Notes on Heinrich Isaac's
Virgo prudentissima

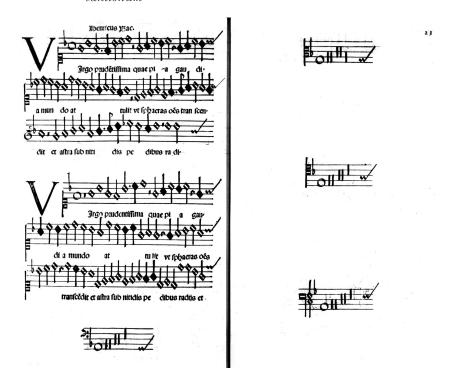ALEJANDRO ENRIQUE PLANCHART

Thomas Binkley *in memoriam*

In 1520 Sigmund Grimm and Marx Wirsung published their *Liber selectarum cantionum quas vulgo mutetas appellant*, a choirbook that combined double impression printing in the manner of Petrucci with decorative woodcuts. As noted in the dedicatory letter by the printers and the epilogue by the humanist Conrad Peutinger, the music was selected and edited by Ludwig Senfl, who had succeeded his teacher, Heinrich Isaac, as head of Emperor Maximilian's chapel until the emperor's death in 1519. The volume is dedicated to Cardinal Matthäus Lang von Wellenburg (1468–1540), honoring him either as Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg at his elevation to the see of Salzburg in 1519 (the cardinal, the printers, and Peutinger were all citizens of Augsburg), or as Martin Picker suggests, as the one man who, after the death of the emperor, could be expected to continue Maximilian's patronage of music and musicians.[1] The choirbook is an object of extreme luxury in every sense of the word. It is a massive volume, of 274 folios, measuring 445 mm x 295 mm. The note shapes and text are cut with great elegance, and the openings are laid out with extraordinary clarity, leaving an extravagant amount of blank space in each (fig. 1).

The repertoire consists of twenty-four motets in three series of eight each: one of works for six voices; a second of works for five voices; and a

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[1] Martin Picker, "Liber selectarum cantionum (Augsburg: Grimm & Wirsung, 1520): A Neglected Monument of Renaissance Music and Music Printing," in *Gestalt und Entstehung musikalischer Quellen im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, ed. Martin Staehelin, Quellenstudien zur Musik der Renaissance, 3; Wolfenbütteler Forschungen, 83 (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1998), 151–52.

FIGURE 1. Opening of Isaac's *Virgo prudentissima* in the *Liber selectarum cantionum*

third of works for four voices. The colophon is a musical magic square that resolves into a twelve-measure setting of a distich: *Salve sancta parens, dulcis amor meus, / Virgo pia, salus mundi, caeli porta* (Hail, holy parent, my sweet love, pious Virgin, health of the world, gate of heaven). The colophon also underlines the fact that almost half of the motets are Marian pieces. The collection contains almost self-consciously complex works, many of which echo the old tradition of the tenor motet and display some of the most complex constructivist musical structures of the late 1490s and early 1500s, although others, such as Josquin's *Benedicta es caelorum regina*, are very modern works.[2] Isaac's *Virgo prudentissima*

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[2] This motet must date from after Josquin's return to Condé in 1502, since the prose it sets was sung only in northern France, England, and Scandinavia. The extensive list of sources for the prose text in *Analecta Hymnica medii aevi*, vol. 54, *Liturgische Prosen des Übergangsstiles und der zweiten Epoche ins besondere die dem Adam von Sanct Victor zugeschriebenen*, ed. Cl[emens] Blume and H[enry] M[arriott] Bannister (Leipzig: O. R. Reisland, 1915), 396–97, lists no Italian or German sources, and only one Southern French source, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *n.a. lat.* 1177, where it is a very late addition.

combines canonic procedures familiar from his five-voice chansons with an expansion of the tenor procedures used by Josquin in his five-voice motets. At the same time, as Stephanie Schlagel has noted in her study of the Josquin motets in the print, the majority of the works in the *Liber selectarum cantionum* are also examples of the highest rhetorical art as exemplified in musical composition (for the content of the print, see table 1).[3]

I have no intention here of straying into the swamp of the late and conflicting Josquin attributions, several of which appear in table 1, and will concentrate entirely upon Isaac's imperial *Virgo prudentissima*. The piece survives in partial copies in Sankt-Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek MSS 463–64, and in Buffalo, State University of New York, Music Library MS M 02/A3/p. These sources transmit the original text of the motet, in which the imperial chapel master, Georg von Slatkonia, is referred to as *praesul Petinensis*, bishop of Pedena (modern-day Pićan), which was his see until he was translated to the see of Vienna in 1513. The text of the motet as given in the *Liber selectarum cantionum* refers to him by his new title, *Austriacae praesul regionis* (Bishop of the Austrian region), which is unique to this source. In a copy in the Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cappella Sistina MS 24, all the imperial references are changed to papal ones. Finally, a version of the motet in the *Secundus tomus novis operi musicis*, published by Formschneider in Nuremberg in 1538, which begins with the text *Christus Filius Dei*, eliminates all Marian references and substitutes Christological ones, asking Christ to protect the new emperor Charles V; but it keeps a cross reference title, *Virgo prudentissima*. This is also the case in Berg and Neuber's monumental edition *Novum et insigne opus musicum* (Nuremberg, 1558–59) and in a number of later manuscripts that are clearly copied from the later German prints.

The occasion for the composition of Isaac's motet was the Reichstag convened by Maximilian in 1507 in Constance to confirm his election as Holy Roman Emperor.[4] The cantus in the version of Sankt-Gallen 464 indicates the place of composition as part of the ascription: *Isaac Constantiae posuit*. The motet is an enormous, 294-breves-long work for six voices. It is a setting of a long poem most likely by the chapel master Slatkonia, who mentions himself in the text as rehearsing the singers. The text calls on the nine orders of angels and on the Virgin to protect Maximilian and the Holy Roman Empire. The motet is built upon a cantus firmus that uses the antiphon *Virgo prudentissima*, which was

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[3] Stephanie P. Schlagel, "The *Liber selectarum cantionum* and the 'German Josquin Renaissance'," *Journal of Musicology* 19 (2002): 580–85.

[4] For more about the motet's relationship to Emperor Maximiliam, see David Rothenberg, "The Most Prudent Virgin and the Wise King: Isaac's *Virgo prudentissima* Compositions in the Imperial Ideology of Maximilian I," this journal, 30–76.

