

Introduction

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I have resolved to write a treatise on music, which, among other sciences, has given me joy since youth, and has not deserted me in old age, but has held me as a man rapt and possessed.¹

Jacobus came to music late—too late. When he spoke of the joy that music had brought to his life, there was one word that made his late acquaintance painfully apparent. That word was youth, *iuventus*. There is another word one would sooner have expected at this point: childhood, *pueritia*. But Jacobus could not claim that his passion for music had been awakened that early.

Youth was the age that began around fifteen and continued into the prime of life. Fifteen was the age for boys to become apprenticed to a master, like a smith, say, or a mason. For advanced schoolboys it was the age to become apprenticed to a *magister* at the university. That was the right time. But when it came to music, fifteen was too late. Nothing could replace years of lessons taken with music tutors, rigorous training in choir schools, or regular opportunities to sing and play with others. What Jacobus is saying, in effect, is that he discovered music only as an undergraduate student in Paris. That is why he speaks of music ‘among other *sciences*’. What he means is the seven Liberal Arts (including Music as an exact science) that made up the curriculum in the first four or five years of study.

Compare this to a close contemporary of his who could in fact boast a childhood full of music. He was Henricus Bate, a major philosopher and scientist who was a canon at the cathedral of St. Lambert at Liège until his death in 1310. In his autobiography of 1280-81, Bate tells us that music had been a constant presence in his life for as long as he could remember.² He had grown up enjoying the sounds of wind instruments, pipes, and reeds, learning to play them, and learning to play the organ and stringed keyboard instruments. That is why he remained a proficient musician throughout his life. He played the vielle, lyre, psaltery, and organ, gladly sang every kind of song, including songs in different languages, partook in all manner of dances, and was active as a musical poet.

Jacobus went through life without such a background. He had no meaningful competence in practical music. This hampered him even as a theorist. ‘It is not easy for me to determine the causes of concord and discord in sound’, he admitted after finishing a long book on precisely that question, ‘for I did not use man-made musical instruments’ (*Speculum*, IV. xli. 1). One can pick up a hint of wistfulness when he writes that

¹ Jacobus Leodiensis, *Speculum musicae*, ed. Roger Bragard, *Corpus scriptorum de musica* 3 (Rome, 1955-73), I. i. 30 (here and hereafter referring to book, chapter, and section numbers). The following historical narrative is based on a close reading of *Speculum musicae*. The detailed arguments supporting it will be discussed elsewhere.

² *The Astrological Autobiography of a Medieval Philosopher: Henry Bate’s Nativitas (1280-81)*, ed. Carlos Steel et al., *Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*, Series 1, 17 (Leuven, 2018), 178-80 (lines 1286-1344).

those who want to be knowledgeable about music must be instructed very early. And boys must be trained in practical music from the beginning, in order that they know how to sing. For those who *wait too long* become awkward and crude at singing, even though they may be subtle at other things and be good scholars. (I. xvi. 4-5)

And yet it made no difference to his love of music. Even as an old man, decades after he first discovered music, he still got carried away remembering the styles and genres of his early youth,

such as songs of *organum* that are cast wholly or partly in mensural rhythm, like *organum purum* or *duplum* [...] also *conducti*, songs of such beauty, in which there is so much delight, that are so artful and so delectable, in two voices, or three, or even four; and also *hoketi*, likewise in two voices, or one voice doubled, or in three, or four. (VII. xlvi. 9-10)

By the time Jacobus wrote these lines the memories were bittersweet. For he had come too late a second time. It was his fate to outlive the glory days of the music he so loved, and witness their demise. It had all started in the late 1310s. Young and inexperienced singers took it upon themselves to change things around in musical composition and mensural notation. Jacobus called them the *moderni*. They prided themselves in having invented a ‘new art’. And they soon abandoned the established ways of singing, composing, and theorizing. The ‘old art’ was languishing in exile now, never to be heard and studied again.

