

***Musica secundum imaginationem :***  
**Notation, complexity, and possibility in the *Ars subtilior***

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To write about the *Ars subtilior* is to enter a strange territory. The music itself is strange enough, but the musicological construction of the genre, being a relatively recent development and subject to a number of controversies regarding the fundamental nature of the phenomenon, further complicates intellectual access. Just as it is a characteristic of technological media to become apparent only when they malfunction, the problematic and contested nature of the *Ars subtilior* calls our attention to the very difficulties inherent in the process of historical and stylistic categorization. But rather than hoping to attain for the *Ars subtilior* the same transparent self-evidence of such music-historical designations as “Baroque” or “Classical,” we should take from it a cautionary reminder about the contingency and alterability of all such notions.

In the case of the *Ars subtilior*, we have what may be called an extreme case of historiographical intervention. This for three reasons: first, the period was long something of a *terra nullius* for music history, a sort of dead zone between the careers of Machaut and Dufay. Second, insofar as the period existed at all as an historical unit, it was portrayed as being dominated by a shallow and aesthetically suspect “mannerism.” Third, because of the stylistic oddity of the period, it was thought to have exerted little to no influence on subsequent musical development, and thus figured problematically for narrative (and often starkly teleological) models of music history. Thus the project of constructing the *Ars subtilior* as a distinct yet historically integrated period of European music required a more emphatic and proactive involvement on the part of musicology. Like all of so-called “Early Music”, the repertoire of this period is cut off from the canonic body of “great music” by what Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht calls “gaps in reception.”<sup>1</sup> Unlike most of the music now in heavy circulation on public radio and

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, “Alte und neue Musik”, in Carl Dahlhaus and Eggebrecht, *Was ist Musik* (Wilhelmshaven: Florian Noetzel Verlag, 1987), 101-111.

concert programming, music before around 1700 underwent a period in which it was largely forgotten and unperformed. In the case of the *Ars subtilior*, this lasted unusually long—until the middle of the twentieth century. Because of this, our intercourse with this music, whether in the aesthetic experience of listening or performance or the scholarly construction of its history, is subject to a unique set of difficulties.

One of the most obvious questions arising from a study of the *Ars subtilior* is, of course, just what is meant by its title. Ursula Günther, in her seminal 1963 article “Das Ende der ars nova,” proposed *Ars subtilior* as a replacement for the then-dominant designation of a “manneristic style,” popularized by Willi Apel.<sup>2</sup> As Günther points out, *subtilitas* was a buzzword in late fourteenth-century writings about music. As a label for the period, it emphasizes the continuity with the repertoire of the *ars nova*, in which the notion of *subtilitas* seems first to have emerged. But *subtilitas* itself remains ill-defined as a historical-aesthetic category. Often it seems to be equated wholesale with the complexity of the music, but this is overly facile. Thus an attempt to understand *subtilitas* and its role in the musical discourse of the late fourteenth century is apposite here.

In a first approach at historical grounding of *subtilitas*, let us examine its place in one of the most important musical writings of the fourteenth century (and the largest medieval music treatise to have been passed down to modernity), the *Speculum musicae* of Jacques of Liège. It may seem counterintuitive to draw upon Jacobus’ writings in an investigation of the conceptual background of the *Ars subtilior*, as the *Speculum musicae* has been portrayed as “a profoundly conservative work,” and much of Book VII is devoted to a critique of the *Ars nova*. Jacques would not seem to be the most impartial source of information here. But on the contrary, we may

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<sup>2</sup> *Die Musikforschung* Vol. 16 (1963), 105-121.

expect to find the most acute definitions of terms in polemical writings which are motivated by an opposition to the phenomenon in question. Recourse to Jacques' writings is justified more fundamentally by the fact that there is more than meets the eye to the apparent stodginess of Jacques' work.<sup>3</sup> Although he clearly took issue with many of the musical tendencies of his time, Jacques' thinking cannot be dismissed as reactionary, and is informed by the most current philosophical trends—including the thought of William of Ockham, a primary influence on Jacques' putative rival, Johannes de Muris. Jacques' treatment of *subtilitas*, though penned as early as 1330, may offer insight on the meaning of the term at the end of the century.