TABLE 1

Contents of the *Liber selectarum cantionum*

Motets for six voices		
1	Optime pastor divino	Isaac
2	Praeter rerum series	Josquin
3	Virgo prudentissima	Isaac
4	O Virgo prudentissima	Josquin
5	Anima mea liquefacta est	Anonymous
6	Benedicta es caelorum regina	Josquin
7	Pater de caelis Deus	La Rue
8	Sancte Pater divumque decus	Senfl
Motets for five voices		
9	Miserere mei Deus	Josquin
10	Inviolata integra et casta	Josquin
11	Salve crux arbor vitae	Obrecht
12	Lectio actuum apostolorum	Anonymous[a]
13	Stabat mater dolorosa	Josquin
14	Missus est Gabriel Angelus	Mouton[b]
15	Anima mea liquefacta est	Anonymous
16	Gaude Maria Virgo	Senfl
Motets for four voices		
17	Ave sanctissima Maria	Isaac
18	De profundis clamavi	Josquin[c]
19	Prophetarum maxime	Isaac
20	Deus in adiutorium meum	Anonymous[d]
21	O Maria Mater Christi	Isaac
22	Discubuit Iesus	Senfl
23	Usquequo domine	Senfl
24	Beati omnes qui timent	Senfl
25	Salve sancta parens (colophon)	Senfl (magic square)

[a] Manuscript attribution to Josquin in the copy of the print in Stuttgart, Württenbergisches Landesbibliothek. Attributed to Josquin in 1519[3] and Munich, Universitätsbibliothek, MS 4° Art. 401. Attributed to Jehan Viardot in Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cappella Sistina MS 42.

[b] Manuscript attribution to Josquin in the Stuttgart copy of the print. Attributed to Mouton in Munich, Universitätsbibliothek, MS 4° Art. 401; Florence, Biblioteca Mediceo Laurenziana, aquisti e doni 666 (Medici Codex), and 1559[1]. Attributed to Josquin in Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cappella Giulia MS XII.4 and Cappella Sistina, MS 19; 1519[3].

[c] Attributed to Josquin Sankt-Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, 463, Kassel, Murhard'sche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel und Landesbibliothek MSS 4° Mus. 24 1–4, 1521[3], 1539[9], and 1547[1]. Attributed to Nicolas(?) Champion in Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Mus. 15941.

[d] Attributed to Nicolas(?) Champion in Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Mus. 15941. Attributed to Josquin in Kassel, Murhard'sche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel und Landesbibliothek. MSS 4° Mus. 24. Attributed to Senfl in 1538[6].

most often used as the Magnificat antiphon for the Vespers of the Assumption. As Emma Kempson has shown in her dissertation on Isaac's motets, the cantus firmus agrees largely with the version of the antiphon found in the *Antiphonale Pataviense* (Vienna: Johannes Winterburger, 1519) and the Augsburg antiphoner printed in 1495 by Erhard Radolt.[5] Example 1 gives the antiphon as it appears in both antiphoners above the cantus firmus of the motet and in the Gloria of his *Missa Virgo prudentissima* that he composed on the same cantus firmus (minus the rests that separate the phrases) (ex. 1).

Isaac clearly used the same version of the plainsong for the cantus firmus in the Mass and the motet. But there are small variants between the plainsong in the two antiphoners. Most of the variants between the plainsong in the antiphoners and in Isaac's settings involve the addition of cadential ornamentation, or in the case of the G at "rutilans," the addition of one note to effect a proper clausula. Even so, certain melodic deviations indicate that Isaac used a source that differed from those in the two antiphoners in example 1: the A–C–A figure at "filia" (which is presented as it appears in the motet and in the Credo of the Mass), the E-fa at "ut (luna)" (which is explicitly signed in the Mass), and the D that follows it. The imperial chapel followed primarily the rite of Passau, but, as Gerhard Pätzig suggests, there were probably small differences in the chant traditions of the imperial chapel and the Passau rite.[6] More significantly, the Reichstag took place in Constance, and Isaac probably wrote the motet in that city. My own experience with the cantus firmi used by Du Fay and Josquin tells me that composers did not write those melodies down from memory, but sought them in chant books available to them at the time they were planning the work.[7] Thus, in all probability, the book Isaac used was either an antiphoner or a noted breviary from either Constance or the Imperial chapel, and most likely a manuscript rather than a printed source. The three versions of the chant are indeed typical of variants one finds in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century antiphoners and breviaries.

Structurally the motet consists of two sections governed by a single cursus of the tenor. This musical structure has its antecedents in

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[5] Emma Clare Kempson, "The Motets of Henricus Isaac (ca. 1450–1517): Transmission, Structure and Function," 2 vols. (PhD diss., University of London, 1998), 1:231–33.

[6] Gerhard Rudolf Pätzig, "Liturgische Grundlagen und handschriftliche Überlieferung von Heinrich Isaac's 'Choralis Constantinus'," 2 vols. (PhD diss., Eberhard-Karls-University, Tübingen, 1956), I, 22–39; see also David J. Burn, "What Did Isaac Write for Constance?" *Journal of Musicology* 20 (2003): 51–54, with further comments and references.

[7] See Alejandro Enrique Planchart, "The Early Career of Guillaume Du Fay," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 46 (1993): 361–62; idem, "Masses on Plainsong Cantus Firmi," *The Josquin Companion*, ed. Richard Sherr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 92–95.

EXAMPLE 1. Antiphon *Virgo prudentissima* in the Passau and Augsburg antiphoners and in Isaac's motet and Mass

Passau

Vir - go pru - den - - tis - si - ma

Augsburg

Vir - go pru - den - - tis - si - ma

Isaac motet

Vir - go pru - - den - tis - si - ma

Isaac mass (Gloria)

quo pro - gre - - de - - - ris

quo pro - gre - - de - - - ris

quo pro - gre - - - - de - ris

qua - si au - ro - - - - -

qua - si au - ro - - - -

qua - si _____ au - ro - - ra,

EXAMPLE 1. (*continued*)

EXAMPLE 1. (*continued*)

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EXAMPLE 1. (*continued*)

Guillaume Du Fay's *Ave regina caelorum* (1464), which has two sections, one in ○ and the other in ⊂, and a short burst of sesquialtera near the end. A number of pieces organized in that manner (with or without the shift to sesquialtera) began to appear in the late 1450s and early 1460s, and I believe that Julie Cumming is correct in detecting in them the influence of the English *Missa Caput*.[8] Some of these motets, although not Du Fay's *Ave regina*, also have the double cursus found in the English Mass, and in certain instances, such as Busnoys's *In hydraulis*, a quadruple cursus. Variants of this structure include pieces such as Ockeghem's *Alma redemptoris mater*, which ends with a sesquialtera section, and Obrecht's *Salve crux, arbor vitae*, in which the sesquialtera section announces the point where the text of the cantus firmus shifts from the tenor to the other voices, leading to a massive homophonic statement of th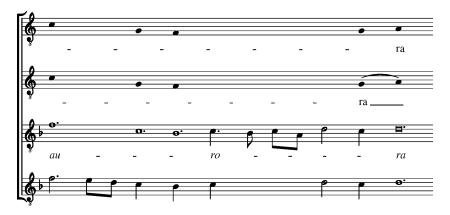e first line of the stanza followed by a final *tripudio*, a dancelike elaboration in ○. Although it is not a new section, it provides an ecstatic conclusion to the second part of the motet.

