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Alexander Agricola's Vocal Style – »bizarre« and »surly«, or the Flower of the Singer's Art?*

There can be no doubt that the ›classical‹ works by Josquin are easy to understand and accessible to a modern audience, just as they were to his contemporaries and subsequent generations. One can say that elements of his musical expression were canonized as a stylistic norm during the first half of the 16th century. Agricola, on the other hand, seems rather inaccessible to the modern music lover, and even to the music historian, in spite of the fact that during his lifetime his music enjoyed a favour comparable to the popularity of Josquin's music.[1] Ever since August Wilhelm Ambros characterized Agricola with the words »Among his contemporaries, he is the strangest and most bizarre, and indulges in the most peculiar flights of fancy – moreover, he tends to write a kind of surly, bad-tempered, dark counterpoint,«[2] most commentators have tended to focus on the richly decorated surface of his music, with its many runs, sequences, leaps, and restless, syncopated part writing. His modern fame seems to be based on the reputation of him being

* I wish to express my gratitude to Nicole Schwindt and the Hochschule für Musik Trossingen for the invitation to speak about Agricola's vocal style. Without this gentle push in the right direction, I probably would not have turned to this subject at the present stage of my research. My warmest thanks also to Jane Alden for her great help in transforming my English into something readable.

1 Cf. Honey Meconi, »Josquin and Musical Reputation,« *Essays on Music and Culture in Honor of Herbert Kellman*. Collection »Épitome musicale« 8, ed. Barbara Haggh (Paris, 2001), pp. 280–97. Agricola's secular music had an especially wide circulation: in a French provincial collection of music from around 1520, Agricola is the only composer whose name is attached to several pieces of music (seven); he is represented in the MS by 14 compositions in all (including four duplicates), surpassed only by Loyset Compère with 17 (two duplicates), while Josquin accounts for only two, see Peter Woetmann Christoffersen, *French Music in the Early Sixteenth Century. Studies in the Music Collection of a Copyist of Lyons. The manuscript Ny kgl. Samling 1848 2° in the Royal Library, Copenhagen*, (Copenhagen, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 36–40.

2 August Wilhelm Ambros, *Geschichte der Musik*, vol. 3: *Geschichte der Musik im Zeitalter der Renaissance bis zu Palestrina* (Leipzig, 1868), p. 243: »Er ist unter seinen Genossen der wunderlichste und bizarrste und ergeht sich in höchst sonderbaren Phantastereien – gleich daneben setzt er irgend einen mürrischen, übellaunigen, finstern Contrapunkt.« Translated by Fabrice Fitch in the article »Agricola« in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edn. (London, 2001), vol. 1, p. 228.

rather peculiar. Perhaps as a result, his music – especially his sacred music – is rarely heard in live performances. The discrepancy between his fame around the year 1500 and his reputation today suggests that Agricola's musical language contains elements whose appeal was lost in the generations following 1500.

This essay will offer a new premise for understanding Agricola's music by isolating one of these elements. I shall explore the possibility that Agricola, to a greater degree than his contemporaries, held on to or embraced the sound world of professional singers from the second half of the 15th century. I will suggest that this is part of the reason why his music came, in posterity, to be viewed as »bizarre« and difficult. I wish to shift focus away from an analysis of structures and towards an interest in the sound and meaning of the music – to consider how the music was heard and how it relates to the performance traditions of the age. Consequently the music of Agricola and his colleagues has to be heard against a background of some necessarily hypothetical notions of the music created *alla mente* as part of the singers' daily work in courtly and ecclesiastical institutions. However, this background of improvised traditions should in general not be regarded as provider of actual models for written compositions, even though exactly this relationship can easily be found in the surviving repertory (to be discussed below). The improvised traditions should rather be kept in mind as widespread frameworks of musical understanding and sound identities, which composers had to relate to in the contemporary sound world.[3]

The singer's art

That Agricola was very much in demand as a singer is confirmed by the few facts we know concerning his life and career. One cannot think of any better recommendation than the preserved letters from King Charles VIII of France, and from Ferrante I of Naples, who both wanted the services of the singer.[4] The epitaphs praise Agricola as much as a singer as a composer; one

3 For a discussion of the term »Improvisation« see Leo Treitler's essays »Medieval Improvisation« and »Written Music and Oral Music: Improvisation in Medieval Performance« with new introductions in id., *With Voice and Pen. Coming to know Medieval Song and How It Was Made* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 1–67.

4 Cf. Allan W. Atlas, »Alexander Agricola and Ferrante I of Naples,« *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 30 (1977), pp. 313–9, and Allan W. Atlas and Anthony M. Cummings, »Agricola, Ghiselin, and Alfonso II of Naples,« *Journal of Musicology* 7 (1989), pp. 540–8.

French commemorative poem admonishes Death for removing »a singer excelling all other musicians« – a »triumphant voice« and an »exquisite mouth famed in music«.[5]

I always wondered what could make a singer from the northern regions of Europe so highly sought-after. It is hard to believe that a singer gifted only with a beautiful voice and a good technique, who served alongside other singers of the same category of voice, could cause kings to put diplomacy in action. We need to ponder some questions: Was such a singer in demand as a soloist in the courtly musical life outside the church? The enormous production of secular music suggests that this might have been the case. Was the backlist of written music, which the singer/composer could bring along, and his ability to create new music, something that added value to his services? It is probable that this was more important than we often presume. However, music could easily be circulated in handwritten copies, and the position as composer was just about to be established and still a rarity. As Pamela Starr has shown, with Jean Cordier as her main witness, composing was not a necessity in order to be one of the most sought-after singers.[6] Likewise the positions in the Burgundian court chapel of Pierre de la Rue and later Agricola seem to be less dependent on their fame as composers than on their service as dependable singers.[7]

The high status of singers like Jean Cordier, Agricola and their other northern colleagues was probably the result of the education and knowledge of performance traditions that they had acquired in the Flemish and French institutions of their youths. Employers must have valued their ability to create attractive music *alla mente,* on the spot, and to lead colleagues with the same educational background in satisfactory performances of music based on multi-voice improvisation, as well as on notated music. These skills were in demand all over Europe. Such special abilities became slowly less

5 »O dure mort ... Tu as frappé dessus maistre Allexandre,/ Chantre excellent sur tous musiciens./ ... Tu as cassé la triumphante voix,/ ... Tu as rompu ... La bouche exquise en musicque famée,/ ...« The poem is published in Rob C. Wegman, »Agricola, Bordon, and Obrecht at Ghent: Discoveries and Revisions,« *Revue belge de musicologie* 51 (1997), pp. 61–2.

6 Cf. Pamela F. Starr, »Musical entrepreneurship in 15th-century Europe,« *Early Music* 32 (2004), pp. 119–33.

7 Cf. Honey Meconi, *Pierre de la Rue and Musical Life at the Habsburg-Burgundian Court* (Oxford, 2003); I read in this study a steady undercurrent of veiled wonder that La Rue was not more rewarded and valued as a composer by his patrons, see especially the section »La Rue's Significance at the Court,« pp. 83–92.

important as the diffusion of printed music became established, but on the other hand, the easy access to printed music created a much wider labour market for professional composers and chapelmasters.

