

K. Schiltz and B. J. Blackburn, eds., *Canons and Canonic Techniques, 14th–16th Centuries: Theory, Practice, and Reception History*, Leuven Studies in Musicology. Leuven: Peeters, 2007. 500 pp. ISBN 978-90-429-1681-4

Frank Dobbins

Volume 30, Number 2, 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1006383ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006383ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

1911-0146 (print)

1918-512X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dobbins, F. (2010). Review of [K. Schiltz and B. J. Blackburn, eds., *Canons and Canonic Techniques, 14th–16th Centuries: Theory, Practice, and Reception History*, Leuven Studies in Musicology. Leuven: Peeters, 2007. 500 pp. ISBN 978-90-429-1681-4]. *Intersections*, 30(2), 124–127.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1006383ar>

K. Schiltz and B. J. Blackburn, eds., *Canons and Canonic Techniques, 14th–16th Centuries: Theory, Practice, and Reception History*, Leuven Studies in Musicology. Leuven: Peeters, 2007. 500 pp. ISBN 978-90-429-1681-4.

In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the term *canon* signified a rule or key inscription provided by the composer for the interpreter to read in order to open one or more hidden melodies that follow in imitation of the melody provided in musical notation. The French theorist-composer Johannes Tinctoris, in his *Terminorum musicae deffinitionum* (1495) suggested it as a rule to enlighten obscurity: “Canon est regula voluntatem compositoris sub obscuritate quadam ostendens.” In his *Practica Musica* (1556), German theorist-composer Hermann Finck described it as an imaginary precept to indicate a hidden melody elicited from a given part: “Canon est imaginaria praeceptio, ex positis non positam cantilena partem eliciens.” This collection of essays admirably shows how canonic directions could be enigmatic and metaphorical, with puzzles and enigmas to challenge the reader or performer.

Many theoretical essays on the principles of composing counterpoint through imitation or voice exchange commonly called “fugue” (flight) followed in the wake of Fux’s *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725) and Cherubini’s teaching at the Paris Conservatoire between 1830 and 1835; these include studies by E. Prout (1890) and A. Gédalge (1901), with analyses and commentaries based mostly on J. S. Bach’s forty-eight “Fugues” in the *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*, written by authors like F. W. Marpurg (1753), C. H. Kitson (1909), G. Oldroyd (1948), and A. Mann (1953). Still, few pedagogic manuals or historical studies treat the stricter process of “canon.” As Katelijne Schiltz explains in her introduction, Denis Collins’s doctoral dissertation “Canon in Music Theory from c. 1550 to c. 1800” (Stanford University, 1992) had few sequels, aside from musicological dissertations by Virginia Newes on “Fuga” in fourteenth-century European polyphony and Peter Urquhart’s “Canon ... in Works by Josquin DesPrez and His Contemporaries.” These three authors and several other (mostly young) musicologists gathered at Louvain University in 2005 to redeem this situation, and the results of their deliberations are published here.

In the first chapter, “The Early Canon as Imitatio naturae,” Oliver Huck explores metaphorical canons known as *rota*, *rotulum*, *rondellus*, *radel*. These songs, based on voice exchange or the circular and inter-imitative use of melody described as rounds or wheels, were written by medieval theorists like Walter Odington or the scribes copying music composed by Oswald von Wolkenstein, the monk of Reading (author of “Sumer Is Icumen In”), Guillaume de Machaut, Antonio Zachara, Baude Cordier, and other anonymous musicians. Huck stresses the symbolic references explicit in the texts of these pieces and relates them to the Aristotelian principle of art imitating nature, as developed by contemporary authors like Marchetto da Padua.

In the second chapter, “Mensural Virtuosity in Non-Fugal Canons c.1350 to 1450,” Virginia Newes shows how original oral and improvisatory practices of voice exchange and round later gave way to more complex proportional

or mensuration canons, exploiting augmentation or diminution of rhythmic values or retrograde or mirror techniques of puntal duplication, which conceal the audible perception of the melodic subjects' fugal progress. She examines these practices as they appear in the poly-textual *ars subtilior* motets by Ciconia, in songs by Dufay, and in Mass movements by the composers of the English Old Hall Manuscript. These Mass movements also form the subject of Oliver Vogel's third chapter, which suggests that the adoption and modification of French "subtle art" practices by Thomas Pycard and Lionel Power was intended to demonstrate the ritual union of French and English musical techniques as political propaganda appropriate to the betrothal of King Henry V and Princess Catherine and to the recognition of English nationhood at the meetings of the Council of Constance following Henry V's victory at Agincourt in 1415.