Under the heading “A Comparison of the Old Art of Mensurable Music with the New, as Regards Perfection and Imperfection,” Jacques presents the following criticism of the *ars nova*:

To some, perhaps, the modern art will seem more perfect than the ancient, because it seems more subtle and more difficult. It appears to be more subtle because it reaches out further and makes many additions to the old art, as is evident in the notes and measures and modes (for the word subtle is used for that which is more penetrating, reaching out further). [...] When it is said that the new art is more subtle than the ancient, it must be said also that, granting this, it is not therefore more perfect. For not all subtlety is proof of perfection, nor is greater subtlety proof of greater perfection....<sup>4</sup>

Without defining *subtilitas* in explicit technical terms, in this passage Jacques provides a number of clues suggesting what the term might have meant. (As an aside, it should be noted how his use of the term “perfection” encompasses both the evaluative sense of “optimally good, consummate” and the allusion to the rhythmic “perfection” of the musical tradition he is defending.) In the first sentence, subtlety and difficulty are presented side by side as (apparent) qualities of “the modern art,” supporting the common conflation of *subtilitas* and musical

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<sup>3</sup> See Dorit Tanay, *Noting Music, Marking Culture: The Intellectual Context of Rhythmic Notation, 1250-1400* (Holzgerlingen: Hänssler-Verlag, 1999) and Frank Hentschel, “Der Streit um die ‘ars nova’ – nur ein Scherz?“, *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 58/2 (2001), 110-130. Tanay's work presents a thoroughgoing reevaluation of the *Ars subtilior*, to which I will have recourse later in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques of Liège, *Speculum musicae*, Book VII, in Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998), 271-72.

complexity, mentioned above. The “many additions” of the *Ars nova*—“notes, measures, and modes”—presumably refers to the notational innovations associated with the practice, such as duple subdivision of a rhythmic value. The parenthetical clause at the end of the second sentence is at once the most direct and tantalizingly vague statement on the matter, and calls to mind the gnomic etymologies of Isidore of Seville, but as it lacks subsequent clarification, this clause is of little help. Finally, Jacques takes pains to distinguish subtlety from perfection, suggesting that the two are often falsely conflated in contemporary writings. Subtlety is defined in opposition to perfection, the latter being understood presumably in the sense of the optimally good. In sum, from this passage we can glean that *subtilitas* for Jacques is associated, but not identical, with difficulty, involves a proliferation of notational forms, and detracts from musical perfection, with which it is often mistaken.

A later passage in the treatise more directly juxtaposes the values of the *Ars antiqua* with the deficiencies of the new practice:

The teachings of the old law of measured music are few and clear compared with those of the new. [...] The old art seems more perfect, more rational, more seemly, freer, simpler, and plainer. Have not the moderns rendered music lascivious beyond measure, when originally it was discreet, seemly, simple, masculine, and chaste?<sup>5</sup>

Again, Jacques’ claims seem to support an understanding of modern *subtilitas* as a kind of complexity or over-sophistication. But with one important detail: it is a complexity of *notation*. The distinction between the notation of music and its sounding form is certainly a problematic one, all the more so because this distinction is rarely made clear in the writings of theorists such as Jacques of Liège. But to speak of the “old law of measured music” as being “clear” would seem to refer to the relationship between notated music and performance, to an ideal fidelity between what is written and what is played or sung. This conclusion is reinforced by a passage

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<sup>5</sup> Strunk, 275, 277.

from *De modo componendi*, a treatise written by Egidius de Murino around the middle of the fourteenth century. This passage is also remarkable in demonstrating through its almost mantra-like incantation of various grammatical forms of *subtilitas* the contemporary fascination with the concept:

There you can impart another subtlety, and that is, if you wish, you can use the perfect modus.... It must be known that, through the aforesaid tenors, there can be discovered many more of another type, and other tenors can be deduced through the path of subtlety, and thus it is not necessary to compose contratenors. The many of them which can be discovered, when the cantor would be subtle, can make many other tenors of them.... If you desire to have more subtlety than is contained in this volume, then study music more diligently.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the etymology of the word supports the reading of *subtilitas* as an essentially textual quality: the term originally means something like “finely woven.”<sup>7</sup> This all suggest that *subtilitas* is something writerly, a quality imparted by the composer to the notated inscription of his music. To be sure, this is not surprising, as the documentary evidence at hand concerns itself much more with matters of *poiesis* than with the experience of the listener. Likewise, even if *subtilitas* is to be conceived as a property of the musical text, it is likely that it would have a correlate in performance and listening. Again, the point is not to base our understanding of *subtilitas* on an untenably rigid dichotomy between written and sounding music; instead, as we will elaborate later, it has to do with the very relationship between these two.

Another of the fundamental questions concerning the *Ars subtilior* is how to explain the complex and often bizarre notational innovations that characterize much of the music of the period. In the middle of the twentieth century, Willi Apel popularized the idea that the music of the *Ars subtilior* was an example of notational technology run amok. Apel suggested that

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Philip Schreuer, ed., *Tractatus figurarum [Treatise on Noteshapes]* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Walter W. Skeat, *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* (Ware: Wordsworth Reference, 1993), 501: “The original sense of *subtilis* was ‘finely woven;’ from L. *sub*, under, closely, and *tēla*, a web, thing woven; put for *tex-la*, from *texere*, to weave.”

composers of the period became fascinated with abstract possibilities of notation far removed from the realities and constraints of performance practice. This interpretation explains Apel's derogatory coinage of the "mannerist style" to describe this repertoire:

Toward the end of the fourteenth century the evolution of notation led to a phase of unparalleled complication and intricacy. Musicians, no longer satisfied with the rhythmic subtleties of the *Ars Nova*, began to indulge in complicated rhythmic tricks and in the invention of highly involved methods of notating them. It is in this period that musical notation far exceeds its natural limitations as a servant to music, but rather become its master, a goal in itself and an arena for intellectual sophistries. [...] Frequently these elaborations of notation are mere tricks of affected erudition, since the effects desired could be represented in much simpler ways. In other cases they are indispensable, leading then to a product of such rhythmic complexity that the modern reader may doubt whether an actual performance was ever possible or intended.<sup>8</sup>

Against this interpretation, Anne Stone has argued compellingly that the unprecedented complexity of *Ars subtilior* notation has precisely the opposite explanation. Instead of a composerly experiment in abstract excogitation, Stone sees it as an attempt to render within the constraints of notation the lively improvisational practices of contemporary musicians:

The labels that we apply to this repertory, such as "mannerist," or more recently "*ars subtilior*," derive from our assumption that writing was central to its creation. It is possible, in fact, that the visual impact of the notation is so powerful that it has drawn our attention away from what was surely its primary function: to represent sounding music. [...] Does the complex notation that survives in manuscripts constitute an attempt outside the arena of performance to invent increasingly complicated rhythms that were then to be performed? Or is it an attempt to record rhythms whose first incarnation was in performance, not in writing?<sup>9</sup>

The connection proposed by Stone between the notational innovations of the *Ars subtilior* and contemporary performance practice and improvisation seems to be all but undeniable, and receives considerable support from several passages from fourteenth-century theoretical treatises. The anonymous author of the *Tractatus figurarum*, written in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, writes tellingly that "it would be very incongruous for that which can be performed not to be able to be written."<sup>10</sup> Much earlier in the century, Johannes de Muris had written in his

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<sup>8</sup> Willi Apel, *The Notation of Polyphonic Music 900-1600* (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1953), 403.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Stone, "Glimpses of the Unwritten Tradition in Some *Ars Subtilior* Works," *Musica Disciplina* 50 (1996), 62.