It lies outside the scope of this study to go into the many problems and uncertainties connected to the study of improvisatory practices. For now, I will refer just to Rob Wegman's influential article »From Maker to Composer«,[8] and to our growing recognition of the degree to which the double experience of working *alla mente* with music as well as in writing enhanced the achievements of composers and singers – as recently demonstrated in Anna Maria Busse Berger's book *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*.[9]

For some time my research has focused on a very simple sort of polyphony and improvisation in the period up to 1500. It is the repertory often referred to as *cantus planus binatim* in which a sound-enhancing countervoice, or maybe two voices, following traditional rules is added to a pre-existing tune.[10] It is an art of singing without the need for *contrapunctus*-rules. This type of song is a long way from Agricola's art, but the practice merits our attention because it puts actual singing in the foreground, which enables us to focus on how different the backgrounds and abilities of the singers in the service of the church were, and how different the sound of suitable musics could be.[11] It is helpful to list, as a sort of intellectual experiment, the various types of performances of sacred music involving improvisation current during Agricola's youth, paying special attention to the interaction between improvisation and written music:

8 Rob C. Wegman, »From Maker to Composer: Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450–1500,« *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 49 (1996), pp. 409–79.

9 Anna Maria Busse Berger, *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory* (Berkeley, 2005).

10 *Cantus planus binatim* was defined by F. Alberto Gallo in » ›Cantus planus binatim‹. Polifonia primitiva in fonti tardive,« *Quadrivium* 7 (1966), pp. 79–89. A few years ago Christian Berktold showed that Gallo's definition building on Prosdocimus de Beldemandis' *Expositiones tractatus pratice cantus mensurabilis* (Padua, 1408), is questionable, and that Posdocimus' remarks rather referred to a discussion of mensural interpretation of ligatures than to two-part unmeasured polyphony; cf. Christian Berktold, » ›Cantus planus binatim‹. Ein musiktheoretischer Beleg zur Mehrstimmigkeit?,« *Beiträge zur Musik, Musiktheorie und Liturgie der Abtei Reichenau. Bericht über die Tagung Heiligenkreuz, 6.–8. Dezember 1999*. Musica mediaevalis Europae occidentalis 8, ed. Walter Pass and Alexander Rausch (Tutzing, 2001), pp. 149–65.

11 Further on these topics in a forthcoming article with the preliminary title »Prayers for the dead and simple polyphony in a French music manuscript c. 1500 (Amiens, Bibliothèque Municipale Louis-Aragon, Ms. 162 D)«.

1. Simple polyphony *alla mente* based on tradition and patterns (*cantus planus binatim* and related types) was a very durable musical tradition that lasted for centuries, as late as the 19th century.[12] The same sort of music can be found in written form, intended for use of singers not able to improvise, usually singers whose musical competences were restricted to the singing of *cantus planus*; it is typically in black non-mensural or semi-mensural notation. Around 1500 the sound of simple polyphony had changed from strings of parallel perfect concords to a dominance of parallel thirds and sixths; and in some examples we also find traces of conventional contrapuntal devices, such as cadential figures. This music was closely connected to intercessory prayers, and its idioms can be traced in innumerable works by famous composers, for example in passages with a reduced number of parts (duos etc.) or in highlighted passages in block harmony with fermatas.[13] *Fauxbourdon*, *gymel* and simple polyphony for two, three or more voices as described by Guilielmus Monachus belong to this family of improvisatory practices.[14]

2. *Cantus super librum – cantus fractus alle mente*, for two or more voices on a pre-existing tune, is typically functional music for use in the liturgy; many of the rules of composition are applied.[15] This way of singing lives on as *sortisatio* until at least the 17th century.[16] We find many examples of this type of music in sources copied for the use of singers without a cathedral

12 Cf. *Le polifonie primitive in Friuli e in Europa. Atti del congresso internazionale Cividale del Friuli, 22–24 agosto 1980*. Miscellanea musicologica 4, ed. Cesare Corsi and Pierluigi Petrobelli (Roma, 1989), and *Un millennio di polifonia liturgica tra oralità e scrittura*. Quaderni di »Musica e Storia« 3, ed. Giulio Cattin and F. Alberto Gallo (Bologna, 2002).

13 A study of the last-mentioned fermata passages can be found in Bonnie J. Blackburn, »The Dispute about Harmony c. 1500 and the Creation of a New Style,« in *Théorie et analyse musicales 1450–1650. Actes du colloque international Louvain-la-Neuve, 23–25 septembre 1999*. Musicologica Neolovaniensia: Studia 9, ed. Anne-Emmanuelle Ceulemans and Bonnie J. Blackburn (Louvain-la-Neuve, 2001), pp. 1–37.

14 Cf. Guilielmus Monachus, *De preceptis artis musicae*. Corpus scriptorum de musica 11, ed. Albert Seay (American Institute of Musicology, 1965), pp. 29–30 and 38–42; see also the interesting development of models based on Guilielmus' descriptions in Markus Jans, »Alle gegen eine. Satzmodelle in Note-gegen-Note-Sätzen des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts,« *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* 10 (1986), pp. 101–20, especially pp. 104–6).

15 Klaus-Jürgen Sachs has drawn up the basis for these practices in »Arten improvisierter Mehrstimmigkeit nach Lehrtexten des 14. bis 16. Jahrhunderts," *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* 12 (1983), pp. 166–83; see also id., *»De modo componendi«. Studien zu musikalischen Lehrtexten des späten 15. Jahrhunderts*. Studien zur Geschichte der Musiktheorie 2 (Hildesheim, 2002), p. 103.

16 Cf. Ernest T. Ferand, » ›Sodaine and unexpected‹ Music in the Renaissance,« *The Musical Quarterly* 37 (1951), pp. 10–27.

education, or for use by choirs. In these sources the liturgical tune is often written in chant notation or, if mensurally notated, in uniform note values.[17] Late examples of this tradition can be found in the *Chorbücher* 34 and 35 in the Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek in Jena[18] or in the vastly more ambitious Lyons *Contrapunctus seu figurata musica super plano cantu missarum solemnium totius anni* of 1528 (probably composed *in toto* by Francesco Layolle).[19] The only respects in which this category of music differs from the next and last one is the level of the singers' aspirations and the compositional skills of those who, on the basis of such practices, wrote music down.

3. *Cantus super librum*, for groups of virtuoso singers who – Johannes Tinctoris tells us in his manual of counterpoint for singers and composers – were sufficiently skilled and experienced to create a sound comparable to what we hear in composed music.[20] In Example 1 Tinctoris shows how to vary the two *contrapunctus*-voices with leaps and fluent motion against a *cantus firmus* in regular semibreves. The example demonstrates the virtuosity and high degree of complexity he expected from multi-voice *cantus super librum*.[21] The biggest difference to composed music is a certain lenience

17 Cf. Marco Gozzi, » ›Cantus firmus per notulas plani cantus‹: alcune testimonianze quattrocentesche,« *Il cantus firmus nella polifonia. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi Arezzo, 27–29 dicembre 2002*. Quaderni di polifonie 3, ed. Francesco Facchin (Arezzo, 2005), pp. 45–87.

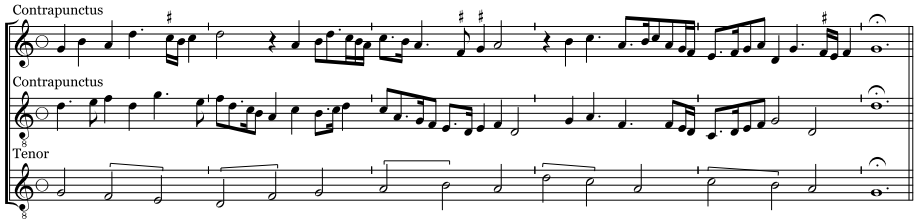
18 Cf. ibid., pp. 54–61, and Christian Meyer, » ›Sortisatio‹. De l'improvisation collective dans les pays germaniques vers 1500,« *Polyphonies de tradition orale – histoire et traditions vivantes. Actes du colloque de Royaumont 1990*. Collection »Rencontres à Royaumont« 6, ed. Christian Meyer (Paris, 1994), pp. 182–200.