Closer in time and place to Isaac's early musical experience are the five-voice motets by Jehan le Roy (Iohannes Regis, ca. 1425–96). The bipartite structure of these pieces is clearly derived from both the *Missa Caput* and the elaboration of that structure by Du Fay. With their separate cantus firmi and the change they effected in the musical space by placing two voices above and two below the cantus firmus, Regis's motets have been regarded as immensely influential in the 1480s and 1490s.[9] Although we know from Regis's biography that he was probably one of the least traveled composers among the major figures of the late fifteenth century and apparently spent all his professional life within about 150 km of Soignies, these motets were widely imitated by a number of composers active in the papal chapel in the early 1490s, as Richard Sherr and, more recently, Jesse Rodin have shown.[10]

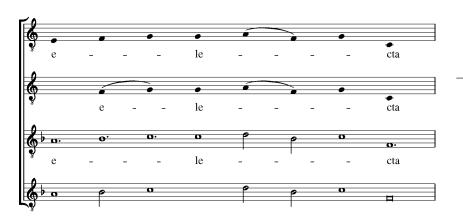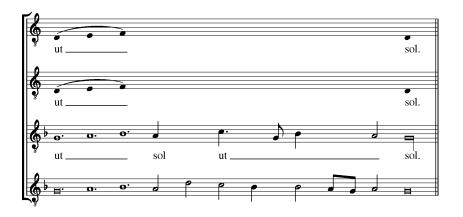Regis might have been a little-traveled composer, but Du Fay and his confreres clearly had considerable admiration for him from 1460 onwards. A number of his works were copied in the choirbooks of the Cathedral of Cambrai, and his *Missa Ecce ancilla–Ne timeas Maria*, copied in the Burgundian choirbook (Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 5557), was probably commissioned by the Order of the Golden Fleece[11]

[8] Julie E. Cumming, *The Motet in the Age of Du Fay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 224–26.
[9] The fundamental work on Regis is now Sean Gallagher, *Johannes Regis* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010).
[10] Richard Sherr, "Illibata Dei Virgo Nutrix and Josquin's Roman Style," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 41 (1988): 434–64; Jesse Rodin, "Who, What, Where, When, and Why It Matters," paper read at the meeting of the Northern and Southern California chapters of the AMS, Berkeley, April 2010.
[11] The form of the cantus firmus that Regis uses begins with a leap G–C (as does that of Du Fay's *Missa Ecce ancilla, Beata es Maria*) that has turned up in only one chant

and valued by the Burgundian dukes. Beyond this, we have five of his eight surviving motets in a late Burgundian choirbook (Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Chigi VIII 234), four in Petrucci's *Motetti a cinque* (1505), one in Petrucci's *Motetti B* (1503), and one in the Sistine Chapel choirbooks CS 15 and CS 16. He is virtually the only composer of his generation to have his Latin sacred compositions represented so extensively in the early printed collections. This indicates that however little Regis traveled during his lifetime, his reputation and influence were quite widespread. Already in 1477 Tinctoris, writing in Naples, praised his motet *Clangat plebs flores* as an excellent example of *varietas* in music.[12] This piece, like the two surviving Masses, both of which can be dated to the 1460s, is a massive and very impressive work. For a young musician like Isaac, growing up in that part of the world in the 1470s and 1480s and having the kind of remarkable fluency that characterizes almost everything he did, the influence of Regis, his music, and his prestige, must have been vividly present.
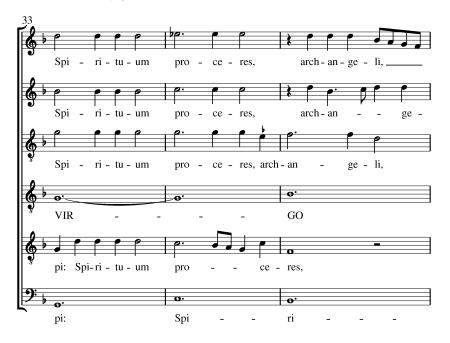
With the addition of a sixth voice Isaac throws off the acoustical symmetry characteristic of Regis's motets. Unlike Josquin in his *Benedicta es caelorum regina*, which involved an elaborate scaffolding of polyphonic textures and a canonic cantus firmus between the cantus and the tenor accompanied by four elaborately figural voices, Isaac aims for a sharp contrast, particularly in the *prima pars* between the rhythmically elaborate duets and the full six-voice sections. These full sections evoke the massive sonorities of his German Mass Ordinaries set in alternation with plainsong or organ. To achieve such effects, he sets the cantus firmus largely in perfect breves, following a German tradition observable, for example, in the prose settings of Trent 91. Further, in the passages for six voices, particularly in the *prima pars*, the bassus 2, which is quite active rhythmically in the duets, also shifts largely to motion in perfect breves (ex. 2).[13]

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book in Europe, the double cantatorium of St. Pierre de Lille (Lille, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 599, red foliation, fol. 30v). St. Pierre was one of the Burgundian churches most closely associated with the order. This and the motet's presence in the Brussels choirbook indicate a Burgundian connection.

[12] Iohannes Tinctoris, "Liber de arte contrapuncti," in *Opera theoretica*, 3 vols., ed. Albert Seay, Corpus Scriptorum de Musica 22 (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1975–78), 2:156. For an English translation of this passage, see idem, *The Art of Counterpoint (Liber de arte contrapuncti)*, trans. Albert Seay, Musicological Studies and Documents 5 (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1961), 140.

[13] This procedure in the motet is probably related to the procedure in part of the Gloria and the Credo of Isaac's *Missa Virgo prudentissima*, in which the tenor and the bassus 2 are in canon and move largely in perfect breves (e.g., mm. 1–36), or the first cantus firmus entrance in the Credo (mm. 16–23). See Heinrich Isaac, *Messen*, 2 vols., ed. Martin Staehelin, Musikalische Denkmäler 7–8 (Mainz: Schott, 1973), 2:80–83 and 2:90–91. The voice designations of the six-voice *Virgo prudentissima* in the prints and manuscripts are inconsistent. In this article I will use the following designations in descending order: cantus 1, cantus 2, altus, tenor, bassus 1, and bassus 2.