Never, that is, unless he, Jacobus, would stand up and rescue it from oblivion:

Let it now please modern musicians to bring the old songs, and the old ways of singing and notating, back to the homeland of singers. May they be returned to use, and may the rational art that was banished along with its manner of singing flourish again. Almost violently were they cast out from the fellowship of singers. But what is violent must not be forever. (VII. xlvi. 10)

Jacobus decided to take a stand against the *moderni* in or around 1319-20. This is when he began to write a polemic treatise on the topic of mensural notation, the area in which he felt they had done the most damage. The objective was to take a long, hard look at what he regarded as their frivolous inventions, and to make them see the error of their ways. The topic of notation had to do with musical practice: it belonged to the realm of *practica musica*. What everyday musicians needed in that realm was straightforward rules and conventions that told them unambiguously what to perform and how. Jacobus thought of the *moderni* as musicians of this kind. He described them as ‘singers, or rather, notators and scribes’ (I. ii. 35). As such they had done what they ought not to do, which is to make up their own rules and conventions.

His treatise would not, for these reasons, require a background in music as a science, as the liberal art taught in the arts curriculum at the university. That was the realm called *speculativa musica*. Music as a science dealt mostly with the mathematics of pitch relations—exploring, for example, why the major semitone has a proportion of $2^{187}/_{2,048}$, or what proportion you will be left with when you reduce that semitone by the sliver that is called the Pythagorean comma: $531,441/_{524,288}$. Subject matter of this kind had no relevance to musical practice. And if the truth be told, the Jacobus of 1319-20 did not know a great deal about it (see below).

But then Jacobus suddenly changed his mind. He decided to write about *speculativa musica* after all, despite his unfamiliarity with it. He now conceived a *magnum opus*, an encyclopedic treatise in seven volumes, to be called *Speculum musicae* or *The Mirror of Music*. The polemic treatise he had been working on was to be put on hold. It eventually became the famous Book VII. It was to be preceded by six other volumes that he was now planning to write first. Books I-V would deal with *speculativa musica*, and Book VI with the church modes of plainchant. All this meant that the attack on the *moderni* would have to wait for many years before it could reach its target. And all those years the *moderni* would be free to continue on the path of radical innovation with impunity. Why would he be content to let that happen?

The reason, as we will see, is that Jacobus did not want the polemic treatise to circulate on its own. It had to be accompanied by the most exhaustive treatment of *speculativa musica* the world had ever seen, even if it offered no opportunity to attack the *moderni*. Jacobus himself tells us about the circumstances that led to his decision.

But when I began to speak against [the *moderni*] with regard to certain things, there happened to come up a matter about certain consonances on which they seemed to be mistaken. And I changed my plan and resolved to expand this musical undertaking more broadly. (I. i. 35)

Jacobus does not tell us *why* he changed his mind. There is a narrative hiatus at precisely the point where he might have told us, between the two sentences. Consider the paradox: if modern singers seemed to be mistaken about certain consonances (as he says before the hiatus), then why should it be *he* who changed plans and expanded his undertaking (as he says after it)? There is a causal step missing here. What was it that happened on that step?

There is a detail that may provide a clue. Jacobus says that he changed his mind after he had begun to *speak* against the modern singers. The Latin verb he uses, *loqui*, does not imply writing. He was literally *speaking*, using his vocal organ. That can only mean he confronted the *moderni* directly, in Paris, and in public, in the presence of musical and other scholars. This may well have been at one of those occasions he recalls at the very end of the *Speculum*. They were meetings of university masters at which old and new motets were heard and evaluated as to their relative merits (VII. xlvi. 9 and 11). Jacobus was there in person. This may have been the moment at which he finally ‘began to speak’.

I have seen, in a certain gathering of distinguished singers and lay scholars, that there were sung modern motets according to the manner of the *moderni*, as well as some old ones. The old motets were much more pleasing, also to laypersons, than the new, and the old manner [of singing] also more than the new. (VII. xlvi. 9, also 11)

If we imagine the moment of confrontation in a context like this, then Jacobus was certainly on home turf. He would have easily outclassed his opponents in the art of academic disputation. That, and his superior knowledge of logic and philosophy, was bound to leave them unable to respond. The ‘certain things’ to which Jacobus referred in the previous quotation were likely the new motets, of which most if not all must have been composed by Philippe de Vitry. Jacobus seems to have taken an instant dislike to them. And so, according to his later testimony, had everybody else.

