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Bologna Q15: The Making and Remaking of a Musical Manuscript
(review)

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MUSIC REVIEWS

EDITED BY JOHN WAGSTAFF



Bologna Q15: The Making and Remaking of a Musical Manuscript. Introductory Study and Facsimile Edition by Margaret Bent. (Ars nova. Nuova serie, 2.) Lucca: LIM Editrice, 2008. 2 vols. [Vol. 1: Pref. & acknowledgements, p. iii–iv; table of contents, p. v–vi; list of illus. and tables, p. vii; table of numberings and foliations, p. viii–xviii; abbrevs., p. xix–xxi; introductory study, p. 1–292; appendix A: plates, p. 293–312; appendix B: editions, p. 313–35; list of ms. sources, p. 337–41; bibliog., p. 343–56; index of composers, p. 357–67; index of texts, p. 369–83. Vol. 2: Facsimile, 342 fols. ISBN 978-88-7096-513-1 (set). €1,000,00]

The manuscript Bologna Q15 (Bologna, Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica, *olim* Civico museo bibliografico musicale, ms. Q15) is one of the most important and often-discussed manuscripts of Medieval and Renaissance music. Yet in the same way that in the context of the larger musical world we can still call Haydn an underappreciated composer, within the larger musicological community, Bologna Q15 remains an undervalued source. Its pages chronicle nearly all the important developments in sacred (and occasionally secular) music of the early Renaissance, from the decline of Ars Nova styles to the rise of the integrated Mass cycle, from the emergence of English composers to the revitalization of the motet and hymn. It is the unique source for numerous works, including many early-fifteenth-century Italian motets and Mass movements. Clearly, this is a source that deserves and rewards close study. Yet while many less important sources have appeared in facsimile, access to Q15 up to now has remained limited.

The size of the manuscript certainly must have daunted would-be publishers. At almost seven hundred pages, Q15 towers over most polyphonic manuscripts of its time. Its close temporal cousin, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Canon. Misc. 213 (published in facsimile by University of Chicago Press as volume 1 of its Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Music in Facsimile series, 1995), is less than half its size. Most of the

other manuscripts in LIM's Ars nova series run from about thirty-five to one hundred pages. Even the majestic Squarcialupi Codex has fewer leaves. However, it was not Q15's length as measured in folios alone that could doom such a project. Its complexities—such as four different numbering systems, repertorial layers that blur into each other, and initial letters recycled from earlier stages of the manuscript—demand an introduction far more accurate, detailed, and convincing than just about any heretofore made.

Margaret Bent's study of Bologna Q15 more than meets this challenge. It sets an extremely high bar for any Renaissance manuscript study. If it seemed impossible to attend a Medieval or Renaissance music conference last year that did not include a special ceremony in praise of Bent's achievement, there is good reason. There may be other introductions to facsimiles that approach the level of detail that Bent brings to her thirty-year-long study of Q15, but none have retained such a focus on making every watermark and every reused initial letter tell a story about the manuscript and its owners.

Bologna Q15 is one of three sources (with Oxford 213 and Bologna, Biblioteca universitaria, ms. 2216) that document a shift in the center of Italian music making and manuscript production away from central Italy and toward the Veneto. It is among the later sources copied using the

system of black mensural notation descended from the ideas of Franco of Cologne, a system that over the course of the fifteenth century gave way to the “white notes” more closely related to modern notation. Bent’s research places the early stage of Q15 in Padua ca. 1420–25, with later sections compiled by the same scribe in Vicenza in the early 1430s. Unfortunately, the “smoking gun” of her dating—an erased name, later copied over, that only would have been written after 1433—is not visible even on these photographs, but has been verified by at least one other musicologist.