<sup>10</sup> Schreuer, 73; this passage is also quoted and discussed in Stone, 74.

*Notitia artis musicae* (1321) that “although signs are arbitrary, yet, since all things should somehow be in mutual agreement, musicians ought to devise signs more appropriate to the sounds signified.”<sup>11</sup> Muris thus adumbrates an understanding of notation that can be called, with a bit of license, “phonographic”: it conceives of notation not as a set of directions for performance originating in the composer’s mind, but rather as a means of documenting a musical performance. As Stone points out, this duality has been treated by twentieth-century musicologists in terms of an opposition between descriptive and prescriptive forms of notation.<sup>12</sup> If Stone is correct, the problem of performability is beside the point. Notation in the *Ars subtilior* is concerned simply with recording musical events as accurately as possible, since, as de Muris states, “whatever can be sung can be written down, so long as the notes are whole and proper.”<sup>13</sup>

So far, we have traced two conceptual trajectories which would seem diametrically opposed. On the one hand, we have argued for an understanding of *subtilitas* as a quality “written into” musical notation and originating mostly or entirely in the act of compositional facture. *Subtilitas* thus emerges as a speculative venture far removed from the exigencies of musical practice. On the other hand, we have been confronted with equally convincing evidence that the notational complexity in question resulted ultimately from the attempt to capture live music by means of a limited graphic technology.

But perhaps these two apparently divergent perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, there is precedent for this possibility in the theoretical writings of the fourteenth century. While Johannes de Muris argues that “whatever can be sung can be written down,” he also speculated on the possibility of *equipollentia* (what we would now call hemiola) and syncopation (though he

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<sup>11</sup> Strunk, 264.

<sup>12</sup> Stone, 63. The descriptive/prescriptive distinction comes from Charles Seeger.

<sup>13</sup> Strunk, 268.

didn't call it that), at a time when neither of these phenomena were employed—to the best of our knowledge—in notated music. That de Muris' ruminations were theoretically inspired is further suggested by his claim that “There are...many other new things latent in music which will appear altogether plausible to posterity.”<sup>14</sup> As Tanay notes, the tension between empirical, reductive tendencies and speculative imaginings was widespread in fourteenth-century thought, and stems from the pervasive influence of the English philosopher William of Ockham (1288-1347). Tanay suggests that Ockham's so-called “razor” was an epistemological principle designed to coordinate human thought more closely with empirical reality, while his theology was based on the idea of *potential Dei absoluta*, which declared the contingency of this world and urged the exhaustive, speculative mapping of all logical possibilities within given systems of thought. Thus, coexisting in fourteenth-century thought is the radical reduction of philosophical categories under the banner of nominalism and the proliferation of potential scenarios devised *secundum imaginationem* (in accordance with the imagination).<sup>15</sup>

In the *Speculum musicae*, Jacques of Liège ominously declares of the moderns that “they also say that it is not necessary for art always to follow nature.”<sup>16</sup> It seems that nature for Jacques means a relationship of commensurability between the signs of music and sounding reality, and further, between the structures of music and those of the world as a whole—thus Jacques' nonchalant conflation of “perfection” as a rhythmic unit and “perfection” as an aesthetic or even theological value. In comparison to the new art, Jacques complains, “the old art seems more perfect, more rational, more seemly, simpler, and plainer.”<sup>17</sup> For the composers of the *Ars subtilior*, however, nature is the enemy: as Guido puts it in his ballade “Or voit tout en aventure,”

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<sup>14</sup> Strunk, 268.

<sup>15</sup> Tanay, 197.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques of Liège, quoted in Apel, 339.

<sup>17</sup> Strunk, 277.

“We are acting against Nature (“Nos faysoms contre Nature”). Indeed, it is part of the very weirdness of this repertoire that one cannot be sure whether Guido is celebrating this antinomian impulse or ironically lampooning it: “Now everything is uncontrolled, / Since I have thus to follow / The new fashion / Which is bound to displease everyone / For it is quite the contrary / Of good art, which is perfect: / Indeed, this is not well done [Certes, ce n’est pas bien fayt]!”

