

Jane Hatter^o

Motet cycles

Motet cycles between devotion and liturgy, ed.

D. V. Filippi and A. Pavanello (Basel, 2019), 88 CHF

This collection of essays thoughtfully and comprehensively approaches questions surrounding how and why European musicians began to string together short pieces of Latin-texted polyphony into longer motet cycles at the end of the 15th century. Rather than simply narrowing in on the relatively small number of confirmable *motetti missales* that were copied by Franchinus Gaffurius into a set of choirbooks in Milan, this volume broadens our perspective on this music, examining the ways that this somewhat insular repertory is aligned with and indicative of general musical, devotional and liturgical practices from across Europe in the second half of the 15th century. One of the greatest strengths of this edited collection is the diversity of viewpoints represented. Another strength is the integration of this volume with a number of other resources, both digital research tools and scholarship associated with two multi-year research projects based at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis (for details, see the Motet Cycles database at <http://www.motetcycles.ch/>, the Sforza Polyphony website at <https://www.fhnw.ch/plattformen/polifonia-sforzesca/>, and the Gaffurius Codices Online: <https://www.gaffurius-codices.ch/>). The synergy between these publications and resources, especially the open-access primary source databases and digital research tools, ensures that the queries posed by the authors of this volume are starting points for a fruitful scholarly conversation that is building a more comprehensive and colourful understanding of the music that we label motets from the pivotal decades around 1500.

This is a beautiful book, printed on good paper, well bound, and it includes a significant number of full-colour illustrations. As well as providing aesthetic appeal, these images allow readers to begin to see this music through the eyes of its original users. For instance, the presentation of both the full index or *tabula* of the Librone 1 along with annotated detailed views (see pp.385–9) bolsters the conclusions presented by Francesco Rocco Rossi about the status of the document discussed as an evolving ‘guide to

performance’ rather than a rigid ‘table of contents’ signifying compositional choices. Although at around 500 pages this collection is quite long, it is made accessible through a thoughtful introduction by the editors and its organization into four logical sections:

- I. Between Devotion and Liturgy
- II. Fashioning the Shape and Sound of Prayer Texts
- III. Milan, Motet Cycles, Josquin
- IV. In the Cycles Workshop: Case Studies

Each section presents the work of three or four authors, with the exception of the third, which presents a single expansive essay by Joshua Rifkin on the topic of Josquin’s ties to Milan, with a lengthy excursus dedicated to the much-debated origins of the familiar *Ave Maria ... virgo serena*. The volume ends with an extensive bibliography of the works relevant to this topic and cited in the essays; this, however, would have been even more helpful to readers if it were divided into primary and/or musical sources and secondary literature.

The Introduction provided by the co-editors Daniele V. Filippi and Agnese Pavanello not only contextualizes the individual contributions of the volume within the larger research project, but also lays out the history of the discourse around the *motetti missales*. This generous exposition provides an excellent crash course on the topic for non-specialists or a helpful refresher for anyone interested in delving deeper. Because this cyclic repertory and motets in general occupy an ambiguous position as spiritual but not liturgical music, the editors make a strong argument for a ‘cultural approach’ that places motet cycles within their habitat of ‘rituals, traditions, institutions, elites, individuals, and communities’ (p.16).

Exploration of the motet’s enigmatic habitat begins with the first section, titled ‘Between Devotion and Liturgy’. Andrew Kirkman provides some general observations about the nature of cyclicity in various kinds of music for the ritual of the Mass, including cyclic settings of the Mass Ordinary texts. He focuses in on the structure and meaning of the Mass liturgy in the years around 1500 and points out the possibility for more individualized and ‘bespoke’ expressions in private ritual contexts. The following chapters by Robert Nosow and Daniele Filippi each closely examine the context of a particular

institution that supported cyclic polyphony—votive ceremonies at St Donatian's in Bruges and the devotional practices of the Sforza family respectively—while Fañch Thoraval's contribution lays out the ways that confraternal groups relied on musical settings of the Hours of the Passion and the Holy Cross in their devotional activities. These authors highlight the importance of understanding that there were musical conventions and innovative enhancements in the practices of specific institutions that were not strictly liturgical and could accommodate cycles of motets.

Questions about the texts of motet cycles are examined further in the second section, 'Fashioning the Shape and Sound of Prayer Texts.' Hana Vlhová-Wörner looks to older practices of textual compilation for devotional environments as a way to understand the patchwork nature of the texts of motet cycles from the late 15th century. Her deep dive into the prayer anthologies or 'breviaries' compiled for a Bohemian princess named Kunhuta (1265–1321) reveal striking similarities with motet cycle texts, indicative of their shared roots in the personal devotional practices of the social elite. Also looking to older textual traditions, Marco Gozzi explores the implications for centonate motet texts of the reliance on sequence texts as educational tools. He points out that sequences were often understood as improvised two-part polyphony from the beginning and could easily be combined in different ways by individuals who were steeped in them through their pedagogical use. Through a close reading of two motet cycles from Librone 1, Eva Ferro demonstrates the significant differences in the ways that Franchinus Gaffurius and Loyset Compère thoughtfully compiled the texts for their cycles from older source texts.

The second half of the book includes the previously mentioned essay by Joshua Rifkin and a series of case studies by Agnese Pavanello, Francesco Rocco Rossi, Clare Bokulich and Felix Diergarten that examine specific questions or repertory. In contrast to Rifkin's assertion that 'in composing motet cycles, he [Josquin] took up a tradition that he found in Milan' (p.288), Pavanello presents evidence for points of continuity between Gaspar von Weerbeke's roots in northern European practices, including oral traditions of singing sacred poetry, and

the motet cycles he wrote in Milan. Pavanello suggests that rather than creating a 'Milanese style', these northern European composers were adapting their native compositional style for the opulent Milanese context. While Rossi provides a close look at the *tabula* of Librone 1 as evidence for understanding *motetti missales* as an evolving 'practice' rather than a compositional choice, Bokulich surveys the consistent uses of triple metre in this same repertory as evidence of an awareness of 'pacing and large-scale form' (p.427). She shows that Weerbeke and Compère approached triple metres in their *motetti missales* differently from their independent motets. In the final essay, Felix Diergarten considers an anonymous cycle *Gaude flore virginali* from the manuscript Munich, Bavarian State Library, Codex 3154 that includes the 'loco' rubrics but does not conform to most of the other characteristics of the repertory found in Milan. He argues that this piece from the 'black hole' (a period in the second half of the 15th century with a dearth of surviving musical sources) provides evidence that cyclic motets may not have been a phenomenon restricted to Milan.

Only the wealthiest, most erudite members of European society in the late 15th century would have had interest in this repertory of extended sacred music that lay outside the official liturgies. Although the extant motet cycles do not represent a commonplace repertory, this collection of essays reveals their potential for improving our understanding of motets and sacred polyphony in general. In combination with the open-access databases generously supported by the Motet Cycles project, examining these cycles can help us to recognize how various cultural, intellectual and social factors worked to reshape expectations of the Latin-texted polyphony produced by Josquin and his contemporaries, the first generation of musicians to see their creations distributed through print to a broader public of users—performers, collectors, readers and listeners. This volume invites us to delve more deeply into this fascinating music, especially the anonymous cycles that have not often been studied or performed since they were copied or printed over 500 years ago.

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