The modern history, restorations, and information about the structure of the manuscript are given in dazzling detail. The sense of being there querying the source for everything it could say about its chronology and purpose is so clear that reading it feels like being with the disbound manuscript itself. The most unexpected source of joy comes from the discussion and identification of initial letters in Q15. Ninety-two of the capital letters in Q15 were cut from a previous source, most likely an earlier version of Q15, and pasted in appropriate places in the later version. During restoration, many of the letters were lifted, and had their backs photographed before being reattached (those that could not be lifted were photographed on a light box, then digitally enhanced). On the back side of the cutout letters are found the last few notes of the first line of whatever piece was on the reverse. From this scant evidence, Bent has been able to identify twenty-six of the pieces, reconstructing an early stage for the manuscript that no longer exists; a stage where Italian songs and Magnificats were present. Remarkably, all but one of these identified pieces are found elsewhere in the manuscript, and were recopied to change the text underlay, the order of works, or for other reasons still unknown to us.

Since Bent has published transcriptions of nearly every cutout letter, I am convinced that other scholars will now be able to identify many other works. Pasted initial No. 46 is probably a setting of *Verbum caro factum est*, though different from the one by Lymburgia found later in the manuscript (fols. A307v/8r). Many settings of this text stem from this time (e.g., Oxford 213;

Venice, Biblioteca nazionale marciana, Italiano cl. IX.145 = ms. 7554; and Avezzano, Archivio diocesano della Marsica, Busta n. 5, fasc. 25) but none of them use the same music for the upper voice, so it is not surprising that this setting would not be recopied into a later stage of Q15. Bent’s work on the letters will inspire searches for years to come.

The larger questions of why someone would make a book such as Q15, or who would have sung from it, are largely left out of the introduction. This is not a complete loss, because Bent has already published much about the cultural context of this manuscript, and indeed of all music in early-fifteenth-century Italy. Further, she promises much more information soon in a separate monograph study. Still, even a short summary of her findings, or inclusion of a reprint of her most important previous article on the topic would have been of great help in the meantime. Many users will lack access to the *Proceedings of the British Academy* or *Quattrocento vicentino*, where her earlier works are found.

Projects that take decades to gestate are usually identifiable by their reliance on outdated bibliography and omission of recent contributions, especially from younger scholars. Thankfully, Bent’s introduction breaks this rule. Recently discovered fragments, such as Siena, Archivio di Stato, Fondo del Vicariato, Ravi 3 (1568–9), and the unpublished London, British Library, Add. ms. 82959, are noted in the catalog. And while it is not surprising that Bent was aware of Michael Alan Anderson’s excellent new dissertation that includes a reexamination of the Q15 hymns (“Symbols of Saints: Theology, Ritual, and Kinship in Music for John the Baptist and St. Anne, 1175–1563” [Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2008]), it is a delight to see the influence of less well-known recent publications in nonmusical sources, such as Małgorzata Dąbrowska’s 2005 discussion of Du Fay’s *Vasilissa ergo gaude* (“‘Vasilissa ergo gaude . . .’: Cleopa Malatesta’s Byzantine CV,” *Byzantinoslavica* 63 [2005]: 217–24), or Thomas Izbicki’s 2000 biographical sketch of the dedicatee of *O felix flos Florencia/Gaude felix Dominice* (“Reform and Obedience in Four Conciliar Sermons by Leonardo Dati, O.P.,” in *Reform and*

Renewal in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Studies in Honor of Louis Pascoe, S.J., ed. Thomas Izbicki and Christopher M. Bellitto [Leiden: Brill, 2000], 174–92).

In addition to a summary inventory of the manuscript and a catalog of compositions in manuscript order, Bent also provides extremely useful indexes of pieces by composer and by incipit. I wish that, in the sea of numbers in each of these indexes, Bent had chosen to distinguish graphically the De Van numbers (perhaps in bold), since these are the numbers by which her main catalog is ordered. A consistent use of either the Roman or Arabic foliations, obviously only when discussing items not intimately tied to layout and ordering, would also have helped readers better get to know this source or its makeup. Nonetheless, her inclusion of useful scholarly apparatus goes far beyond other facsimiles today.

One of the most important projects that the new facsimile allows is the scrutiny of Bent's central thesis that Bologna Q15 is the work of a single scribe whose habits changed over the fifteen or so years that he labored to produce the three distinct stages of the book. The arguments in favor of her theory are detailed and nuanced. She marshals evidence in the form of slight changes of letterforms within a stage to show the recurrence of these letterforms in later stages. Her argument also encompasses similarities of musical hand and a chronological gap between stages that would allow for development of the scribe's writing.