19 Published in *The Lyons Contrapunctus (1528)*. Recent Researches in the Music of the Renaissance 21–2, ed. David A. Sutherland (Madison, 1976).

20 *Liber de arte contrapuncti,* II, xx–xxvii, and III, i, iv, and vi–ix: Johannes Tinctoris, *Opera theoretica*. Corpus scriptorum de musica 22, ed. Albert Seay, vol. 2 (American Institute of Musicology, 1978).

21 Ibid., III, iv: »Sed ab hac regula eximuntur, qui magis contrapuncto dulciori ac venustiori student quam propinquiori. Quique pluribus super librum canentibus ut contrapunctum diversificent, eum cum moderatione instar quodammodo compositorum longinquum efficiunt, ut hic patet ...« (»But those who seek a sweeter and more delightful counterpoint than one based on neighbouring notes are freed from this rule. With many singing *super librum,* so that the counterpoint may be varied, certain ones employ this great [leap] with moderation, like composed music in a certain way, as is seen in the following ...«, translation by A. Seay in Johannes Tinctoris, *The art of Counterpoint. Liber de arte contrapuncti*. Musicological studies and documents 5 (American Institute of Musicology, 1961), p. 135); see also Bonnie J. Blackburn, »On Compositional Process in the Fifteenth Century,« *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 40 (1987), pp. 210–84, especially pp. 256–8.

towards a strict adherence to rules[22] and – even more importantly – narrow limits on how long the stretches of polyphony could be that were planned in this way. This is not music characterized by temporally extended, involved developments – such phenomena were reserved for composed music. Rather, it is likely that this sort of polyphony was applied to the widespread line by line *alternatim* performance of chant.[23] Improvised music making of this class created a scene for the virtuoso singer where he could dazzle an audience by his virtuosity and the beauty of his voice; he could also impress the learned in music with new artifice and new sounds as leader of a group of singers. But paying specialized and highly educated singers was an expensive way of embellishing the liturgy, and it probably died out with the establishment of bigger choirs made up of local singers, as well as the accompanying easy access to composed music through prints.



Example 1: Johannes Tinctoris, example of *cantus super librum* from *Liber de arte contrapuncti,* III, iv (cf. fn. 21, p. 149)

Today it is only possible to study the virtuoso singer's art with the help of the preserved musical sources. It can be difficult to identify traces of improvisatory traditions, especially if the written music was created by a gifted composer. To compose is a performance for a single performer who has the power to control long musical developments as well as every detail. He can

22 Tinctoris advises training and more training from an early age to overcome the difficulties in singing *super librum* by internalizing the rules of counterpoint (*Liber de arte contrapuncti*, cf. fn. 20, III, ix), and he highly recommends the singers to rehearse and agree on how to perform their parts – and in this way minimize the differences between music *alla mente* and composed music (II, xx); cf. Blackburn, On Compositional Process (cf. fn. 21), p. 256, and Wegman, From Maker to Composer (cf. fn. 8), p. 444.

23 This theme is further discussed in my article »Kirkemusik i stramme tøjler. Om alternatimmesser til Santa Barbara i Mantova« [»Church music in tight reins. ›Alternatim‹ masses for Santa Barbara in Mantua«], *Dansk Årbog for Musikforskning* 30 (2002), pp. 9–50, especially pp. 42–50.

choose to implement a grand scheme using long-range manipulation of the musical material; this can eventually be combined with simple procedures that are easy to grasp by ear, or he can try to hide behind a glittering, highly worked out surface. No matter how he shapes his music, he has to communicate with the singers through musical notation in order to bring the composition to life in sound. The singers, for their part, have to try to live up to the challenges posed by the composer. These challenges may be demands on their virtuosity, their ability to solve riddles or to understand and implement new musical concepts. This process is important in the reciprocal relationship between writing and performance, which in many ways is related to the interaction between memory and writing.

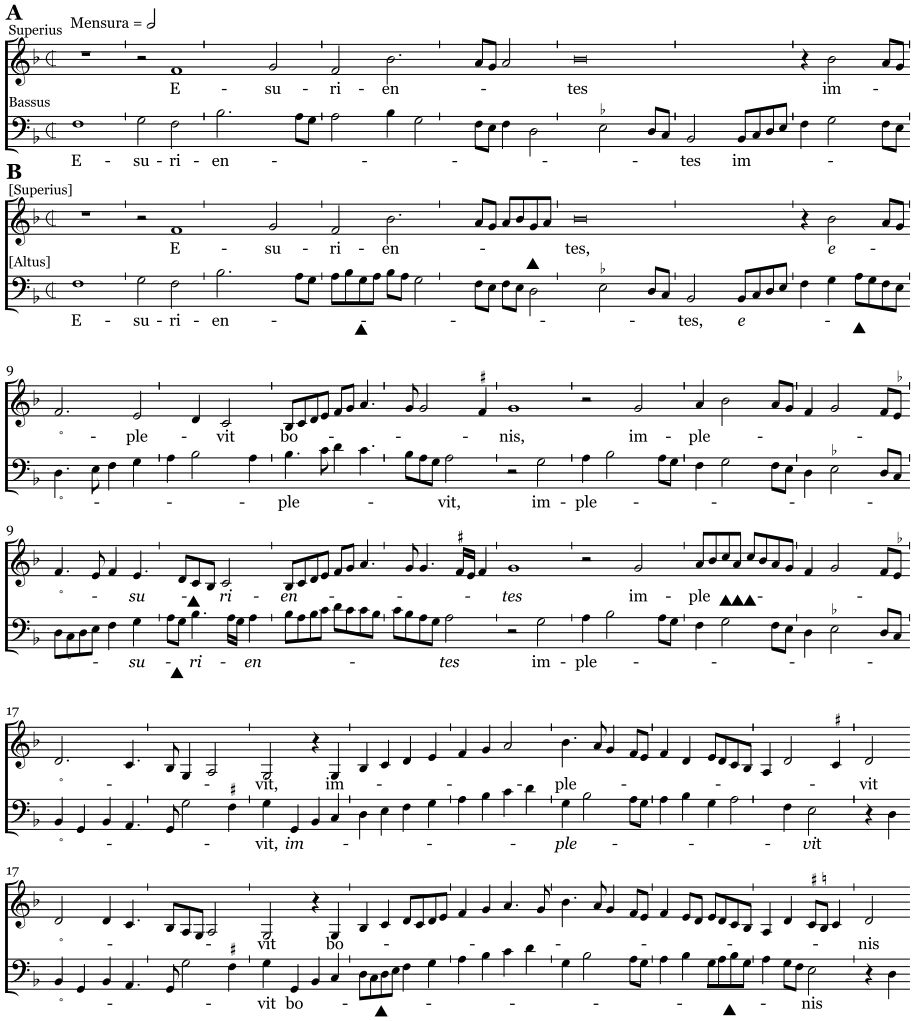
It is well known, owing to the anecdote published by Johannes Manlius in 1562, that Josquin disapproved of singers elaborating their performances of his music with their own added embellishments.[24] A likely reason for his discontent might have been that the singers' conventional ornaments could easily have transported his carefully balanced musical surface and characteristic sound into the realm of collective improvisation. A striking example of such an elaboration is preserved in one of the sources of Antoine Brumel's four-part *Magnificat Secundi toni*. It appears in a ›normal‹ version in manuscripts in the Biblioteca Central in Barcelona (MS 454) and in the Landesbibliothek und Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel (MS 4° Mus. 9) and in a more embellished version in the French manuscript Ny Kgl. Samling 1848 2° in the Royal Library in Copenhagen, which was copied at Lyons around 1520.[25] In the four-part verses the diminutions occur primarily in the superius, causing free dissonances as well as parallel fifths and octaves foreign to the contrapuntal rules on which Brumel's setting of the Magnificat tone is otherwise based.[26] In the two-part verse 8, »Esurientes implevit«, both parts are decorated. Example 2 shows the start of the verse in both versions; the black triangles mark dissonances created by the added diminutions. Note the cluster of dissonances in the superius in bar 15,