EXAMPLE 2. *Virgo prudentissima*, entrance of the cantus firmus (mm. 33–38)

The one exception to this procedure in the *prima pars* is the concluding section. Before I describe the function of this episode, I turn briefly to the structure of the *prima pars*, which shows Isaac's debt to Regis. The *prima pars* begins with a series of duos involving all the voices except the tenor in a systematic descending order: cantus 1 and 2, altus and bassus 1, and bassus 1 and 2. The duets are unequal in length, lasting 13, 14, and 5 breves respectively, and each consists of a chain of points of imitation no more than a breve apart. The motivic substance of each point of imitation is sometimes repeated immediately in a quasi-ostinato manner (mm. 3–4) and sometimes in successive subphrases with small rhythmic variations (mm. 6–7 and 8–9). The points of articulation in the duets fall primarily on two notes: G and D. The first duet has a strong cadence on G at measure 8, a softer cadence on D at measure 10, and concludes on G at measure 16. The second duet has a strong cadence on G at measure 18, cadences on D at measures 22 and 26, and concludes on G at measure 28. The third duet has only its final cadence on G as the cantus firmus enters in measure 33 (ex. 3).

A particular conceit of the introductory duets is that, even though the motives used for each point of imitation are different, the motive that opens each of the three duets is a paraphrase of the first phrase of the antiphon *Virgo prudentissima*. Knowing the antiphon, contemporary listeners would surely have noticed and would have assumed that Isaac used a sort of anticipatory imitation, even if the remainder of each duet had nothing in common with the plainsong melody. Of course, such expectations would have been foiled with the entrance of the cantus firmus, because the tenor sings the plainsong so slowly that its melodic shape becomes essentially imperceptible (ex. 2). The distant roots of this procedure go back to Du Fay's double duet at the opening of his *Ave regina caelorum* 3, although in that case the duets are not imitative and their melodic similarities are due to the repetition of a melodic phrase in the chant itself. Isaac's systematic and orderly presentation of the duets, however, has a closer model in the music of Regis, especially in his Masses, particularly in a movement such as the immensely long Benedictus of the *Missa Ecce ancilla–Ne timeas Maria*, in which much of the length results from Regis's systematic and often dogged (if also inspired) exploration of every possible pairing of voices in his ensemble.[14] Isaac organizes his introduction more simply, in a hierarchy that, rather than exploring every combination, provides a simpler scheme: a progressive descent in the range of the voices that shifts abruptly as the cantus firmus enters (something that happens also in Du Fay's *Ave regina*). This organization might also be heard as a generational difference

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[14] Gallagher, *Johannes Regis*, 137–42.

EXAMPLE 3. *Virgo prudentissima,* introductory duets (mm. 1–33)

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EXAMPLE 3. (*continued*)

EXAMPLE 3. (*continued*)

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between Regis and Isaac—the former a brilliantly original but at the same time conservative composer still rooted in the motet repertoire of the second and third quarters of the fifteenth century, the latter a more progressive composer who by 1507 had spent a good number of years in the Florence of Lorenzo de' Medici.

At the entrance of the cantus firmus there is a curious element that, to my knowledge, has not previously elicited comment. The surviving voices in Sankt Gallen 463 and 464, in all the prints that transmit the text *Christus filius Dei* and in the manuscripts copied from these prints, have the sign ⊘ in all voices at the start of measure 33. The sign is not found in the *Liber selectarum cantionum* or in Cappella Sistina 24. It might be that it was not part of whatever exemplar Senfl used, or that he suppressed it as part of his editorial work on the piece. The presence or the lack of the sign marks the difference between the tradition represented by the *Liber selectarum cantionum* and Cappella Sistina 24, and the tradition represented by Sankt Gallen 363 and 364 and the later German prints. The meaning of the sign is difficult to ascertain. Its appearance in all parts at the entrance of the cantus firmus, precisely the place where in a slightly older repertoire one would expect a *signum congruentiae* (sign of congruence), might indicate that, as Margaret Bent has claimed, it could serve as a reaffirmation of the current *tempus perfectum.*[15] It probably does not indicate a proportional tempo shift of any kind. Based on a close reading of Tinctoris and other theorists, Rob Wegman has suggested that it is a sign for *acceleratio mensurae.*[16] I propose a slight variation of Wegman's interpretation for this case. The introductory duets, with their dense text setting on the minims, their frequent semiminim syncopations, and their closely spaced, imitative semiminim runs, require the utmost concentration from singers if they want to maintain the initial tempo, even if they sing one on a part. Any slowing down of the tempo during the duets deforms the declamation at the crucial moment when the cantus firmus enters. If there had been any danger of the tempo slowing down during the long introductory duets, the ⊘ sign at that point in the piece might have served as a warning to the Kapellmeister and the singers to adjust the tempo slightly up

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[15] Margaret Bent, "The Early Use of the Sign ⊘," *Early Music* 24 (1996): 199–225; idem, "The Use of Cut Signatures in Sacred Music by Ockeghem and His Contemporaries," *Johannes Ockeghem: Actes du XLe Colloque international d'études humanistes, Tours, 3–8 février 1997,* ed. Philippe Vendrix (Paris: Klincksieck, 1998), 641–80, esp. 645–47; idem, "The Use of Cut Signatures in Sacred Music by Binchois," *Binchois Studies,* ed. Dennis Slavin and Andrew Kirkman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 277–312, esp. 277–312; idem, "On the Interpretation of ⊘ in the Fifteenth Century: A Response to Rob Wegman," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53 (2000): 597–612.

[16] Rob C. Wegman, "What Is 'acceleratio mensurae'?" *Music & Letters* 73 (1992): 515–24.

if necessary, achieving not so much an *acceleratio* as a *restoratio mensurae*. It is impossible to tell if the sign was part of the original notation of the work, or was introduced later for practical reasons. But it is worth noting that Senfl, who as a student of Isaac surely knew the original version of the motet, did not include it in his edition.

At the entrance of the cantus firmus, the motivic substance of the individual voices changes: scalar figures give place to motives that begin with or consist largely of repeated notes (cf. exs. 2 and 3). This is not entirely due to the slower harmonic rhythm imposed on the music by the tenor and bassus 2 moving largely in breves, since in a number of places in the motet Isaac manages to write melodically active lines over the slow moving lines. It is more likely that Isaac decided to highlight the different harmonic rhythm, emphasizing at the same time the declamation of the text, which continues to move largely in minims. This, particularly at the entrance of the cantus firmus, serves as an oratorical device to emphasize the massive nature of the new sonority. Given how closely this sonority is related to the sound of Isaac's *alternatim* Ordinaries written for the imperial chapel and for Constance[17] and to music with a cantus firmus moving in steady breves, one can assume that Isaac's audience would have heard this moment in the motet as "German."

