>th</sup> century, no composer chose E as a Phrygian final for a free sacred or secular composition; pieces normally ended on C, D, F or G, occasionally on A. One can hardly believe that composers could forget about a mode they would regularly sing in the liturgy, but there has never been an attempt to explain this abstinence. Certainly, at least in secular music, there was no dearth of melancholic texts and compositions, but there was hardly any Phrygian song before 1450 or even 1460, as Reinhard Strohm has demonstrated. One might claim

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<sup>19</sup> You can put the tenor clausula in the lowest voice. Such is the choice of the four-part setting of Pange lingua in Tr88, MRM 12, nr. 69, 710-1. This composition, however, opts in its final cadence for a contrapuntally not totally satisfying solution. Marginally better is no. 73, Gaude visceribus, 719-20. You can also write a d below in the bassus, then jump down to the A, or upwards to the g above the tenor, or be silent altogether.

<sup>20</sup> “If the third mode were not mixed with the ninth mode”—he refers to Glarean’s construct of an Aeolian mode on A—“and were heard by itself, its harmony would be somewhat hard, but because it is tempered by the diapente of the ninth mode and by the cadence on a, which is very much in use in it, some have been of the opinion that the third mode moves one to weeping. Hence they have accommodated to it words which are tearful and full of laments.” Zarlino, *Ist. harm.*, 1558 Edition, IV, c. 20, transl. Vered Cohen, p. 64, quoted here after Claude V. Palisca, *Mode Ethos in the Renaissance*, 133.

that the contrapuntal difficulties alluded to earlier made composers avoid the mode. But in fact, whenever it was necessary for composers in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to write a piece closing on E mi they were perfectly capable to do so. Such necessity arose whenever a liturgical chant such as a Magnificat tertii or quarti toni or a hymn like *Pange lingua* had to be set polyphonically. Obviously, composers before 1460 were neither ignorant of the Phrygian mode nor incapable to compose polyphony in it. But, like Bartleby, they would prefer rather not to.

Strohm has argued, that (to quote) “the application of modal concepts to polyphony including secular song can specifically be detected in works of Dufay and Binchois, and was a particular achievement of their generation.”<sup>21</sup> It is natural that this approach was heavily dominated by the modal practices of sacred polyphony. Compositions with the finals D, G and F abound in sacred *and* secular sources from that time, and we may also regard pieces with the finals C and (more rarely) A as transposed Lydian and Dorian, respectively (which I would prefer rather to using the anachronistic terms Ionian and Aeolian). The case becomes even more provocative if we accept the conviction of some scholars that there are just three finals—ut, re and mi: Before 1460 there would have been only ut and re.

Only afterwards some freely-composed (without a chant model) pieces emerge that use E mi as a final; and all of them are chansons: I have listed some of them at the top of your handout.<sup>22</sup> As was also the case with through-imitation, the songs of the 1460s and 1470s explored territories that were only later covered by sacred music. On the other hand, I have yet to find a single sacred composition in E phrygian not based on chant that can be confidently dated before 1480.

I argue that the reason for this absence is largely due to the already referred-to fact that the mode was perceived, in polyphonic use, as harsh, dissonant and sad. And I further claim that this is exactly what made it attractive after 1480. This development must be seen in the context of a growing new conception of what sacred polyphony, including motets, could and should do. Speaking very generally, sacred polyphony was considered a joyous and exhilarating experience in the first half of the century. In the early fifteenth century, when English church music became very influential on the continent, an English theorist stated that singing many thirds or sixths in a row was “mery to the singer and to the herer”, Ugolino of Orvieto praised the “inextimabilis laetitia” that one experiences when listening to three- or four-part polyphony, and whatever Martin Le Franc meant when he spoke of the “contenance angloise”, he said that by its means Dufay and

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<sup>21</sup> Strohm, *Modal Sounds*, 155.

<sup>22</sup> The earliest may have been *Ma plus ma mignonne* by Convert, and another early one is Delahaye’s *O dieu d’amours*, but the most prominent ones are Ockeghem’s *Ma bouche rit* and his *Presque transi* and Dufay’s *Malheureux coeur* and *Adieu, quitte le demeurant*. Also pertinent is Barbignat’s *Au travail suis*, technically on A but inhabiting a sound-world that is not far removed from E. A kind of affinity, sometimes a kind of oscillation between tonalities on A and on E is, as already remarked, a common phenomenon, and the rise of the Phrygian mode saw also the rise of the mode on A.

Binchois achieve “merveilleuse plaisance” which made their songs (or their singing) “joyeux et notable”.<sup>23</sup>

This is not to deny that polyphony was capable of expressing sadness in the earlier fifteenth century. There is exquisite and subtle melancholy in the chansons by Dufay or Binchois, among others.<sup>24</sup> But low-spirited affects only rarely translate themselves into sacred polyphony—I am thinking of the “minor mode passages” in Dufay’s *Flos florum* and his third *Ave regina celorum* setting. There is also a general tendency in compositions to avoid liturgical genres of a penitential, sad or mourning mood; such music continued to be sung monophonically. To be sure, there were the Lamentations by Johannes de Quadris, the now lost passion settings by Binchois and the also lost Requiem by Dufay. But by and large, to judge from the extant sources, settings of such genres were not very common, and the same is true for Lenten tracts (outside of England, that is). Even the Lent Marian antiphon, the *Salve regina*, was rarely set with its original chant melody before c. 1460.

