Aesthetics of Music in the Early Renaissance

Second Edition

Aesthetics of Music
Volume 3

David Whitwell
Aesthetics of Music

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## CONTENTS

- Foreword vii
- Acknowledgements xi
- Fourteenth-Century Italy 1
- Petrarch 17
- Boccaccio 45
- Fourteenth-Century France 69
- Fourteenth-Century England 105
- Chaucer 137
- Fifteenth-Century Italy 161
- Leonardo Da Vinci 191
- Fifteenth-Century France 211
- The Low Countries in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries 227
- Johannes Tinctoris 237
- The German-Speaking Countries in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries 253
- Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Spain 287
- Fifteenth-Century England 303
- Epilogue 323
- Bibliography 325
- Index 333
- About the Author 337
We define Music to be that form of music performed live before listeners. We define Aesthetics in Music to be a study of the nature of the perception of music by the listener.

We believe the performance of music in actual practice falls naturally into four classes. These are Art Music, Educational Music, Functional Music and Entertainment Music.

I. Art Music

Art Music we believe is defined by four conditions, all of which must always be present. These are:

1. Art music is inspired. Art music is music in which it seems evident that the composer has made an honest attempt to communicate genuine feelings. Feelings, which may range from lofty and noble to superficial and vulgar, must be presumed to be generally recognizable in music, as they are in any other art form, including painting, sculpture, dance, and architecture. In Art Music, lofty and noble feelings are paramount.

   Due to the common genetically understood nature of emotions, it must also be understood that in music emotions or feelings cannot be ‘faked.’ They will always be recognized as such by any contemplative listener.

2. Art Music has no purpose other than the communication of its own aesthetic content. Art Music is free of any purpose or function, save the spiritual communication of pure beauty.

3. Art Music is that which enjoys a performance faithful to the intent of the composer.

4. Art Music must have a listener capable of contemplation.

If any of these conditions are missing, the performance must result in a lesser aesthetic experience. For example, the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven played in a stadium, during the half-time of a professional football game, would fail for the lack of the presence
of Condition Number Four. The same Symphony heard in a concert hall, but in a poor performance, not faithful to the intent of the composer, would fail for the lack of the presence of Condition Number Three.

II. Educational Music

Educational Music may or may not have the same conditions as Art Music, excepting Condition Number Two; it may or may not occur within an educational institution. Educational Music is didactic music, music which has the specific and additional aim to educate. In the strictest sense, if the primary purpose of Music is to educate, it cannot be Art Music—for Art Music has no purpose.

III. Functional Music

Functional Music is music put at the service of something else. We include here, for example, all kinds of religious music, music for weddings, music for the military, and occupational music. Functional Music may share the same conditions as Art Music, excepting Condition Number Two.

One may ask, How can a Mozart Mass be called Functional Music, and not Art Music? If the observer were not contemplatively listening to the music, but were rather contemplating religious thoughts, then the Mozart Mass becomes merely a very high level of Functional Music. If, on the other hand, the observer is a contemplative listener of music, forgetting about religion, then the Mozart Mass is Art Music, but has failed in its purpose as church music.

Military and wedding music are examples of music in which the contemplative listener is missing entirely. How about airport, supermarket and elevator music where there is no listener at all? According to the definition we have given above, recorded music without listeners is not to be considered music at all.
IV. Entertainment Music

Entertainment Music is music with no object other than to please. It will always be missing Condition Four, the contemplative listener. For this reason, Entertainment Music may be inspired music, but the composer is unlikely to be inspired by lofty and noble emotions, knowing there will be no contemplative listener. Entertainment Music and Art Music can never be the same thing because of Condition Number Two: Art Music has no purpose other than the communication of its own aesthetic content. It is inconsistent with the nature of great art to have any extrinsic purpose, including the purpose to entertain.

The first philosopher to address the impact which Art has on an observer was Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, as part of a discussion of Tragedy, which like music has both a material, written form and a live performance form. In this treatise, Aristotle first considers the nature and contribution of each of the specific components of the written form of the Tragedy in his typically methodical style. His great contribution, however, comes when he has completed this discussion, for he then goes beyond the material form of the play itself to discuss the observer. He makes it clear that not only is the end purpose of the elements of the play to produce a specific experience in the observer, but that the nature of this experience is what distinguishes Tragedy from other dramatic forms, such as Spectacle. It was in this moment that he created a new branch of Philosophy which we call ‘Aesthetics.’

Our purpose is to provide a source book of representative descriptions of actual performances, observations by philosophers, poets and other commentators which contribute insights to our understanding of what music meant to listeners during the early Renaissance. It is for this reason that when discussing contemporary treatises on music that we concentrate on those passages which offer insights relative to the aesthetics of music and musical performance rather than the usual technical subjects such as scales, modes and counterpoint which fill most books on Renaissance music.

Since traditional musicology has focused almost exclusively on sacred and secular vocal music of the Renaissance, we have also
included numerous references which we hope will reveal a much wider world of music during this period.

We are also interested in contemporary views on the physiology of knowing, especially with regard to the relationship of the senses and Reason, and related psychological ideas, such as Pleasure and Pain and the Emotions, which might offer a frame of reference for their perspective on the perception of music.