24 Rob C. Wegman, »›And Josquin Laughed ...‹ Josquin and the Composer's Anecdote in the Sixteenth Century,« *The Journal of Musicology* 18 (1999), pp. 319–57: 322.

25 For a description of this source, see Christoffersen, French Music (cf. fn. 1). The two versions of Brumel's *Magnificat Secundi toni* are published in an instructive parallel edition in Antoine Brumel, *Opera omnia*. Corpus mensurabilis musicae 5, ed. Barton Hudson, vol. 6 (American Institute of Musicology, 1972), pp. 7–38.

26 It has to be remarked that Brumel's music even without these embellishments can be compared to Agricola's in its detailed surface.

caused by melodic figuration; these would hardly be acceptable in composed music, but probably recall a sound acceptable in improvised polyphony.



Example 2: Antoine Brumel, *Magnificat Secundi toni* a 4, verse 8, »Esurientes«, bb. 1–25 (based on the edition of B. Hudson, cf. fn. 26, p. 15)

A: as in E–Bc, 434, ff. 91^{v}–94, and D–Kl, 4° Mus. 9, no. 12
B: as in DK–Kk, Ny kgl. Saml. 1848 2°, pp. 324–9

It is easy to find examples of Agricola's use of techniques from improvisatory traditions – I could have used this essay to call attention to examples of his use of free-flowing counter-voices set to a *cantus prius factus*, or to traces of *cantus super librum*-techniques, which can be found everywhere and especially in his reworkings of the music of other composers. But that would not produce a true picture of Agricola as a composer. Indeed, the main results of my studies are firstly that Agricola is much less dependent than some of his contemporaries (Josquin primarily) on highly stylized improvisatory traditions, and secondly that he, to some degree, relies in his music on the entire world of sound cultivated by groups of virtuoso singers, exploiting his rich imagination in structuring this sound on paper.

Sound and singing in two motets

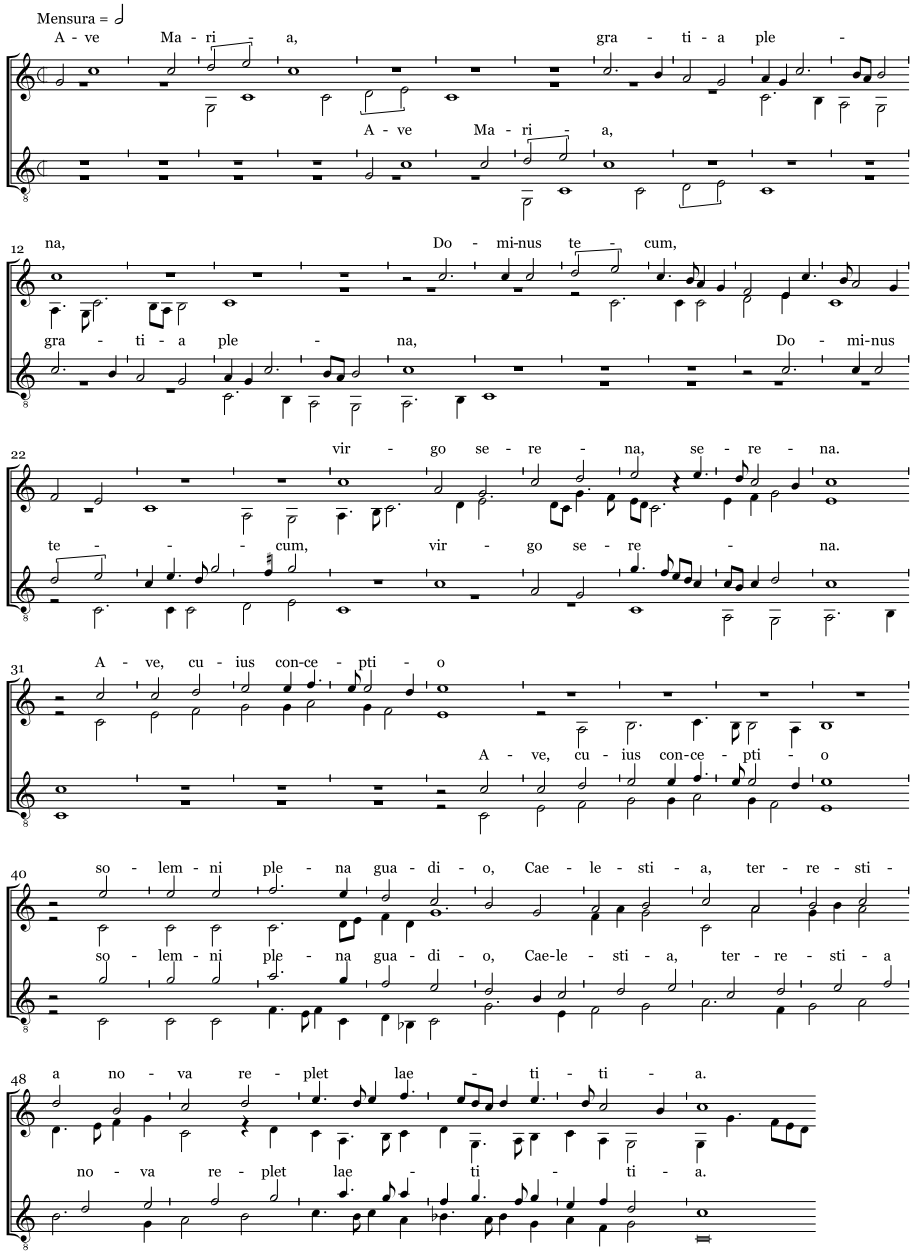
Let us turn to a couple of very simple examples. This may seem odd when the subject is Agricola, but it is too easy to bury the point in a lot of notes when dealing with this composer. It may seem unfair, too, to compare a very early work by Josquin with a mature work by Agricola, but I find that this confrontation may make my point clear.

Josquin's famous motet »Ave Maria ... virgo serena« dating from around 1480[27] can be read as a catalogue of very simple techniques – or, one could be tempted to say, as a pedagogical stylization of good singers' skills in improvisation.[28] The motet starts with a four-part imitation at the octave and prime of the very simple tune for the introductory strophe of the sequence »Ave Maria ... virgo serena«, schematically unfolding in four phrases (see the condensed score in Example 3, bb. 1–30).[29] There is nothing here that could

27 Joshua Rifkin dates the copying of the motet into the MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Mus. ms. 3154 (fols. 147^{v}–148) to ca. 1485, cf. pp. 305–7 in »Munich, Milan, and a Marian Motet: Dating Josquin's ›Ave Maria ... virgo serena‹,« *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 56 (2003), pp. 239–350.