In other words, music of a penitential mood was perceived as incompatible with the joy of polyphony, and this sensual pleasurableness was of course one of the main reasons why so many theologians and other persons who took the idea of religious reform seriously were opposed to it. The important treatise by Gilles Carlier, *Tractatus de duplici ritu cantus ecclesiastici in divinis officiis* (1472), states the problem in its opening sentences very succinctly:

“A certain devout man has asked why it is that in many churches, both cathedrals and collegiate churches of secular canons, Gregorian chant, that is monophonic singing, is neglected, and the sweet jubilation and harmonious consonance of voices resounds in the divine office—which ritual practice is not observed by well-instituted religious orders that appropriately serve God with doleful and subdued voice—even though both are good.”<sup>25</sup> And Carlier’s answer was: „Both plainchant and musical jubilation draw the soul to divine contemplation according to the diversity of social positions, personalities, times, and places.“ A comparable reading of polyphony as elevating the mind to almost mystical heights is flatly stated by as sober a theorist as Johannes Tinctoris, who in his *Complexus effectuum musices* flatly states that music not only pleases God and the saints, it assimilates the church militant to the church triumphant, drives away the devil, lifts the earthly mind, excites the souls to piety, and it causes ecstasy.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the joy embodied and experienced in polyphony is heavenly joy, either in the way celestial and terrestrial liturgy fuse, or

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<sup>23</sup> Wolfgang Fuhrmann, Englische und irdische Musik im 15. Jahrhundert, in: *Den Himmel öffnen ... – Bild, Raum und Klang in der mittelalterlichen Sakralkultur*, hg. v. Therese Bruggisser, Bern etc.: Peter Lang, 2014 (Publikationen der Schweizerischen Musikforschenden Gesellschaft Serie II, 56/Publications de la Société Suisse de Musicologie Série II, 56), 85–131: 108–109.

<sup>24</sup> I have attempted to trace the idea and practice of melancholic song in my paper *Tristre plaisir et douloureuse joie*. Die Stimme der Melancholie in der französischen Chanson des 15. Jahrhunderts, in: Christiane Ackermann/Hartmut Bleumer (Hg.), *Gestimmte Texte = LiLi. Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 171 (2013), 16–46.

<sup>25</sup> Translation after Rob C. Wegman, *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe 1470–1530*, New York etc. 2005, 49.

<sup>26</sup> Woodley, *Printing and Scope*, 263f.



in the personal way of experiencing spiritual uplift, and even mystical ecstasy. And the considerable number of Renaissance paintings showing angels engaging in singing polyphony is further proof that we are almost in heaven when listening to Dufay's, Ockeghem's, or Busnoys's masses and motets. Advocates of such music, such as Gilles Carlier or Johannes Tinctoris would compare it to the heavenly liturgy and the ineffable joy of mystical union, while ascetic theologians and other persons who took religious reform ideals seriously were strongly opposed to polyphony in a sacred context. Rob Wegman has described in detail two of the main objections among many others: first, exactly this over-joyous character—the reformers would have called it “lascivious” or worse—, and secondly the incomprehensibility of the words sung.<sup>27</sup> And the development of sacred polyphony in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century can be understood at least partially as reaction and response to such these accusations. One consequence of this was the rise of negative affect in sacred polyphony, as if to show that such music was also capable of speaking with a “doleful and subdued voice” [voce flebile et submissa] (to quote Carlier's phrase by Gilles Carlier): in Requiem settings, in tracts, lamentations, and in motets.

The pieces on table 1 of your handout are some documents of this process. They are not the only ones, of course. Nor was the renaissance of the Phrygian mode the only or even the decisive factor; others were the more dramatic exploration and juxtaposition of musical textures; a kind of speech-like declamation almost amounting to a kind of polyphonic recitation, in order to enhance the comprehensibility of the text; the dramatic use of height and depth (including very low ranges), the contrast between variety and regularity, even monotony and a kind of angular and austere melodic movement characterized more by skips or leaps than by steps, which I would call, borrowing a term from Aby Warburg, “pathos formulae”, and so on. This general trend towards a more openly “rhetorical” or “theatrical” expressivity, epitomized in Josquin's *Miserere*, led composers to explore possible registers of expressivity that had been untapped, and musical resources of hitherto marginal importance suddenly came to the fore. The Renaissance of the Phrygian mode is exactly this: finding a new means of expression that had been hiding in plain daylight.

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<sup>27</sup> Wegman, *Crisis of Music*.