In chapter 4, the young French musicologist Gilles Dulong explores the realistic imagery or mirrored representations of poems and their relationship with different forms of canonic writing in the ballades of Senleches, Cordier, and Olivier, as found in the manuscript Chantilly 564. Then Michael Eisenberg's essay considers reflections of the verse in Machaut's *rondeau* "Ma fin est mon commencement . . .," assimilating its palindromic musical canon to the semiology of St. John the Divine's summation of divine identity "Ego sum Alpha et Omega," as represented in contemporary iconography and the round dances (*chorea circa daedalum*) performed at Easter on the pavement labyrinth of the cathedral of Reims. The sixth essay by Adam Knight Gilbert turns to the sixteenth century and considers the fugal exploitation of the Guidonian hexachord, *ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la* in lieder, motets, and Masses by Heinrich Isaac and Ludwig Senfl within the philosophical context of the Harmony of the Spheres, the Goddess Fortune, the Golden Fleece, and the Virgin Mary as *scala regni coelestis*. The next essay by Eric Rice describes the canonic technique applied to the three contrapuntal voices added to the *cantus firmus* in an anonymous Mass based on the famous melody *L'Homme armé*, arguing that this Mass may well have been composed by Pierre de La Rue. Theodor Dumitrescu then skilfully probes *Salve radix*, an anonymous motet perhaps composed by the German composer known as "Sampson," copied on a circular stave in an illuminated manuscript probably compiled for King Henry VIII of England in 1516. The repetitive four-voice double canon is based on melodic motives arising from the stereotypical sixth-to-octave suspended cadence, but Dumitrescu argues that its apparently diatonic facade conceals an interpretation as a pitch spiral so arranged that, via successive additions of flats, the melody falls through a circle of fifths, descending from an opening G minor (Dorian mode transposed) to a concluding G double flat minor (i.e., F minor). This motet may thus be assimilated to a body of pieces identified by Edward Lowinsky as a "secret chromatic art" of the sixteenth-century Netherlanders.

Peter Urquart's essay considers examples of strict canon described by the composer-theorist Gioseffe Zarlino in 1558, as "*fuga*" such as we find later in the motets of William Byrd, suggesting that these pieces may have been modelled on motets that Zarlino's teacher Adrian Willaert published in 1559 in "*Musica*

nova.” In “Resonances of Josquin in Later *Inviolata* Settings,” Stephen Rice also shows how an older master’s five-voice model inspired canonic emulation in later eight-voice settings of the same motet variously attributed to Nicolas Gombert, Jean Mouton, or Philippe Verdelot, and in others by Willaert for seven voices, Pierre Certon for six voices, and Vicente Lusitano for eight voices.

Chapters 11 to 14 investigate the use of canon in sixteenth-century Germany: Mattias Lundberg follows the proposition of Johann Walter that “Choral mit fugen ist das best” (1564) in showing how canon was used in polyphonic Lutheran chorales in his ‘Canon and *cantus firmus* for the edification of the laity in early Lutheran music.’ Then Thomas Roeder examines a group of four-voice canons by Sixt Dietrich, Ulrich Braetel, and Benedictus Appenzeller, and others printed at Augsburg in 1549 that reflect on the city’s political and religious situation in the German Reformation.

In chapter 15 Bonnie Blackburn surveys two “treasure chests” of canonic antiquities collected in two treatises by the canon fanatics Hermann Finck (*Practica musica*, 1556) and Lodovico Zacconi (*Prattica di musica*, 1592); she relates these motets, Mass movements, or chansons by Ockeghem, Obrecht, Brumel, Josquin, Moulu, Festa, Senfl, P. de Villiers, and others to versions found in earlier sources. She also includes an Appendix of canons by old composers that were cited in Zacconi’s vast manuscript collection preserved in the Biblioteca Oliveriana in Pesaro.

