

*The Mind Leading the Blind:  
Blindness and the Alterity of Musical Improvisation in the Late Middle Ages*

This paper explores the evolving conceptualization of blindness in the Middle Ages and its connection to the development of printed notation in the fifteenth century. Reflecting on Johannes Tinctoris's encounter with two blind viol players from Bruges in *De inventione et usu musicae* (1483), I posit that the advent of printed music coincides with the sociopolitical othering of musical improvisation. I begin by examining Tinctoris's terms *res facta* [made thing] and *cantare super librum* [singing upon the book] using Ernest Ferand's 1957 close reading of the theorist's *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (1477) as a starting point. Ferand associated singing upon the book with improvisation and florid counterpoint, linked the fifteenth-century notions of "fractured" music and extemporaneity, and questioned whether counterpoints generated in the mind could be considered "made things." Recently, Margaret Bent (1983), Bonnie Blackburn (1987), Rob Wegman (1996; 2008), Peter Schubert (2009) and others have expanded the discourse on late-medieval, improvised composition in their examinations of the epistemological reconfiguration of notation in the Middle Ages. However, this paper is the first to consider how this historiography is related to the changing understanding of blindness—a similarly abstruse constellation of ideas—at the end of the fifteenth century.

There was little distinction in the Middle Ages between those born blind and those on whom blindness was enacted as a juridical punishment. As such, blindness may be considered a metaphysical "dying without death": blind citizens lived their lives both part of and disassociated from society at-large. With the advent of printing, the Aristotelian notion of "dead music," implicit in the medieval conceptualization of musical notation, is reified by a fifteenth-century reassessment of musical memory, writing, and seeing. In Tinctoris's *De inventione et usu musicae* we read traces of this Neo-Platonist turn—a nascent fetishizing of improvisation by two

blind viol players that can be analyzed alongside constructions of alterity in late-medieval discourses on musical notation. The transience of musical performance, once its defining quality, becomes an exponent of its curious ability to exist simultaneously “in the mind” and on paper.

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