

School of Music

Creative Collaboratorium Seminar 2016

Thursday 9 June 2016 1.00pm – 2.00pm
Zelman Cowen Building (51): Nickson Room

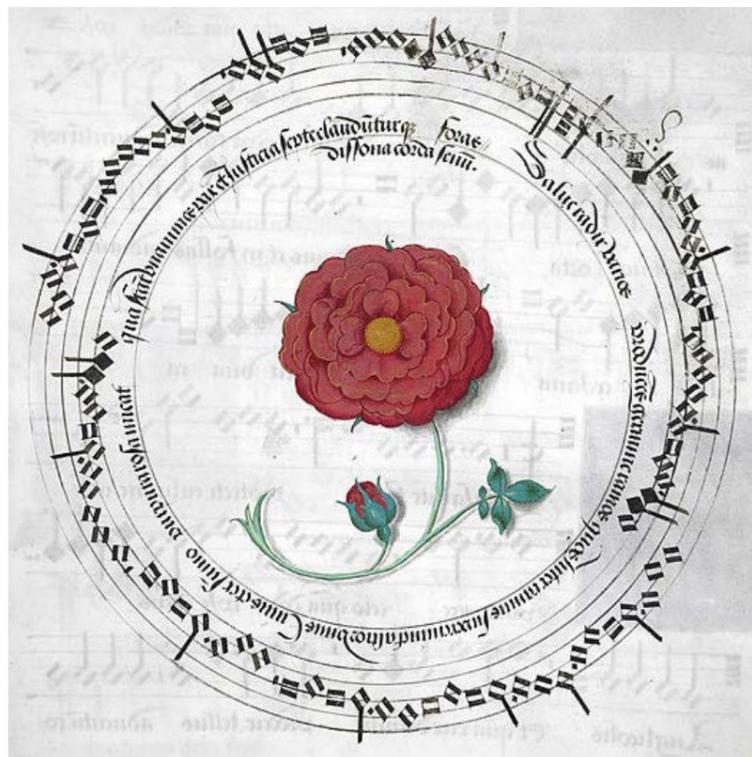
Canons, Counterpoint and Computers: Steps towards a new history of musical composition in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance

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London, British Library, Royal Ms. 11 E xi, ff.2v-3. Creative Commons.

In her influential *The Book of Memory*, Mary Carruthers argues that memory played a fundamental role in supporting thought and creativity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Buoyed by the work of Jack Goody and Walter Ong, Anna Maria Busse Berger has recently extended Carruthers' ideas to frame a new understanding of the role of orality in musical composition in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. As Jessie Ann Owens has shown, the near absence of musical scores—unlike part music—in this period reveals that composers worked out music in their minds before writing down each part. Similarly, Philippe Canguilhem and others have concluded that musicians extemporised music akin to surviving examples of written musical composition. How did they do it? With the advent of counterpoint c.1330, memory seems to have played a role in its teaching and practice. Rote learning of lists of contrapuntal progressions was standard, although this itself cannot furnish a complete understanding of polyphonic music composition. Around the same time, composers began to create melodies from which musicians could generate one or more additional "unwritten", contrapuntal voices in a polyphonic composition. An unaltered melody could follow after a predetermined time interval, or it could be systematically altered melodically and/or rhythmically. Known today as canon, composers embraced and explored these techniques so that by the early sixteenth century they had exhausted just about every possibility for transforming an original melody. Paradoxically, manuals on the art of canon only appeared in the mid sixteenth century and seldom encompassed the wealth of techniques explored in the music of the previous two centuries. In this paper, after reviewing some examples that illustrate the role of memory in realising canons, we demonstrate how we are using computers to identify repeated musical structures in canons, and discuss how these and future findings might shed light the role of memory in musical creativity in early European culture.

Everyone welcome