28 David Fallows remarks in »Approaching a New Chronology for Josquin: An Interim Report,« *Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft* 19 (1999), pp. 131–50, that »... for all its beauty, *Ave Maria ... virgo serena* does not actually contain anything that is at all contrapuntally difficult: technically speaking, it could have been composed by almost anybody.« (p. 137).

29 The complete motet is published in *Werken van Josquin des Prés. Motetten*, vol. 1, ed. Albert Smijers (Amsterdam, 1925), no. 1, and, perhaps more conveniently, in *Anthology of Renaissance Music. Music in Western Europe, 1400–1600,* ed. Allan W. Atlas (New York, 1998), pp. 159–65.



Example 3: Josquin Desprez, »Ave Maria ... virgo serena« a 4, bb. 1–53 (after the edition of A. Smijers, cf. fn. 30)

not be agreed verbally and performed satisfactorily by professional singers after a short rehearsal. The next section demonstrates simple harmony in the setting of a stanza from the strophic poem »Ave, cuius conceptio«: In bars 31–5 we hear a two-part texture in parallel sixths with octaves at the start and end – this conforms entirely to the preference in simple cantus planus settings for thirds and sixths. The short line is then repeated by the lower pair of voices, supplemented by parallel fourths to the highest part in the altus transforming the texture into a beautiful fauxbourdon-setting (bb. 35–9). In the second line of the stanza (bb. 40–4), the parallel sixths between superius and tenor are expanded to four parts completely in accordance with Guilielmus Monachus' description of how to perform such things.[30] The stanza's last two lines (bb. 44–53) exhibit a traditional procedure in polyphonic improvisation: a jubilant rising sequence in superius and tenor, which basically moves in parallel fifths (alternating with an octave after every three fifths), made functional, or contrapuntally acceptable, by the insertion of a single note (*b*) in the tenor (in bar 44), which displaces this voice by a minim interpolating a sixth between every fifth; the bassus follows the superius slavishly in parallel tenths and altus fills out the harmony.[31] In a comparable manner the motet sets the next four stanzas and

30 Guilielmus Monachus, De preceptis (cf. fn. 14), p. 39.

31 The rhythmic displacement of a single voice part was a well-known technique, beginning in the late 14th century, used to create momentum in composed music. Guilielmus describes it as a traditional way of performing fauxbourdon with »sincopas per sextas et quintas« (ibid., p. 38) and gives an example of how to harmonize raising and descending scales in syncopation (p. 53). In the 16th century, Vicente Lusitano and Nicola Vicentino still mention it as a basic technique in polyphonic improvisation; see Ernest T. Ferand, »Improvised vocal counterpoint in the late Renaissance and early Baroque,« *Annales musicologiques* 4 (1956), pp. 129–74 (here pp. 148–51). Richard Sherr has made the same observation concerning this passage in Josquin's »Ave Maria« without, however, associating it with traditional techniques, cf. *The Josquin Companion*, ed. Richard Sherr (Oxford, 2000), pp. 333–4; Josquin also uses the fifth-sixth pattern – possibly with a hint at improvised practices – in his motet »Ut Phebi radiis«, especially in its first section on the ascending hexachord (see my edition of the motet bb. 23–5, 48–50, and 55–61, pp. 113–8 in the article »Hvad enhver kordreng skal kunne. Betragtning af motetten *Ut Phebi radiis* af Josquin Desprez« [»What every choirboy has to master. Reflections on ...«], *Musik & Forskning* 28 (2003), pp. 97–118. The same technique of rhythmically displacing the tenor, now at a semibreve value, can be found in the setting of the fourth stanza »Ave, vera virginitas« in triple time (bb. 94–109 in the Smijers edition, cf. fn. 29). Here the simple sixth-fifth formations evolve into a strict canon at the lower fifth between superius and tenor inside the four-part texture. John Milsom correctly identifies this procedure as belonging to the basic skills of singers and composers, as part of the ›grammar‹ of counterpoint, using this

the final prayer in an expert simplification of basic techniques known to and recognized by every singer – with every single phrase confined to the horizon of *musica alla mente*. The success of this motet may have been prompted by the young composers' bold dismissal of everything in the setting of the words not essential to the prayer, which gives the music an immediacy rare in composed music; it is also very easy on the ears.[32]

Agricola's motet »Transit Anna timor« (Examples 4a–b) was probably composed more than twenty years after Josquin's »Ave Maria«. Edward Lerner suggests that it celebrates the recovery of the French King, Louis XII, in 1504.[33] After a broad opening gesture, a four-part imitative passage starts in bar 9, which is almost as straightforward as Josquin's opening of »Ave Maria«. However, the imitation includes a detail, which I find rather characteristic of Agricola and the composing singer. It is a small circling figure first heard in the tenor in bars 10–1 (each occurrence is put in a box in Example 4a), which adds life and character to the imitation. It introduces unaccented dissonances, fourths in the tenor and seconds in superius and bassus, generating energy for the rather majestic advance to the cadence in bar 21.[34] It is telling that Agricola keeps the little figure as the characteristic feature in the shortened entry of the altus. After the cadence, tenor and bassus take over in a canon at the octave, using a more extended version of

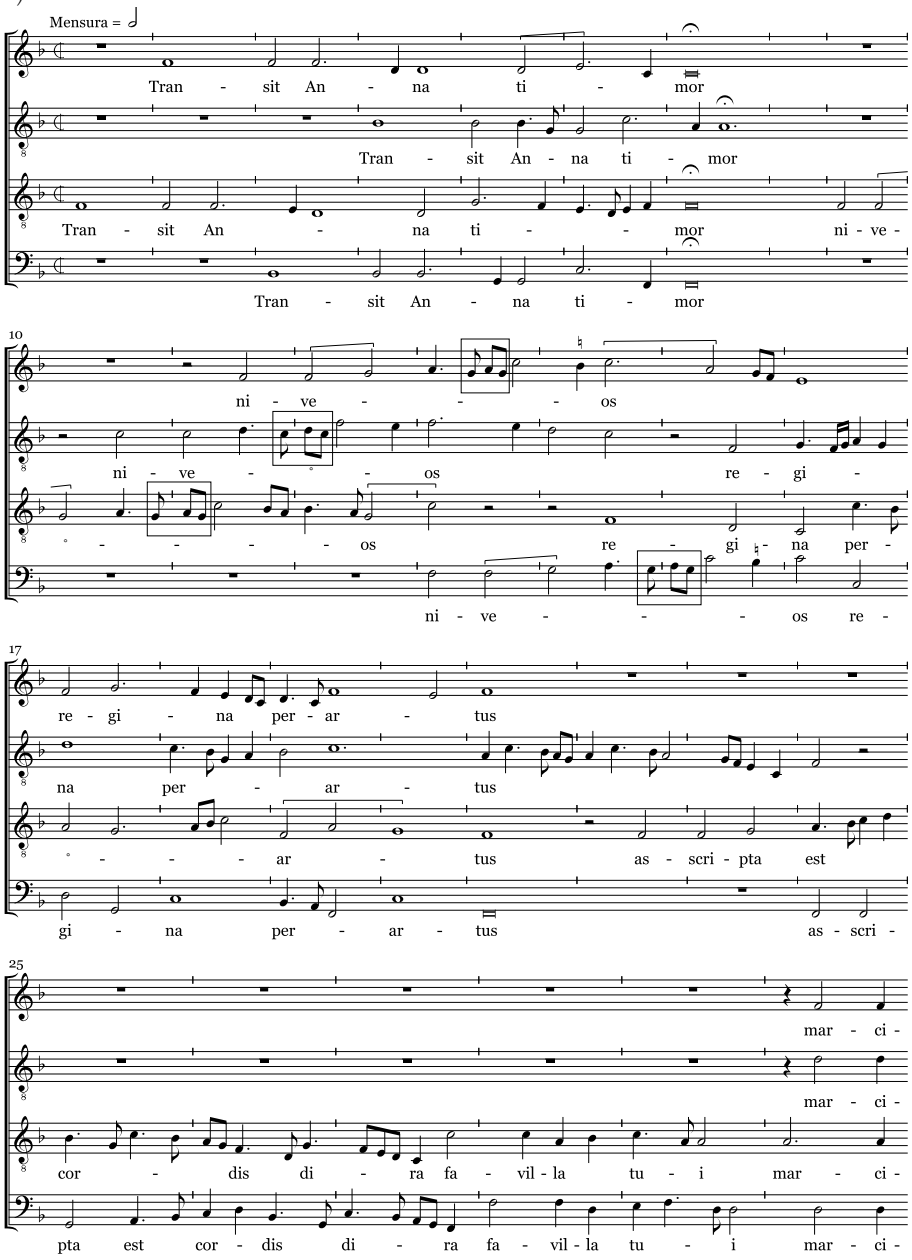
passage and others by Guillaume Dufay and Josquin as examples, see pp. 146–51 of »›Imitatio‹, ›Intertextuality‹, and Early Music,« in *Citation and Authority in Medieval and Renaissance Musical Culture: Learning from the Learned*. Studies in medieval and Renaissance music 4, ed. Suzannah Clark and Elizabeth Eva Leach (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 141–51.

