

Rob C. Wegman. *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe, 1470–1530*.

New York: Routledge, 2005. x + 254 pp. index. append. bibl. \$95. ISBN: 0–415–97512–3.

The subject of Rob Wegman's book is not immediately clear from its title and certainly not from the timespan indicated. The latter is a period that covers — a bit generously at each end — what to historians of music not so long ago represented the High Renaissance in our art, epitomized in the career of Josquin des Prez (ca. 1450–1521): a point of arrival, not a crisis. This is not the place to reopen a debate over whether the conceptually-limited *Renaissance* is less acceptable than the feeble and, for the field of music, almost totally inappropriate *early modern*. But *crisis*; what does the author mean by this word? A précis of the book's content, present in laminated form on the book's back cover, vulgarizes and sensationalizes its argument. I shall try to do a bit better.

Let us begin with the writer's own words: "Something fundamental in European musical culture seems to have begun to happen, sometime in the 1470s: a shift in musical and religious sensibility, occurring not in the corridors of power, not on the writing desks of composers, but among people of all stations who cared about music and the church" (24). The shift, in Wegman's view, was from an attitude of approval or at least tolerance of polyphonic music, seasoned from time to time with negative criticism of perceived excesses — a later period would call them "modernisms" — in its style and exhibitionism in its performance, to one of sweeping and sharply worded disapproval of its very existence in anything more than the most severely chordal form. Wegman perceptively isolates what these critics disliked the most about polyphony: namely, its perceived rhythmic intricacy. He takes such criticisms as a real threat to the musical culture of the time, hence a real crisis.

Are these critiques to be taken as seriously as the author would have it? I am inclined to doubt it, but Wegman is a serious and thoughtful scholar whose views deserve respectful notice. He cites a number of passages criticizing contrapuntal music of the time, including perhaps not all he could find but certainly the most strongly worded ones. From them emerges the stance that sacred polyphony is an idle thing, pleasant to the senses but a distraction from serious religious devotion, a needless waste of time and money in the training of choirboys; secular polyphony encourages lasciviousness and is dangerously likely to infect the style and content of music intended for religious services.

Wegman admits that such attacks on polyphonic music were not new but

claims they became more numerous from the 1470s into the early sixteenth century. They came from worried local councilors, especially in Germanic areas, from a few Church dignitaries and secular magnates, and, most notably, from reform-minded humanists (Erasmus) and religious zealots (Savonarola). The author clearly thinks them important enough to define a whole era, but he wisely stops short of claiming that they consistently reflect generally held opinions.

Attacks generated defensive counterattacks which, as evidence that negative criticism was taken seriously, are cited and evaluated fairly (the book's third chapter, "The Defense of Music," is about the same length as the first two, devoted to the attack mode). Wegman's procedure in this book is in fact largely one of citation, preceded and followed by explanation, a rather dissertation-like approach that is doubtless useful in getting a book written but involves a good deal of repetition and does not always make for an exhilarating read.

Humanists when expressing negative views about music often referred to attacks made on the art and its practitioners (for exhibitionism, unbecoming lack of *gravitas*, effeminacy) in classical antiquity, attacks usually answered by encomiums of the art, drawn from the ample *laus musicae* tradition. An example is Castiglione's *Cortegiano*, briefly cited by Wegman. In my judgment these passages, usually given in dialogue, can be interesting when illustrated by examples drawn from the humanist's own time, but are at best only half-serious, more or less graceful rhetoric based on well-known material.

Much more serious are complaints about the overelaborate and worldly nature of polyphonic Church music, ranging from the gentle chiding of one Florentine Dominican, Giovanni Caroli, in 1479 to the fevered denunciations of another, Girolamo Savonarola, in the 1490s, and extending chronologically from John Wyclif to Martin Luther. Wegman devotes a generous amount of space to the musical views of the humanist reformer Erasmus; had he decided to do this with other important figures in what might be termed a pre-Reformation musical iconoclasm, he could have set about organizing his book in a satisfyingly thematic way.

As long as I am presuming to tell a distinguished professional colleague how he might have improved what he wrote I might go on to conclude by pointing out something he does not say anywhere in it. A prime reason, in my opinion, for the rise of complaints about elaborate polyphony ca. 1470 is that it was at this time that such music was being heard in many more places, especially more churches, in Northern Europe — and also in England, Italy and Spain — than it had been just a generation earlier. Hence, more schoolboys were spending more time learning to read and sing music, to the dismay of some monks, some Church elders, and some pedagogues. Whether this is seen as a crisis or more calmly taken to be the growing pains of the art is up to the viewer. Rob Wegman has given us a distinctive and carefully drawn view of his own musical Delft.

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