The first six-part episode in *Virgo prudentissima* is followed by a duet between cantus 1 and cantus 2, precisely the two voices that open the motet. Here Isaac uses an outline of the opening of the antiphon as motive for the imitation and presents it in strict unison canon and in an identical repetition on two pitch levels, first on G and then on D. The start of the following six-voice episode, although not quite as dependent upon declamation on repeated notes as the previous one, begins with such a declamation in the altus, which is at this point the highest sounding voice. Isaac dissolves this episode into a short duet between the altus and bassus 1. The first phrase of the duet cadences on D at measure 69, after which an extended duet starts with a repeated-note motive, thus motivically tying the two textures Isaac has been using (ex. 4). Equally interesting is that here, as in the introduction, Isaac uses the altus-bassus 1 pair for the second duet—another trait that relates this piece to the systematic approach to scoring one finds in Regis's music.

This duet leads to the final six-voice episode of the *prima pars*, which Isaac begins with virtually the same scoring and sonority that he used in the first six-voice episode, even though the cantus firmus note is G in one case and D in the other. Isaac thus ties the openings of the episodes both texturally and harmonically. In the second episode he gradually abandons the repeated-note declamation. The episode is articulated by a break in the cantus firmus between the words "filia" and "Sion" (ex. 5).

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[17] Compare Burn, "What Did Isaac Write for Constance?" 67–71.

EXAMPLE 4. *Virgo prudentissima,* final duet section of the *prima pars* (mm. 67–76)

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EXAMPLE 5. *Virgo prudentissima*, end of the *prima pars* with cantus firmus shift to cantus 1 (mm. 85–98)

EXAMPLE 5. (*continued*)

EXAMPLE 5. (*continued*)

As the tenor reaches the note A at the end of the word "filia" (m. 87), bassus 2 launches the last repeated-note gesture in the section, which is also the most rhythmically active gesture this voice has in a full texture. Here cantus 1 and ba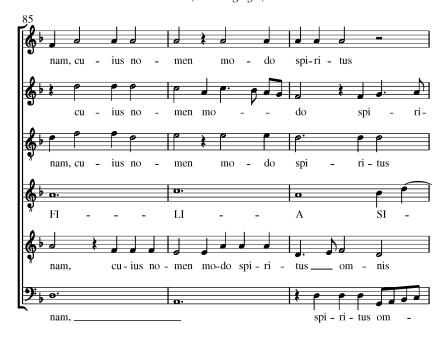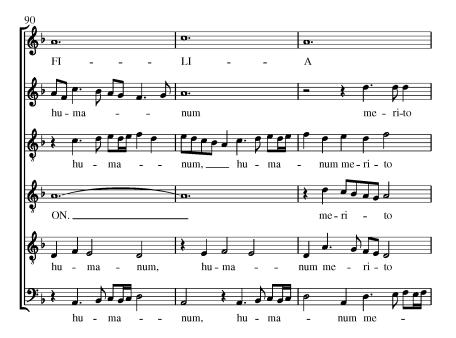ssus 1 drop out, and the other voices, including the tenor, which suddenly has abandoned the cantus firmus, move to a cadence on G (m. 89), effected by cantus 2 and the tenor. The cadence is followed by a short tag that moves the music to the D sonority that started the phrase. At this point, the cantus firmus returns, but in cantus 1, which repeats the last three notes of the cantus firmus that the tenor sang on the word "filia" and finishes the phrase "filia Sion." The texture underneath this last segment of the cantus firmus is entirely unlike what we have heard in any of the six-voice episodes. It is pervaded by short motives either in imitation or in what Graeme Boone has called "motivic reaction,"[18] including a prominent gesture: dotted minim, two semiminims, and two fusae, used eight times within the space of seven breves, inviting comparison with the use of a rhythmically identical figure

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[18] Graeme MacDonald Boone, "Dufay's Early Chansons: Chronology and Style in the Manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, Canonici misc. 213" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1987), 246–47.

at the end of the Credo in Josquin's *Missa Gaudeamus.*[19] Just as the last duet of the *prima pars* began with the repeated-note gesture associated with the full texture, the end of the last six-voice section becomes shot through with the kind of motivic work and rhythmic energy that had been the principal trait of the duets. Thus, at the end of the *prima pars,* Isaac reverses the kinds of motives associated with the duets and with the full textures and ties both textures together motivically.

The music of the *secunda pars* of the motet is essentially in duple meter, as indicated not only by the duple division of the breve but also by a host of motivic and rhythmic gestures that characterize Isaac's music in duple meter, particularly in his instrumental works. Nonetheless, Isaac retains the ○ signature in the tenor, which at this point is halfway through the antiphon, and shifts the remaining parts to ○2. The semibreve of the tenor equals the breve of the other parts, which are then organized in major *modus*. On the face of it, this is an unequivocal manner of indicating a doubling of the tempo in the free parts, since we do not have a simple successive use of signs, but a simultaneous use of ○ and ○2. In fully scored passages of the *secunda pars,* where the text falls on repeated notes, the declamation, which in the *prima pars* was consistently on the minim, shifts to the semibreves. The theoretical literature carefully surveyed and explained by Anna Maria Busse Berger indicates that this is the only plausible reading of the mensuration shift.[20] A look at the music shows a distinct shift to larger values, particularly in the case of the repeated-note declamation, although we also encounter occasional minim declamation and runs of semiminims. Unlike most of the music in the *prima pars,* some of the motivic and rhythmic gestures in the *secunda pars* are strongly reminiscent of pieces like Isaac's exotic *La la hö hö* and his chanson *Par ung chies do cure.* This prompted Emma Kempson to do a statistical count of note values in the motet, something that a number of other scholars have done with fifteenth-century repertories. Kempson's count shows that in ○ we have 102 semibreves, 231 minims, and 122 semiminims, while in ○2 there are 231 semibreves, 161 minims, and 124 semiminims.[21] That is, the semibreves have more than doubled, the minims have decreased by a third, and the semiminims have remained essentially constant. Citing Gossett's studies of the *Choralis Constantinus* and Busse Berger's survey of the theoretical literature, Kempson suggests a shift from semibreve to breve tactus between ○ and ○2, and she notes that the *impression* of speed becomes greater because the note values, particularly the minims

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[19] See Planchart, "Masses on Plainsong Cantus Firmi," 104–5.

[20] Anna Maria Busse Berger, *Mensuration and Proportion Signs, Origins and Evolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 148–63.