These findings deserve close analysis if only because they change the way we view scribal hands throughout all manuscripts in the period. Now no one can say that two similar but slightly different hands are definitely the work of two different scribes without confronting the possibility that one hand could be an evolution of the first. But is the argument for a single scribe in Q15 airtight? At one point we read, "when the scribe resumed work on stage II after a hiatus of about five years, his script has undergone some changes. . . . He must meanwhile have been writing elsewhere." Based on the same evidence could not another scholar write, "a new scribe was brought in to continue work on the manuscript, choosing a similar hand to the original scribe, but with some obvious changes"? The dating of the work and its number of scribes

are intertwined. Bent notes that the first stage of the manuscript could not have been completed before 1423–24 and that the second stage could not have been begun much before 1433 (both on the basis of references to people mentioned in motets). She then reasons that, "since the stage-I manuscript was bound, and the scribe's handwriting was evolving elsewhere during the years when Q15 was presumably in use . . . it makes sense to set the end of stage I a little later than the date of its last composition," i.e., 1424–25 (p. 20). The need for a gap of several years to allow the scribe's hand to change affects the perception of stylistic chronology ("the presence of a piece in the stage-I manuscript [permits] an earlier dating than might otherwise have been suspected. Du Fay's paired Gloria and Credo ##107–8 and his *Vergene bella* are among the most striking cases," p. 113) and the interpretation of other manuscripts ("The later-added date 1426 in [Oxford 213] for Guillaume Legrant's Credo #51 cannot be a date of composition; it was copied in Q15 early in stage I, probably about four years earlier than this date," p. 20). Raising these doubts does not mean I consider the single-scribe explanation wrong. In fact, it remains the most compelling and well-developed theory available. But if this new facsimile encourages others to look carefully at the evidence and to advance (and perhaps then abandon) alternate conclusions, musicology as a whole can only stand to gain.

The use of new technologies in making the facsimile and commentary are exceptional, and their importance cannot be overstated. It would be easy to call the digital photographer, database manager, and computerized image restorer Julia Craig-McFeely the "unsung hero" of the volume, except that Bent draws liberal attention to her and praises her indispensable role. The quality of the photographs (and LIM's high printing standards) is evident in Ciconia's motet *Venecie mundi splendor* (no. 257). In the first line, the scribe began with flagged, solid notes, and then notated the same rhythm in unflagged, void notes. The scraped-off flags and hollowing of the noteheads are clearly visible. The motet's tenor has a section where notes are erased and then rennotated identically except for the use of ligatures. This too is clearly visible.

The clarity of the images does not fully explain why scribes choose the notation that they do, but we now have the data to begin an answer.

The collaboration between Craig McFeely and Bent reaches its apex in the digital editions they prepare of previously unperformable works. By selectively deleting show-through and digitally filling in notes where the ink has eaten away at the paper, they have been able to transcribe five new works. Their methods are documented and their digital editions are included in the commentary. (The use of color is generous even in the introduction.) Unfortunately, this process can only be repeated with access to the digital images, which are not included. It is interesting that these difficult works have been included while there are still perfectly legible pieces that have never been included in a modern edition. The majority of such pieces are anonymous French songs. Finding untranscribed works is made more difficult because of an inconsistency in the catalog. Some pieces without editions are identified explicitly as such; others simply omit the line marked "editions."