What is new about the notation of the *Ars subtilior* is not merely the arsenal of symbols at the disposal of the composer, but the very network of potential signification created in the act of writing a piece of music. The direct, intuitive relationship between notes and sounds praised by Jacques as constituting the elegance of the *Ars antiqua*, remained more or less in place, in spite of Jacques’ laments, through the *Ars nova*. But in the *Ars subtilior*, the role of notation seems to have been deliberately muddled. What does it mean to notate passages in such a way that the same musical result could be attained through simpler notation? For critics such as Apel, this was the mark of the “mannerist style,” and could be explained only as a sort of trickery designed to conceal a lack of musical substance. Likewise, for Heinrich Besseler, writing in 1931, the music of the late fourteenth century “betrays in all respects the end of an era whose creative power is on the wane.”<sup>18</sup> No doubt the influence of Johann Huizinga’s epochal text *The Waning of the Middle Ages* helped to inspire such interpretations. The idea that the *Ars subtilior* is essentially an aesthetic manifestation of a profound cultural decadence engendered by such events as the Black Death and the Papal Schism has gone largely uncontested in musicological accounts of the period. But as Tanay argues, this theory is as superficial as it is outwardly plausible. The music of the *Ars subtilior* was not geographically limited to the southern French courts in which the

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<sup>18</sup> Heinrich Besseler, *Musik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (Potsdam, 1931), 143. Quoted in Jehoash Hirshberg, *The Music of the Late Fourteenth Century: A Study In Musical Style* (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1971), 2.

nobility led such fabulously dissolute lifestyles, and even in the case of the music from these circles, the ostensible parallel between fatalistic extravagance in social life and refined complexity in music is hardly an intuitive one. Doesn't it make just as much sense to expect that people living in unusually troubled times would take refuge in a music of serene simplicity?<sup>19</sup> As an alternative, Tanay proposes to understand the music of the *Ars subtilior* in the context of contemporary scientific and philosophical thought. Although Tanay counterposes this to a "socio-historical" approach, I would argue that her interpretation in fact involves a salutary widening of the scope of music's social and cultural contexts.

Tanay relates the phenomenon of compositional *subtilitas* to the late fourteenth-century vogue for logical sophisms, meaning "proposition[s] whose logical status...is usually different from what it appears to be." This fundamental ambiguity between proposition and conclusion, or sign and signified, is for Tanay central to the meaning of *subtilitas*:

Rhythmic intricacies are literally sophistic. In other words, the notions of subtlety are not synonyms for rhythmic complexity, but are instead inherent properties of this complexity. [...] In the *Ars subtilior*, sophistication is embodied in a series of disjunctions between the written and the heard, between expectation and realization, or between apparent simplicity and apparent complexity.<sup>20</sup>

In logic, sophisms are used to train the mind: it is a test of the student's mental acuity to draw the proper and often outrageously counterintuitive conclusions from a given proposition. In music, however, other meanings are possible. Günther, for example, discusses a ballade by Jacob de Senleches (*Je me merveil—J'ay pluseurs fois*) whose text complains of musical imitators and epigones. The refrain of the song features a canon in the two upper voices which sounds the same, but is notated differently—a brilliant contrivance, Günther surmises, through which the composer musically depicts a copycat who attempts to conceal his forgery with fancy notational

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<sup>19</sup> Tanay, 209 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Tanay, 227.

artifice.<sup>21</sup> To complain that these pieces could be notated in a simpler way, then, is to miss the point. The criticisms of *Ars subtilior* notation made by Apel and others take for granted a model of notational efficiency that is foreign to the period in which these pieces were written. Carl Dahlhaus makes this point with typical eloquence:

The criterion of audibility, the exhaustive realization [of notated music] in perception, is no natural law of aesthetics, but rather a postulate of historically limited applicability. To rigorously confine the notion of music or “actual” music to what is perceptible is to contract historical reality for the sake of a dogma that emerged no earlier than the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup>

The difficulty in making sense of the notational strangeness of the *Ars subtilior* stems from the assumption that the purpose of notation is to refer as directly and transparently as possible to certain musical results. Notation is conceived as an ideally transparent medium whose graphic elements have no semantic value in and of themselves. From such a perspective, the notational conceits of the *Ars subtilior* can appear only as examples of an imaginative extravagance that are extraneous to the essence of the music being notated.