But in the midst of the discussion there came up another matter. Jacobus says it happened ‘ex incidenti’, by happenstance. That is because it was not directly about the motets. It had to do rather with ‘certain consonances on which they seemed to be mistaken’. That means *speculativa musica*, as he confirms elsewhere (below). For the Jacobus of around 1319-20 that was not home turf. Yet it was to somebody else present, a precocious arts student of barely twenty years who would soon become famous as a natural scientist. His name was Johannes de Muris. He had only just completed the music treatise known today as the *Notitia artis musicae* of 1319. It came in two parts, the first devoted to *speculativa musica* and the second to *practica musica*—more specifically mensural notation. Muris would have known better than to mess with the razor-sharp Jacobus, whom he would describe only a few years later as the ‘invidus reprehensor’, the hateful castigator. Yet Jacobus could easily have decided to take him to task for his recent treatise. Its endorsement of the minim ♫ alone was certain to antagonize him, not to mention the notion of ‘imperfect time’. (He would sharply criticize Muris for these and other things in the *Speculum*.)

But back to the matter of the consonances on which the *moderni* ‘seemed to be mistaken’. *Seemed*, that is, but not necessarily in fact. It had to do with one chapter in the *Notitia*, in the part devoted to *speculativa musica*. There, Muris posited that the whole tone cannot be divided into equal semitones. The great authority Boethius had conclusively demonstrated this in his treatise *Musica*, which was the textbook on music as a science in the liberal arts curriculum. But Muris was bold enough to present a new demonstration of his own. It was faulty from beginning to end. Yet it is unlikely that Jacobus even got that far. He objected to the very premise of the demonstration, a premise he already knew to be wrong based on his own reading of music theory. For him there was no doubt: *of course* the Pythagorean whole tone can be divided into equal halves. He had said so himself in some of his earlier writings on music. Unaware of the demonstration of Boethius, he may have felt tempted to bring up the matter, probably in the course of a longer critique of Muris’s *Notitia* (II. lvi. 11-20).

This is where the tables turned. Jacobus had come too late once again, now for the third time. He knew too little about speculative music theory to debate someone like Muris who had carefully studied it. The problem, as he would admit years later, was that he had not paid proper attention when the question came up in the lectures on Boethius he attended as an undergraduate student. He *ought* to have known it. In an already charged atmosphere, heated perhaps by manifest indignation on his part, it is easy to imagine that Muris produced a copy of Boethius and had Jacobus read the demonstration there and then.

If this is how it happened, it must have been like his world collapsed. As a *magister in artibus*, Jacobus was licensed to teach the liberal arts, including music. Now he turned out to be unfamiliar with the very textbook he was responsible for teaching. Not that he would have been the only arts master who did not know his Boethius inside out. Many delegated the liberal arts to assistants while they worked full-time disputing Aristotle. But when the stakes are as high as they must have been here, humiliation is unbearable. It was guaranteed to make Jacobus the laughing stock of musical and academic Paris. No follow-up discussion needed. It was in any case too late for Jacobus to catch up on Boethius. This must be the event Jacobus seemed to have elided in the hiatus. The missing step almost writes itself:

But when I began to speak against [the *moderni*] with regard to certain things, there happened to come up a matter about certain consonances on which they seemed to be mistaken. [Yet they pointed out that it was I who was mistaken.] And I changed my plan and resolved to expand this musical undertaking more broadly.

Expansion was the only option. If Jacobus still wanted to defend the *antiqui* from the abuses of the *moderni*—which he did, more ardently than anything else—it was imperative that he demonstrate exceptional learning in all areas of music theory, not just mensural notation. He had to put himself on a rigorous course of study on Boethius, like a ‘fresh and diligent schoolboy’, as he put it (II. lvi. 16). Jacobus obviously came to that study too late. But then it could never be too late to learn his Boethius. The prospect of solid immersion, away from distraction, may well have made him decide to return to Liège—assuming there was a livelihood waiting for him there.