An essay by Thomas Schmidt-Beste draws attention to the canonic inscriptions and techniques found in the papal chapel repertory of Masses, motets and Magnificats copied and therefore sung between 1563 and 1635; these collections of canons of Josquin, Mouton, Festa, Morales, and Palestrina represent a dying art, enlivened in some copies by humorous *tacet* remarks addressed by the scribes to individual singers. The conservative style of the Roman canons contrasts with a more modern approach of Don Lodovico Agostini, who in 1571–72 published six-voice *Enigmi musicali* and *Canones et Echo*, some as antiphonal dialogues with secular and even homoerotic texts, addressed to the canons of Ferrara Cathedral, as described in chapter 17 by Laurie Stras.

Chapters 18 and 19 are devoted to English exponents of the canonic art, with Andrew Johnstone re-evaluating and reconstructing Thomas Tallis’s “Service of Five Parts Two in One,” and Denis Collins reviewing George Waterhouse’s 1,163 canons based on the plainsong *Miserere*, which Thomas Morley’s *Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Music* (1597) described as “sweet springs ... sufficient to quench the thirst of the most insatiate scholar.”

The closing essays emerge from the theory and practice of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, turning to reception history, as Oliver Weiner sketches the “Discrepant Role of Canonic Techniques in Enlightened Writings about Music” based on eighteenth-century German theorists like Mattheson, Werkmeister, and Marpurg, but reaching through the process of mechanical replay to include the “Canon Machine in (Post) Modern Practice,” as observed in Pendereki’s *Canon* or Terre Thaemlitz’s electronic decomposition of Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un Faune*. Luciane Beduschi, student at the Sorbonne, describes the amusing riddle-canons that the young Austrian composer

Sigismund Neukomm wrote for the album of his friend Luigi Cherubini, who had long been a teacher of counterpoint at the Paris Conservatoire. In the final essay, Ronald Woodley shows how canonic reiteration seems to have been an obsession in the works of Steve Reich, since his “phase shifting” and tape-loop experiments of the 1960s until and beyond his composition of *Proverb* (1995), based on an Wittgenstein’s aphorism “Welch ein kleiner Gedanke doch ein ganze Leben fullen kann” (How small a thought it takes to fill a whole life).

Bravo to the editors for a goodly assembly of thoughtful essays on the art of counterpoint developing through two centuries, as reflected through the prism of distinguished musicologists. Such a collection of essays selected for a conference must necessarily suffer from a certain incongruity and lacuna; thus one may quibble about the under-representation of some wonderful music, like the first printed collection of Latin and French canons that have appeared on the *Chansons et Motetz* [sic] website of the OICRM at the University of Montreal; but most of the best of Renaissance canons are represented here with a critical reflection and insight that will enhance any reader’s understanding and enjoyment of this fascinating repertoire.

FRANK DOBBINS

Ryan McClelland. 2010. *Brahms and the Scherzo: Studies in Musical Narrative*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing. 320 pp. ISBN 978-0-75-466810-7.

What began in the 1980s as an exploration of the relationship between music and narrative has tentatively become a subdiscipline in current music scholarship. From Carolyn Abbate’s queries about how the music from Dukas’s *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* narrates, to Michael Klein’s discussion of expressive states in Chopin’s Fourth Ballade, scholars have examined the ways in which literary narratives can serve as an analogy for describing the dynamic processes we experience in music, calling into question not only whether music can narrate and signify, but also whether it has the capacity to convey a temporal past and present.¹ Taking their departure from literary models, scholars have also proposed new theoretical frameworks that seek to confront the particular challenges that the music medium presents.²

Ryan McClelland’s *Brahms and the Scherzo: Studies in Musical Narrative* contributes more broadly to this ongoing discussion on music and narrative by proposing that rhythm and metre play a primary role in motivic development, acting as “motivic agents whose journey is as central as the development

¹ Carolyn Abbate, “What the Sorcerer Said,” *19th-Century Music* 12, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 221–30; see also a later version of this article in *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 30–60; Michael Klein, “Chopin’s Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 23–55.

² See, for instance, Byron Almén’s *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).