32 For more on the declamation of the text in the motet, see Ludwig Finscher, »Zum Verhältnis von Imitationstechnik und Textbehandlung im Zeitalter Josquins,« in *Renaissance-Studien. Helmuth Osthoff zum 80. Geburtstag*. Frankfurter Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft 11, ed. Ludwig Finscher (Tutzing, 1979), pp. 57–72, and Thomas Schmidt-Beste, *Textdeklamation in der Motette des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Turnhout, 2003), pp. 167–9.

33 Cf. Alexander Agricola, *Opera omnia*. Corpus mensurabilis musicae 22, ed. Edward R. Lerner, vol. 4 (American Institute of Musicology, 1966), p. XIII; the motet is published ibid., pp. 41–6.

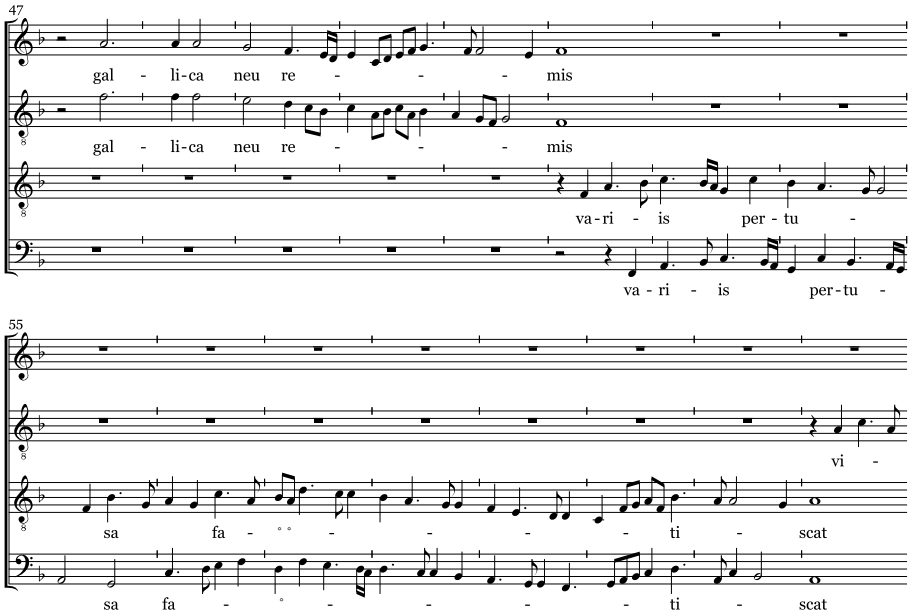
34 This circling figure followed by a leap of a fourth is not a common feature of Agricola's music. I have only been able to find it in two other compositions in his *Opera omnia*: in his »Salve regina« (II) a 4, published ibid., pp. 20–7, where it occurs in a three-part imitation (S–Ct–B) on »misericordiae« bars 7–10 (in Lerner's edition), and in the introductory imitation between superius and tenor (bb. 1–3) in the motet-chanson »Belle sur toutes«/ »Tota pulchra es« a 3 (ibid., pp. 52–3). It does not have the same striking effect on the sound as in »Transit Anna timor« in any of these occurrences, and in the second instance it does not produce any dissonances at all.

a)



Example 4a–b: Alexander Agricola, »Transit Anna timor« a 4, (a) bb. 1–30,

b)



Example 4a–b (continued): (b) bb. 47–62 (based on the edition of E. Lerner, cf. fn. 34)

the theme until all parts – *subito* – come together in homorythmic declamation. Agricola uses, in a relatively simple structure, the same procedures we saw in the Josquin example, but without Josquin's ear-catching simplifications.

Of course Agricola also knows the lure of parallel imperfect concords. A bit later in the motet, the upper parts sing »gallica neu remis« in thirds spreading out to sixths into the cadence at the octave (Example 4b). Again the lower voices respond in bar 52, now in imitation, and they are drawn out in a long sequence (with traces of the fifth-sixth model, now descending), so that the simplicity of expression in the start of the passage somehow is renounced in favour of an asymmetric complication of the course of the music – quite unlike the techniques in Josquin's »Ave Maria«.

Agricola's *Missa Malheur me bat*

This insignificance of symmetry, and the effect on the sound of the music of the small circling figure, are each in their own way essential to Agricola's vocal style. This view can be supported by a study of Agricola's greater

sacred compositions and especially by looking at his *Missa Malheur me bat* (on a chanson probably by the Flemish singer Malcort),[35] while keeping the corresponding masses by Josquin and Jacob Obrecht in mind. All three masses were published by Ottaviano Petrucci in respectively 1503 (Obrecht), 1504 (Agricola) and 1505 (Josquin) – and all were thus current during the first decade of the 16th century.[36]

The masses by Obrecht and Josquin have several features in common. Josquin's mass was probably composed with a knowledge of Obrecht's – possibly with a sense of competition. Both of them use segmentation and ostinato, and they make part of their techniques demonstratively audible: Obrecht does this by his long-term scheme of segmentation in the highest voice, which for long stretches unfolds in long note values; Josquin puts text-derived ostinato motives on the musical surface, every time presenting these motives in such a simple manner that the listener can confidently follow the musical development. No matter how sophisticated their contrapuntal techniques are, or how involved their *cantus firmus* treatment, both composers rely in many passages on the sound of simplified or stylized improvisatory techniques – a feature that also helps to make the music recognizable and safe for the listener.