We do not know how long Jacobus worked on Boethius. But from what he says it sounds like it could have been years. In his own words, ‘this work held me up not a little, and delayed the present opus’ (II. lvi. 19). The time he spent learning *speculativa musica* makes us realize how little he knew about it before he took on the *moderni*. Jacobus may have been one of the most formidable intellects in the study of philosophy, but in advanced music theory he was a beginner.

It is not hard to see what came next. Jacobus would be too late again, now for the fourth time. While working away on *Speculum* Books I and II, and making disappointingly slow progress, he began to realize that the project had been ‘nimis tarde inceptum’, ‘begun *too late*’. It was the long time he had spent working on Boethius that was to blame. He began to complain about the *Speculum* as ‘this long, laborious work, too intensive, too extensive, too late begun’ (II. iii. 10), ‘filled with many cogitations’ (I. i. 42). The problem was that he was getting older and becoming physically weaker (VII. xlix. 9). His great anxiety was that he might never complete the work. It is this thought that keeps haunting him, especially in the second book. Now Jacobus found himself racing against the ultimate deadline, death itself.

In the end there would be a fifth time Jacobus was too late. True, he did complete the raw text. But only then did he realize the full weight of another labor still ahead. The *Speculum* was unedited. Haste had forced him to write without looking back. He had left many things to be reviewed, corrected, and edited at a later stage. And now it was too late. It would take forever to bring *Speculum musicae* into presentable shape. Jacobus had to resign himself to leaving the opus as it stood.

When I, looking at the whole opus, wanted to read it again and improve various things that I had written, [...] I found many things I wished I had not said, or said differently. Yet I said what occurred to me then, and how it seemed to me at the time. [...] For if I had always kept changing the things I had said, when would I have reached the end of this work? Perhaps never. (VII. xlix. 34)

The *Speculum* as Jacobus left it was not a neatly bound volume. More probably it looked like piles and piles of gatherings and fascicles, with notes sticking out on all sides. Nobody but he could make sense of it. Even a century later, the chief source Paris 7207 still contains parts that are all but impossible to navigate. A good example is the part we know best, *Speculum musicae*, Book VII. The main text consists of chapter-sized chunks that follow each other without numbers and titles to identify them. One would have to

read the first few lines of each chunk to learn what it was about. True, there is a table of contents at the beginning. It offers a list of the titles not provided in the main text. In fact it includes a title for a chapter that is not there, causing the numberings in the two modern editions to diverge from that point onward. The discrepancy is possible because the table of contents stops numbering the chapters after 7. As if that were not confusing enough, there is a cluster of several chapters that is inserted in the wrong place, and another cluster that was moved from its original place to where it patently does not belong.

These are errors Jacobus is unlikely to have made himself. It looks like other people ended up editing the *Speculum* as best they could. Many must have tried editing it while copying, like the Paris scribe before he gave up. But it was to no avail. Jacobus had meant to write the definitive *Summa summarum* of music, the music treatise to end all music treatises. But as the hour of death approached, he had to leave *Speculum musicae* as Bach would have to leave his *Art of Fugue*—as an *opus imperfectum*.

Still, the story of Jacobus has had a happy continuation. It was not too late for *Speculum musicae* to enjoy a significant afterlife in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In her contribution to this issue, Bonnie Blackburn demonstrates that Italian theorists held the work of Jacobus in high regard. They treated *Speculum musicae* as a source of great authority, precisely with respect to the speculative music theory on which he had worked so hard. My own contribution explores the question of Jacobus's name and identity, not as an end in itself, but as part of a broader historical picture in which it might be a natural fit.

At the beginning of *Speculum* Book VII, when he mounts his case against the *moderni* at long last, Jacobus admits he cannot do so without the kind consideration of his readers. And so he begins his final oration with a *captatio benevolentiae*, a 'capturing' of goodwill, which we may take to be addressed to us as well:

Having now completed the accessory part [that is, Books I-VI], let us proceed, as far as we are able to, with our primary intent. And here I need a benevolent reader. May he be forbearing of me, I pray, may he condescend to hear me. For I am alone (which saddens me), and many are they against whom I undertake this, my last, satirizing and polemical work. (VII. i. 8)

May this special issue help Jacobus find an ever-growing and ever more benevolent readership in our time.

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