[21] Kempson, "The Motets," 1:266.

and semiminims, do not decrease by the same amount by which the semibreves increase.[22]

Performers, who apparently follow what can charitably be described as the "hearsay" traditions of performance practice, blithely ignore Isaac's mensuration change and Kempson's observations, which are supported by the studies of Busse Berger and Gossett. Because of the monumental difficulty of the motet, modern-day recordings of it are rare. The London Ambrosian Singers with John McCarthy recorded it in 1967, and the Columbia Collegium with Alex Blachly in 1975.[23] The first CD recording was by the Tallis Scholars in 1991, followed by the Cappella Sancti Michaelis with Van Nevel in 1994, Henry's Eight with Jonathan Brown in 1997, the Munich Cathedral Choir with Karl Ludwig Nies, and the Ensemble Hofkapelle with Michael Procter, both in 1999.[24] As the first, the Tallis Scholars' interpretation proved to be the most influential. They sing the *prima pars* at about MM 60 to the semibreve. But at the beginning of the *secunda pars* they sing as if the O2 simply did not exist, retaining exactly the same tempo for the semibreve. Since the opening motive of the *secunda pars* is a breve and two semibreves, the music in O2 appears to be actually slower than the music in O. In this rendition the proclamations of the Holy Roman Empire and of the Emperor's name sound flaccid and bland.

Every recorded performance since then has duplicated almost exactly the tempos and mannerisms of the Tallis Scholars. Only the recording by the Munich Cathedral Choir shows some independence, beginning the motet at the absurdly slow tempo of MM 60 to the minim. When the cantus firmus enters with the cut circle sign found in Sankt-Gallen and the late German prints, they double the tempo to MM 60 to the semibreve. It does not seem to have bothered them that under the new tempo the quotation of the opening at measures 52–54 sounds as if it belonged in a different rhythmic and expressive universe than the opening. For the *secunda pars*, they not only ignore any of the implications of the O2 sign but actually slow down the semibreve from the MM 60 at the end of the *prima pars* to about MM 54–56. The performance tradition of the motet in the late twentieth century seems to consist in imitating the

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[22] Ibid., 266–67; cf. Philip Gossett, "The Mensural System and the 'Choralis Constantinus'," *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Music in Honor of Arthur Mendel*, ed. Robert L. Marshall (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1974), 92.

[23] *The Triumph of Maximilian* (2 LP), London Ambrosian Singers, dir. John McCarthy, Nonesuch HB-73016; *In Praise of Women—Musical Metamorphoses*, Columbia University Collegium Musicum, dir. Alex Blachly, Collegium Musicum JE 116.

[24] *Missa De Apostolis*, The Tallis Scholars, dir. Peter Phillips, Gimell 454 923; *Isaac, Obrecht, De la Rue*, Cappella Sancti Michaelis, dir. Van Nevel, Eufoda 1166; *Virgin & Christ Child*, Henry's Eight, dir. Jonathan Brown, Et'cetera EKT 1213; *Isaac: Virgo Prudentissima*, Münchner Domchor, dir. Karl-Ludwig Nies, Christophorus 77218; *Motetten für Kaiser Maximilian I*, Ensemble Hofkapelle, dir. Michael Procter, Christophorus 77217.

Tallis Scholars' recording, however misguided or downright absurd their conception of the tempo relationships in the piece might be.

It is also quite safe to cite the theoretical evidence for the doubling of the tempo at $O2$ without trying to sing the work that way. There is no doubt that a number of singers trained on this repertoire—specifically anyone who can manage works like Guillaume Du Fay's *Resvelliés vous* or Claudio Monteverdi's *Duo seraphim*—could probably sing the *secunda pars* of the motet clearly and accurately at MM 60 to the breve. The simple declamatory moments, moving in semibreves, would sound no different from the declamation in the *prima pars*, but in those places in the full texture where Isaac creates a dense network of short motives, the music would sound rushed, and the listener would lose any sense of the interplay between motives. When considered in the context of the studies using this criterion, particularly those of Rob Wegman, what Kempson has noticed in terms of the rhythmic densities between the two parts points to a possible approach.[25] This approach makes literal mensuralists and scholars who assume that if the theorists do not mention something explicitly it does not exist quite uncomfortable. But composers and theorists did not always see eye to eye, particularly in the matter of proportions. We know quite well, for example, of Tinctoris's intemperate remarks about some of his colleagues' mensural usage and the openly hostile reaction of some of those he attacked. There was also the subtle, but in the end dismissive response by Ockeghem in his *Missa Prolationum*.[26]

Throughout the fifteenth and into the early sixteenth century, a shadow tradition of proportional and mensural practices seems to have existed, which theorists largely ignored. I say practices because some of them appear to be specific to one composer or to a small group of composers. This topic is far too large and complicated to be addressed here. One tradition has to do with the tenor motet and begins with what Charles Hamm called the "artificial" relationship between the upper voices and the tenors in Du Fay's *Ecclesiae militantis* in 1432.[27] Over the next two decades, Du Fay developed a procedure in his tenor motets whereby the symbolic proportions existed on paper, but the performers used a much simpler procedure, according to which the upper voices would be sung "as if the tenors did not exist," and the mensural shifts were treated as simple successive ones, governed largely by the simple sesquitertial relationship between

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[25] Wegman, "What Is 'acceleratio mensurae'?"

[26] Bonnie J. Blackburn, "Did Ockeghem Listen to Tinctoris?" in *Johannes Ockeghem: Actes du XLe Colloque international d'études humanistes*, 597–640, with extensive references to earlier scholarship.

[27] Charles Hamm, *A Chronology of the Works of Guillaume Dufay Based on a Study of Mensural Practice*, Princeton Studies in Music 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 67–70. See also Guillaume Du Fay, *Opera Omnia, 02/06, Ecclesiae militantis*, ed. Alejandro Enrique Planchart (Santa Barbara: Marisol Press, 2008, forthcoming online through DIAMM).

○ and English ℂ or ₵. Busse Berger has traced the roots of this practice to Italian mensural practices, but musicians of the generations of Du Fay and Ockeghem probably took it from the English mensural practice of the mid-fifteenth century.[28] It is worth noting that once Du Fay arrived at that solution, he never again wrote a motet like *Balsamus et munda cera* (in which the tenor and the upper voices sing together through the mensuration shifts). Instead, he always placed the shifts where the tenors have rests of several breves, so that the singers of the lower voices can hear the new tempo and adapt to it. In any case, the sesquitertial relationship between ○ and fast ℂ, however it was later notated, became essentially the default relationship between these two mensurations for most of the second half of the fifteenth and the first quarter of the sixteenth centuries. Josquin and his contemporaries use a variation of this procedure, in which the progression from ℂ to ₵ and then to ₵, is intended to produce a sesquitertial relationship between ℂ and ₵ and then retain the semibreve tempo of ₵ at the shift to ₵.[29]

The case of ○2 is complicated because it is an infrequent and unusual mensuration, which individual composers used differently. Du Fay makes use of it in his *proprium missae* settings in the 1440s, probably the decade when he wrote his lost treatise on proportions.[30] He never returned to it. As Sean Gallagher has demonstrated, Regis, probably influenced by Du Fay, uses it in the final Agnus Dei of his *Missa Dum sacrum mysterium—L'homme armé*.[31] The most extensive use of it is in the works of Busnoys and Obrecht, who seems to have taken it from Busnoys. Isaac uses it with some frequency in the *Choralis Constantinus*, most of the time in what appears to be duple proportion. In Josquin's music it appears infrequently, most famously in the final Agnus of his *Missa Pange lingua*, in which the notational and motivic density argue against a strict duple proportion.[32]

In Isaac's *Virgo prudentissima* and in Josquin's Agnus from his *Missa Pange lingua*, the use of ○2 has apparently a looser proportional meaning connected with a metric meaning. It is related to the specific meaning of ₵ in Du Fay's work, in which it invariably indicates a fast triple meter organized in minor *modus*. It is possible that the ○2 in Isaac's

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[28] Anna Maria Busse Berger, "The Relationship of Perfect and Imperfect Time in Italian Theory of the Renaissance," *Early Music History* 5 (1985): 1–28.