Naturally in an undertaking of this magnitude, some errors have crept in. None are large enough to affect the overall conclusions of the author, but some of the more significant ones should be mentioned. Several concern the current locations of musical sources: the Atri source is listed in the Archivio capitolare as frag. 5; one learns from the Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music Web site (<http://www.diamm.ac.uk/> [accessed 18 November 2009], a project supervised by Margaret Bent, that it is now Biblioteca del Capitolo della Cattedrale, Frammento 17. The call number for the Siena fragments (*olim* mss. 326–7, then ms. 207) seems to change every decade or so; they can now be accessed as Archivio di Stato, Frammenti Musicali busta n. 1. inserto n. 11. Similarly, Pad1225 is now found in Padua, Biblioteca universitaria, as ms. busta 2/2 and not ms. 1225. The correct library for Grot is Grottaferrata, Biblioteca del Monumento nazionale, and its call number is no longer provisional. Additionally, the connection of Krakow manuscript 40582 (listed under its former location in Berlin) to the Trent fragment (Museo provinciale d'Arte,

Castello del Buon Consiglio, though owned by the Biblioteca comunale, ms. 1563) is tenuous at best. The rediscovery of the title "scabioso" (and not "scabroso") for the Credo by Zacar is attributed to Lucia Marchi in 2000; even John Nádas was surprised to learn that his 1986 article ("Further Notes on Magister Antonius dictus Zacharias de Teramo," *Studi musicali* 15 [1986]: 167–82), was in fact the first since Padre Martini to correctly transcribe this title. Ciconia's *Aler m'en veus* (no. 255) is attributed to "Johes" and not "Johannes" in Padua, Biblioteca universitaria, ms. 1115. Finally, there are some layout errors in the pasted-capitals section (letters 27–44) that make it easy to miss the last lines of each discussion.

Margaret Bent has shared with me several other errata that she has discovered: among the more significant, pieces No. 185 and No. 281 are not in Oxford 213 but rather in other Oxford manuscripts. Pieces No. 57 and No. 59 are missing from the concordances found in the Boverio Codex (Turin, Biblioteca nazionale universitaria, T.III.2). On p. 162, the scribe's attribution of *Regina celi* is to "dunstaple" not "dunstable." Some alternate composer attributions were left out of the index of composers: No. 192 should have Dunstaple and Binchois listed in addition to Power; likewise, No. 289 should also list Dunstaple. Bent informs me that the complete list of errata will soon appear on the LIM Web site.

The commentary is sometimes more certain of its conclusions than the evidence allows. On the back of blue initial letter "K," we see no notes, but only traces of a red, vertical line. Bent reasons that the red bar

must have belonged to a sectional Agnus from a mass cycle preceding the Kyrie. It cannot be the Du Fay Agnus #15 on f. R15 ending the Du Fay cycle, because the normal recto and verso status of red and blue capitals is reversed in the first half of gathering II, where versos are red, rectos blue. It must be from Du Fay's Agnus #21, whose recto is now recopied on f. R22, ending the Du Fay/Zacara cycle. (p. 244)

Each of these conclusions is the most-likely option given the reasoning thus far: red lines do delimit sections; mass cycles are most likely preceded by other mass cycles;

most mass cycles do end with settings of the Agnus; the capital letters of the Du Fay Agnus No. 15 should be different in color; many letters did contain music that would appear in the later stages of Q15. But following a long chain of most-likely options cannot end with a statement of certainty. You can bet on the most likely horse in every race of a day, but you are still lucky to hit the pick 6.

Potential buyers should not be deceived by the beautiful miniatures on some of the advertising copy—this is not primarily an illuminated manuscript. The initial letter with the singers is one of the few illuminations in the source. One is paying for a top-notch introduction and perfectly reproduced music in a great package, but not an art book. This austerity begs the question of whether the source could have instead been reproduced in black and white, as in the lower-priced Chicago series, with only the illuminated, damaged, and red-notation pages and portions of the intro-

duction presented in color? This choice would hamper some directions of scholarly inquiry (especially scribal identification and development), but at the reduced price it would surely gain many more users. But maybe this is a false dichotomy in our age of easy print-on-demand. Perhaps it will someday be possible for LIM to offer a reduced-cost black-and-white (or digital?) version to a larger market, for this is a manuscript and a study that deserves a wider audience. In an era when many important music books are becoming available in facsimile, this edition stands above the crowd. With a sage introduction by the world's most-qualified scholar on the source, high-quality images, and comprehensive indexes and catalogs, the Bologna Q15 facsimile will bear scholarly fruits for generations to come.

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