Another example: might the circular visual form of Baude Cordier’s *Tout par compas* enable a different hearing of the piece? Circularity is a strictly visual concept; there is no circularity in time, according to the linear, modern conception of the matter. For the late medieval eye and ear, however, the visual form of the notation and the canonic or recursive features of the music were likely perceived as two manifestations of the same thing. For the modern listener, the point is not so much to strive for this prelapsarian unity of sense and understanding, as to allow the influence of the visual to impinge on our auditory impressions in such a way as to challenge the ingrained patterns of “absolute” listening. Why shouldn’t the eye be able to convince the ear to apprehend an otherwise inaccessible roundness? What we must call a “synaesthetic” impulse can be seen at work in other pieces as well. In Jacob de Senleches’

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<sup>21</sup> Ursula Günther, “Die Ars subtilior”, *Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft* Vol. 11 (1991), 282-83.

<sup>22</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Analyse und Werturteil* (Mainz: B. Schott’s Söhne, 1970), 63.

*La harpe de melodie*, for example, the graphic form of the notation *shows* us what we *hear*; the lyrics of the song contribute to the confluence of senses: “La harpe de melodie / Faite sanz merancholie / Par plaisir / Doit bien chascun resjoir / Pour l’armonie / Oir, sonner, et veir.”

This symbolic linkage of the ostensibly disjunct, this suggestive surplus of the visual medium, which, instead of exhausting itself in the act of reference, extends its tendrils into other domains of sense and experience, is according to Umberto Eco an aesthetic hallmark of the later Middle Ages. Eco argues that with the emergence of a new proto-scientific worldview, the symbolic connections once seen in nature became gradually attenuated. The world of nature was understood more and more in terms of causal relations, rather than affinities and sympathies. The products of art, in order to compensate for this loss, begin to take on a quality of “second nature”: they now encompass the rich webs of allegorical meanings that once suffused the natural world:

The allegorical content of the works of man gradually came to be felt more keenly than that of nature.... The allegory of nature became weaker, more ambiguous, more conventional; while art, even the figurative arts, came to be thought of as quite intentionally endowed with several meanings. The allegorical interpretation of the world lost ground, but poetic allegory remained familiar and deep-rooted. Progressive opinion in the thirteenth century firmly renounced the allegory of nature, but gave birth to the very prototype of allegorical poems, the *Roman de la rose*. And Classical poetry, too, was always read for allegorical meanings. [...] Attributing allegorical meanings to art meant regarding it in the same light as nature, as a living storehouse of images. [...] Nature was seen as a vast allegorical representation of the supernatural, and art was put on the same level.<sup>23</sup>

Aquinas wrote that “it is the mark of the poetic arts to indicate the truth of things by means of invented similitudes.”<sup>24</sup> The music of the *Ars subtilior* recoups the loss of sonorous vitality that marks notation by mobilizing the meaningful ambiguities lurking in the interstices between sign and signified. A notation that strives for the most transparent relationship between what is written and what is heard forfeits a great source of meaning; it is like a language without

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<sup>23</sup> Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 60, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Eco, 60.

figurative expression. Thus it is surely no coincidence that the musicological reevaluation of the *Ars subtilior* took wing in the 1950s and '60s, a period in which composers had re-engaged with the multi-sensory expressive possibilities of musical notation. The introduction of this 600-year-old repertoire into contemporary consciousness has thus no doubt helped fuel the radical reconceptions of Western music taking place in the second half of the twentieth century.



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