[29] This is the case in the Kyries of the *Missa Pange lingua* and the *Missa sine nomine*.

[30] See Busse Berger, *Mensuration and Proportion Signs*, 155–56; F. Alberto Gallo, "Citazioni da un trattato di Dufay," *Collectanea historiae musicae* 4 (1966): 149–52.

[31] Gallagher, *Johannes Regis*, 98–113.

[32] Josquin's use of ○2 was largely unnoticed by most twentieth-century scholars until Richard Sherr brought attention to it together with a transcription error that had been repeated by every editor of the Mass until the late twentieth century. Richard Sherr, "Josquin's *Missa Pange Lingua*: A Note on Agnus Dei III," *Early Music* 18 (1990): 271–75.

motet means a fast duple meter organized in major *modus*, but the duple meter itself is moving at the default tempo at the time, that is, in a sesquitertial relationship to the previous *tempus perfectum*.[33] This becomes clear from the way in which Isaac makes the large-scale meter and the phrases' structure interact at the beginning of the *secunda pars*. He arranges the opening duet of the *secunda pars* in phrases of two rather than three breves and spaces the first two points of imitation at two rather than three breves (ex. 6).

The phrase "Raphael testamur ad aures" at measure 106, which is still imitated at two breves, is five breves long and cadences at the *initium* of a *modus* unit. The expanded phrase on "fundetis vota precesque" (m. 119), which opens with imitation at the breve and lasts nine breves, serves to make the modus clear just at the point where the cantus firmus enters. The cantus firmus itself remains in minor *modus*, and Isaac uses a specific declamatory rhythm at "pro sacro," "pro cesare," and, with a slight modification, at "omnipotens," to create formal accents in the long initia of the cantus firmus. The rhythm at measure 129 is reminiscent of the procedures that Josquin uses in the Credo of his *Missa Gaudeamus* to articulate the very long notes in his cantus firmus, which serve almost as pedal tones for an entire phrase.

Given that at the start of the *secunda pars* the structure of the music points in the direction of what we might call the default relationship between ○ and fast ℂ, where three semibreves in ○ are replaced by four in fast ℂ, why would Isaac then use ○2 rather than ₵? (We should remember that many of the ○2 pieces by Busnoys and Regis were renotated as ₵.) We can partly answer this question by looking at Isaac's *Missa Virgo prudentissima*, in which a number of the sections in fast ℂ are organized in major *modus* and thus notated with ○2 in *all* voices. But then there is the case of the tenor of the motet remaining in ○. I suspect that Isaac used ○2 for symbolic reasons. In several of the sources, the text of the antiphon is copied together with the text of the Mass in some of the voices carrying the cantus firmus (although this is not carried out with any consistency).[34] In the motet, however, the textual identity of the cantus firmus is absolutely central to the conception of the work, which explains why Isaac might have wanted to avoid using a sign of imperfection in the one voice that is both the official chant and describes the qualities of the Blessed Virgin.

A final detail that might also support singing the *secunda pars* in a sesquitertial proportion to the *prima pars* is derived from the actual

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[33] This can also be deduced from the relationship between notational density and mensuration in the earlier *Missa Virgo prudentissima*, where ○2, ₵, and even ⨁ are used in sections with roughly the same distribution of semibreves, minims, and even *fusae*. Isaac, *Messen*, 2:76–79 (Kyrie), 2:106–13 (Sanctus).
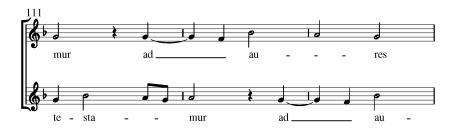
[34] Ibid., 71–115, passim.

EXAMPLE 6. *Virgo prudentissima*, introductory duets of the *secunda pars* (mm. 99–140)

EXAMPLE 6. (*continued*)

EXAMPLE 6. (*continued*)

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performance time of the work when sung in this manner. Taking the semibreve in the *prima pars* at MM 60—the tempo Smits van Waesberghe referred to as "quiet walking" in his study of tempo in the Renaissance,[35] and which is the tempo used for the *prima pars* in all the modern performances on record, including the benighted Tallis Scholars—would lead to a tempo of MM 80 for the semibreve in the *secunda pars* in a sesquitertial relationship. At these tempi, if they are kept absolutely steady, each of the two *partes* lasts exactly 4:54.[36] This cannot be a coincidence. The structure of the *secunda pars* is entirely different from that of the *prima pars*: it does not have the extended series of duets at the beginning, and the internal sections, where the tenor is silent, are also differently organized. This can be seen most clearly in example 7, which shows the tenor of both parts (ex. 7).

All these distinctive marks indicate that *Virgo prudentissima* belongs to the tradition where a sign like O2 did not mean a strict duple proportion, but rather a fast duple meter organized in a major *modus* (something that was becoming increasingly rare in the early sixteenth century). A small detail at the very end of the motet also suggests that Isaac was playing subtle rhythmic games against the major *modus* in the *secunda pars*. The final long of the free parts does not come on the first breve of a *modus* unit but appears on the last, so that the last rhythmic gesture of the entire section, just like its opening, is a gesture of two breves.

As in the *prima pars*, Isaac derives the first motive of the *seconda pars* from the opening phrase of the cantus firmus of that section. He apparently chose to divide the antiphon at that point because it allowed him to construct motives that have a similar melodic outline in the introductory duets.[37] But the construction of the internal segment in reduced scoring of the *secunda pars* is very different from that of the *prima pars*. Rather than returning time and again to the opening motive, these segments in the *secunda pars* give the listener a kaleidoscope of combinations of voices—duos, trios, and quartets—with a plethora of new motives, none of which can be traced to the chant. These textures are

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[35] Joseph Smits van Waesberge, *De muzische mens: zijn motoriek* (Amsterdam: n.p., 1971); idem and Ademan Hillebrand, *Het biologisch-muzisch ritme: op zoek naar de oerprincipes van het biologisch-muzische in de mens en hun toepassingen in de westerse kultuur* (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlandse Toonkunstenaarsraad, 1983).

