

Publication Before Printing: How Did Flemish Polyphony Travel in Manuscript Culture?

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Before the introduction of commercial music printing, in 1501, musical works could only travel only in handwritten form, a type of transmission that necessarily involved the time-consuming labor of writing new copies note-by-note, and the inevitable accumulation of variants and errors across generations of copies.

The change of medium from manuscript to print was a momentous one, of course, and some of its implications are still waiting to be fully explored. The question of transmission is a case in point. In the sixteenth century, the incentive to distribute prints across Europe was obviously a financial one. But before that period, what would have been the incentive to transmit hand-written copies of music to other parts of the continent? Would these motives have been financial, too? Or were there other factors at work? If so, what could those factors have been?

When it comes to this, the overall picture of music transmission in manuscript culture turns out to be quite confusing. Some music turns up hundreds of miles from where it was composed, but other music seems to have been virtually unknown outside a circumscribed geographical region. For the music of fifteenth-century English and Netherlands composers, for example, we are heavily dependent on Italian sources. Netherlands composers continue to dominate those manuscripts after about 1470, but English music disappears altogether. Similarly, Spanish music tends to survive mostly in Iberian sources. Moreover, and somewhat disconcertingly, whenever a new set of manuscript fragments turns up, there is usually two or more works that we didn't know before—suggesting that a good proportion of the contemporary repertory may scarcely have travelled at all.

Style and taste alone cannot account for such seemingly erratic patterns. Peñalosa's works, for example, compare very favorably (to put it mildly) with those of Josquin's better-known Franco-Flemish contemporaries. Yet there is nothing to suggest that musicians outside of Spain knew a note of his music. Quality cannot have anything to do with it. My aim in this contribution is to explore this intriguing and in some ways perplexing picture, and to suggest interpretations under which it might make plausible historical sense.