In Agricola's sound world it does not seem to be as desirable to expose the compositional skeleton – or to help the listener feel at home in the music. He is, in this respect, more in line with Johannes Ockeghem, who is also somewhat reticent about his working methods, evading too obvious means of phrasing in his music's surface.[37] Agricola's music shows him as an

35 See the discussion of the attributions to Ockeghem, Johannes Martini and Malcort in Johannes Ockeghem, *Collected Works*, vol. 3: *Motets and Chansons,* ed. Dragan Plamenac and Richard Wexler (Philadelphia, 1992), p. CVI; the chanson is published ibid., p. 95, and elsewhere; see also the article »Malcourt« by Barbara Haggh in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edn. (London, 2001), vol. 15, pp. 682–3.

36 Published in *The New Obrecht Edition,* vol. 7, ed. Barton Hudson (Utrecht, 1987), pp. 1–37; Alexandri Agricola Opera omnia (cf. fn. 33), vol. 1 (1961), pp. 66–104; and *The New Josquin Edition*, vol. 9, ed. Barton Hudson (Utrecht, 1994), pp. 2–42. For an introduction to the masses by Obrecht and Josquin, see Rob C. Wegman, *Born for the Muses. The Life and Masses of Jacob Obrecht* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 239–44 and 332–3, and M. Jennifer Bloxam, »Masses Based on Polyphonic Songs and Canonic Masses,« in The Josquin Companion (cf. fn. 31), pp. 176–86; cf. also Barton Hudson's very extensive commentaries to the two editions.

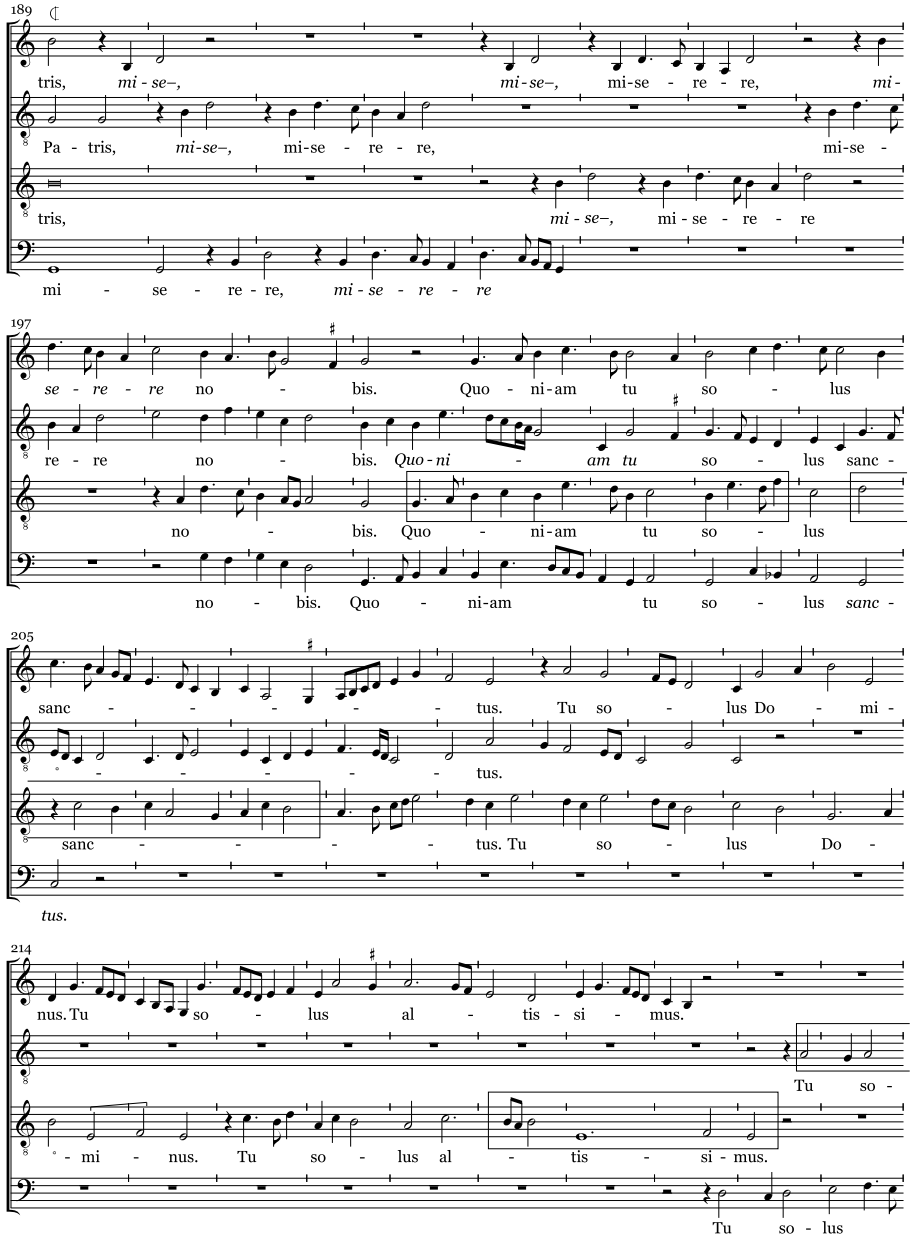
37 Cf. Fabrice Fitch, *Johannes Ockeghem. Masses and Models*. Collection Ricercar 2 (Paris, 1997), p. 9: »... the secret of his art lies in the deftness with which he covers his tracks. Thus the twin themes of subversion and concealment run like *leitmotivs* throughout his work.«

expert in the art of singing, and he did not like to leave anything to the whims of singers. Therefore every detail is carefully worked out and his demands on the singers are high. It is rare to find simplified versions of improvisatory techniques in his music. On the contrary, he seems to prefer to produce the sounding universe of the singers by subtle means, which can be thought out and developed only with the help of notation. Agricola's music, we might say, looks more like »res facta« than much other contemporary music. For example, he likes, at times, to undermine the stability of the music's basic pulse. This procedure is utterly anti-improvisatory – something that would cause an immediate breakdown in a performance *super librum*. We find a striking example in the Agnus Dei III of his *Missa In myne zin*, where we hear the impressive sound of an improvising ensemble in full flow, while the tune in the bassus is organized in units of at first eleven minimae and later seven minimae – an astonishing, out-of-the-world, jazzy effect, and probably not an everyday experience of singing »on the book«.[38]