[36] Steady tempi are not just a modernist chimera but also a concept that would have been familiar to men steeped in the Platonic thought of late-fifteenth-century Florence. They underpin the entire symbolic edifice found in the proportional structures of motets and Masses from Du Fay to Josquin and beyond. Their existence in performance might have been entirely contingent, but they were fundamental to structural planning by composers. See, for example, Craig Wright, "Dufay's *Nuper rosarum flores*, King Solomon's Temple, and the Veneration of the Virgin," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 47 (1994): 395–441.

[37] Compare the beginnings of examples 1 and 6, as well as the beginning of the two parts in example 7.

EXAMPLE 7. *Virgo prudentissima*, structure of the motet (based on the *cantus firmus*)

Prima pars

shift of the CF to Cantus 1

transition

free counterpoint

Secunda pars
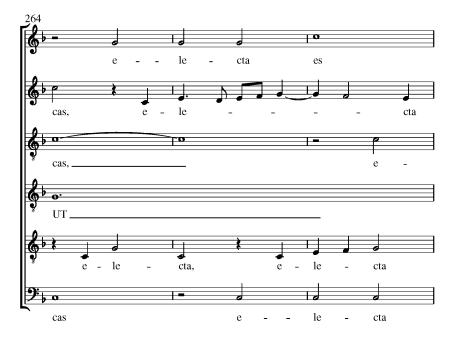
sesquialtera section (tenor tacet)

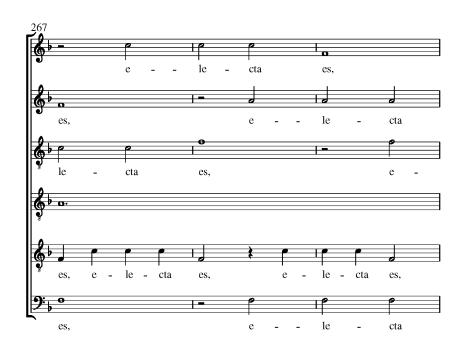EXAMPLE 8. *Virgo prudentissima,* imitation and ostinato patterns (mm. 222–31)

much closer to the active motivic construction one finds in Isaac's instrumental works. Example 8 demonstrates this active motivic construction, used here in almost ostinato fashion. Notice that the final motive is an inversion of the ostinato figure (ex. 8).

At measure 174 Isaac begins to incorporate the repeated-note declamation of the six-voice sections into the motives of the reduced-score passages. He had done something similar near the end of the first half, but now he expands the procedure. When the cantus firmus reaches the final words, "ut sol," he constructs a motive for the words "electa es" out of the repeated-note declamation in semibreves, a hallmark of the *secunda pars.* But instead of presenting the motive simultaneously in several voices, he presents it successively in a series of close entrances: cantus 1, bassus 2, altus, cantus 1, cantus 2 together with bassus 2, cantus 1, and bassus 2, while bassus 1 presents it in diminution and in quick succession five times as a counterpoint to the other voices (ex. 9). Once again, the result

EXAMPLE 9. *Virgo prudentissima*, final six-voice episode (mm. 264–76)

EXAMPLE 9. (*continued*)

is a blending of the two main textures of the work: the imitative melodic motives of the duets, the other passages with reduced scoring, and the repeated-note motives used for the homophonic proclamations. The extended coda of the motet on "ut sol" consists of a series of short ostinatos that has been prefigured earlier in the piece, but represents an entirely new texture, in which the two voices that participated in the cantus firmus, the cantus 1 and the tenor, hold on to the final G for eighteen breves.

All in all, *Virgo prudentissima* is an extraordinarily impressive work with a seemingly inexhaustible amount of invention. In contrast to the schematic tightness of Josquin's *Miserere mei Deus* or his *Benedicta es caelorum regina*, it is also what one could call a "loose limbed" work. The impression one has is that it is a work of not only a magnificent composer but one for whom writing music came easily and naturally—someone who, like Alexander Pope, "lisp'd in numbers for the numbers came,"[38] as Gian Artiganova suggested in his malicious evaluation of Isaac.[39] It is no surprise that Isaac did not receive his due in the last century, which was besotted with the Beethovenian notion of the composer as one who struggles with writing. This image has begun to change in this century, and for that those of us who love Isaac's work are grateful.

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ABSTRACT

Isaac's *Virgo prudentissima,* composed in 1507 for the Reichstag in Constance that confirmed Maximilian I as Holy Roman Emperor, is one of the composer's most complex and extended works. It is also a self-consciously constructivist piece that looks back to the repertoire of tenor motets pioneered by Guillaume Du Fay, Jehan de Ockeghem, and most prominently by Iohannes Regis. Yet its construction is markedly different from similar motets by his contemporary Josquin Des Prez, who used a nearly schematic construction in *Miserere mei Deus,* and ostinato techniques in *Illibata Dei genitrix.* This article takes a close look at *Virgo prudentissima* in order to show how Isaac achieves both a great deal of variety in textures and sonorities and a remarkable degree of motivic and thematic unity in the piece. The unity in Isaac's motet is

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[38] Alexander Pope, *A Collection of Essays, Epistles, and Odes* (London: Thompson & Steele, 1758), 111.

[39] See Lewis Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara 1400–1505: The Creation of a Musical Center in the Fifteenth Century,* rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 227–28; idem, "'It is true that Josquin composes better . . .': The Short Unhappy Life of Gian de Artiganova," *Uno gentile et subtile ingenio: Studies in Renaissance Music in Honor of Bonnie J. Blackburn,* ed. M. Jennifer Bloxam et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 207–8 and 222.

largely due to an interplay of two basic textures and two kinds of motivic construction that are exposed in the first few sections of each *pars* and then fused in the concluding section, and to a judicious choice of which phrases of the cantus firmus—an antiphon for Vespers of the Assumption—he chooses to paraphrase in the free voices.

The motet's mensural structure—one section with all voices in O, and one with the tenor continuing in O but the other five voices switching to O2, with semibreve-minim equivalence with the tenor—has been ignored entirely in all modern performances of the work that have been recorded in the last thirty years, usually with disastrous consequences for the performance of the *secunda pars* of the work. Isaac's notation is implausible until one realizes that he is using it for symbolic purposes and at the same time pointing to a correct tempo relationship between the *partes* by his organization of the phrase structure and the imitation at the beginning of the *secunda pars*. Isaac thus places this motet in what can be called a mensural tradition, which has its beginnings in the motets of Du Fay in the 1430s and in the wholesale adoption of the "English" relationship between triple and duple meters in the second half of the fifteenth century.

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Keywords: Heinrich Isaac, liturgy, motets, performance, structure