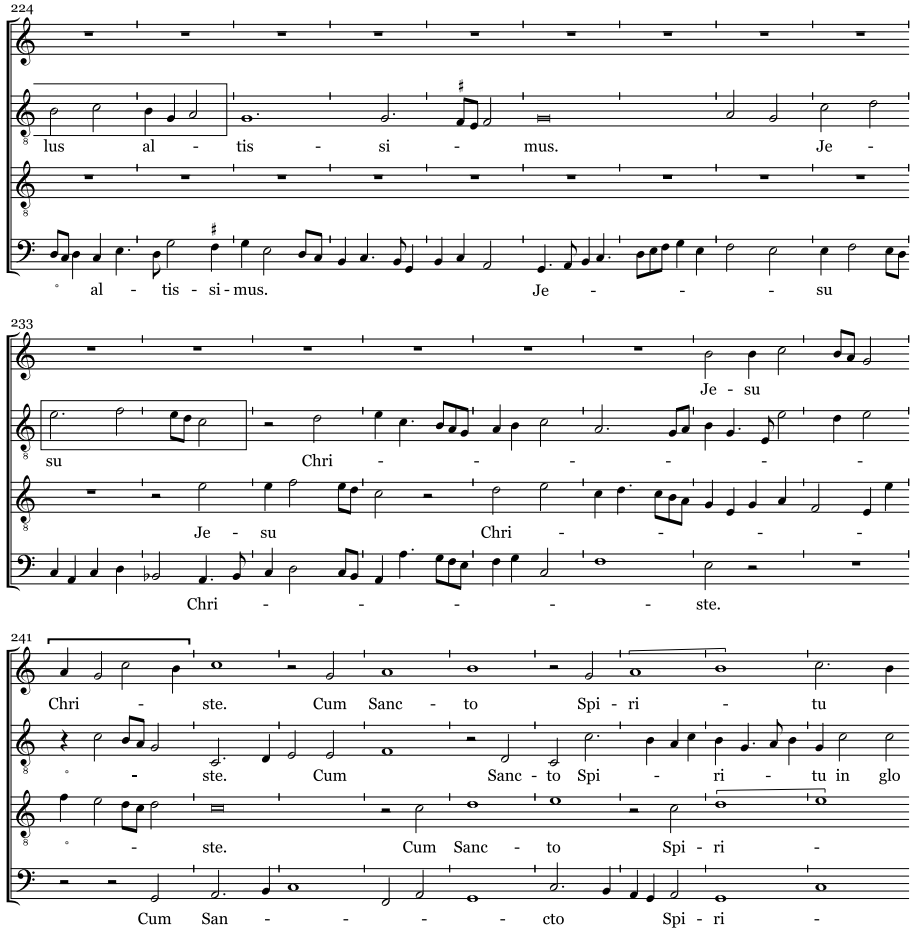
I will use a final example from Agricola's *Missa Malheur me bat* to try to clarify my point. It is from the second part of the Gloria, near the middle of the »Qui tollis«-section (see Example 5).[39] A lot is happening in this section. Just before the example starts, we hear a three-part passage on the words »ad dexteram Patris« ending in a Phrygian cadence to *b – b'*, which the entry of the bassus (and the final notes in the altus) reinterprets as major thirds over *G – g* (b. 189). Now comes a quite remarkable echo-passage on »miserere nobis« – almost in ›*hocquetus*‹-style – emphasizing the major triad on *G*. Everything picks up again at »Quoniam tu solus« (b. 200), in a four-part texture with the chanson tenor as *cantus firmus* in the tenor. This short, quite conventional, passage cadences on *C* in bar 205. The following three- and two-part passages present Agricola at his most fluent and refined. The

38 Alexandri Agricola Opera omnia (cf. fn. 33), vol. 1 (1961), pp. 143–4.

39 The example corresponds to bars 90–120 of the Gloria in Lerner's edition: Alexandri Agricola Opera omnia (cf. fn. 33), vol. 1 (1961), pp. 77–9. It has not helped Agricola's modern reputation that Lerner chose to transcribe every section in *tempus imperfectum diminutum* in a 1:4 reduction of the note values, while the current editions of Obrecht and Josquin keep to halved or original values respectively. This ought not make any difference in performances. However, the psychological impact of the pages' accumulation of small note values on singers and instrumentalists cannot be ignored. The very few performances and recordings of Agricola's music have a tendency to be too fast and strained and fuzzy, not allowing its expressive qualities to come to the fore. The examples in the present essay are all reduced in the ratio 1:2.



Example 5: Alexander Agricola, *Missa Malheur me bat* a 4, »Et in terra pax«, bb. 189–249 (based on the edition of E. Lerner, cf. fn. 34, vol. 1, 1961, pp. 66–104)



Example 5 (continued)

descending lines in the superius evolve freely from the tenor's almost strict reproduction of Malcort's Phrygian chanson tenor – with a hint of the improvisational trick of repeating scale segments in varied rhythms.[40] In the next phrase, where the altus repeats the words »Tu solus altissimus« (starting in b. 222), the *cantus firmus* moves to the altus and the bassus takes over the florid counterpoint; the tune suddenly loses its momentum in drawn-

40 Cf. Ferand, Improvised vocal counterpoint (cf. fn. 31), pp. 152–3.

out note values (bb. 226–30) – the bassus has to work hard alone to keep the music going. When the tenor enters again on »Jesu Christe« (b. 234) with a repeat of the motive (quoted from the chanson tenor) just sung in the altus, the feeling of the strong beat in the brevis-bars has become rather vague, even if there has been articulated cadences on strong beats in the preceding phrases. This floating accentuation forces the introduction of a brevis-bar containing three beats into the transcription (marked with a fat bracket in bar 241). Agricola establishes a new strong beat at »Cum sancto Spiritu« marked by regular brevis values and upbeat phrasing – it comes as a sort of ›wake up‹ call. The strong beat has now moved to the former position of the relative weak beat in the brevis-bar, and here it stays (with the Holy Ghost) for the remainder of the movement.

This rhythmically floating episode illustrates Agricola's precise calculation of the musical effect and how he exploits the model tune. The place where the *cantus firmus* changes from the tenor to the altus is marvellously heard by the composer. The tenor here quotes the model literally;[41] the long note *e* and the semitone movement sets the scene for a strong Phrygian cadence (bb. 220–2), but the superius just fades out with the semitone step *c'* – *b*. The cadence never materializes; it sounds more like a semitone ›sigh‹ echoed a fifth below in the tenor in doubled note values. The literal quote continues in the altus, but the bridging, syncopated pre-imitation in the bassus underscores the rhythmical limbo of these moments. The text in this section has the solemn acclamations to Jesus, »Tu solus Dominus. Tu solus altissimus«, but the music almost disappears into two thin, syncopated strands of melody, very subdued. It is a rather individual interpretation of the text, comparable to the jubilant ›*hocquetus*‹ on »miserere nobis«.[42] From »Quoniam tu solus sanctus« (b. 205) to »Cum sancto Spiritu« (b. 241) we experience an inverted curve of musical intensity, tightly controlled by Agricola. We meet a composer free from conventional thinking, writing for and expressing his ideas through virtuoso singing voices in a music that could never have emerged from improvisation. This music has been heard in

41 The literal quotes in the tenor and altus (of the chanson »Malheur me bat« as published by Wexler, cf. fn. 35) are marked with boxes in the example.

42 Settings of this »miserere nobis« moment in the Gloria in very active, dotted rhythms can also be found in Agricola's *Missa Je ne demande* (Alexandri Agricola Opera omnia, cf. fn. 34, vol. 1 (1961), pp. 43, bb. 78–80) and in his *Missa In myne zin* (ibid., p. 112, bb. 134–5). A sort of ›*hocquetus*‹ appears also in the Sanctus of the *Missa Malheur me bat*, bars 9–11 (ibid., pp. 91–2).

the composer's mind and developed on paper using the notation to communicate with the singers.

In Josquin's and Obrecht's masses on the same chanson I hear personalities speak though the collective of the singing voices very convincing and with clearly argued points; they invite admiration for their grand structures. In both cases the four (or six) voice parts express a single, fictional, rounded personality, helped by stylization and simplification of the musical details. Agricola, on the other hand, composes for the singing voices without the same degree of simplification and without rhetorical appeals to the listener. His personality comes out just as strong but different. His music builds on the traditions of the virtuoso ensemble of singers, with their richly detailed, multi-dimensional sound. This is a lost tradition, and one less easily accessible to later audiences. It is in the ever-changing sonorities and the care for expressive details that we find Agricola the singer.