This is the third volume in a series of eight, ranging from the music of the ancient civilizations through the Baroque Period.

David Whitwell
Austin, Texas
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David Whitwell
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The term ‘Renaissance’ was first coined in 1840, by Jules Michelet, to mean ‘discovery of the world and man.’ Perhaps a better definition would be the ‘rediscovery of the world of man,’ for it is the rediscovery of the values of the human and his secular life, in contrast to a galaxy of Christian spirits, angels and the sacred dogma of the Church. With the new ability of man to think of himself apart from the Church came a great sense of self-confidence, which was a necessary prerequisite for many of the advances in science and the arts. There is no better symbol of this new self-confidence than an incident which occurred during the trial of Galileo. Though he was forced, prostrate on the floor before a commission of cardinals, to retract his view that the earth moves in an orbit and is not the center of the universe, when he rose from the floor he quietly whispered ‘Nevertheless, it moves!’

Important societal developments also contributed to the new environment. In Italy, in particular, the growth of trade and industry produced the wealth by which more enlightened princes could imitate the fostering of the arts they had learned from the East through the crusades. The rediscovery of the ancient literature, again through the East, went hand in hand with the developing sophistication of the vernacular languages. Finally, all of these developments joined to provide the courage and freedom of thought necessary to break the long domination of thought by the Church. Man at last could freely begin to think independently, and to ask questions—something the early Church had distinctly discouraged.

These new attitudes, which were all essential parts of humanism, rapidly repaid society with accomplishments which the Church had been unable to achieve in a thousand years. In a relatively short period of time came the achievements of da Vinci, Michelangelo, Isaac Newton, Galileo, Copernicus and Gutenberg.

In Italian literature, it was Petrarch and Boccaccio who carried this new banner of humanism at the dawn of the Renaissance.
The nineteenth-century scholar, Francesco de Sanctis, writing in defense of Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*, has written a passage which we believe goes right to the heart of the essential difference between the philosophy of life in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Many people blame Boccaccio, saying that he spoiled and corrupted the Italian spirit. He himself, in his old age, was overcome by remorse, became a religious clerk, and condemned his book. But his book would not have been possible if the Italian spirit had not been well on its way to being spoiled—if spoiled is the correct word for it. If the things Boccaccio laughed about had been venerated, his contemporaries would have felt indignation. But the opposite proved to be true. The book seemed to respond to something in people’s souls which had been wanting to come out for a long time. It seemed to proclaim what everyone had been saying secretly, in the depths of their souls, and it was received with so much applause and success that the good Passavanti became frightened and set against it his *Specchio di penitenza* as an antidote. Boccaccio was, then, the literary voice of a world about which men, in their consciousness, were already confusedly aware. A secret existed: Boccaccio guessed it and everyone applauded him. This fact, instead of being damned, deserves to be studied.

The essential quality of the Middle Ages was transcendence: a sort of ultrahuman and ultranatural ‘beyond’ outside of nature and man, the genus and the species outside the individual, matter and form outside their unity, the intellect outside the soul, perfection and virtue outside life, the law outside consciousness, the spirit outside the body, and the purpose of life outside the world …

The natural product of this exaggerated, theocratic world was asceticism. Life here on earth was losing its seriousness and value, so that while man continued to dwell here, his spirit was in the next life …

Feeling, as the product of human or natural propensity, was always considered a sin. Passions were banned and poetry was considered the mother of lies. The theater was the food of the Devil and stories and romances were regarded as profane types of literature. All these things were called by one name: ‘the senses’ …

But a state of tension and imbalance like this cannot last. Art and culture, the knowledge and experience of life, work to modify it and transform it. Thus art, by seizing this world, had begun to humanize it, bring it closer to man and nature …

A modern writer writes of the same issue and of Petrarch’s contribution to the new humanism.
To the centuries before Petrarch the world was a place in which to prepare for a life beyond; the noblest subject of thought was theology; the saving of the soul was the one important task. The centuries since have realized in some measure that the present life is precious in itself, and is not to be thus subordinated. This shifting of the view is of immense significance; and it is owing to Petrarch, more than to any other one man.³

From the perspective of the musician, the beginning of the Renaissance appears clearly, and almost suddenly, defined. The changes desired in Church music by the composers of the early fourteenth century were sufficiently different as to give birth to the terms *ars nova* and *ars antiqua* to distinguish these composers from their teachers. Outside the Church the explosion of thirteenth-century troubadour repertoire was no less dramatic in its new emphasis, indeed this music was the harbinger of humanism.

Our view of music performance in the Renaissance has been clouded in several ways as the result of directions taken by nineteenth-century musicology. The subsequent traditional view has been, basically, that to study music, you have to study extant music. The problem is that relative little music in the fourteenth century was notated, and that which has survived has been mostly the Church music of the Northern countries. No where in music history texts can one find extensive discussion of the broad early Renaissance musical practice which is documented in the literature of that period. Indeed, in reading some of the most revered music history texts you might get the impression that music somehow disappeared from Italy after 1350. But Pirrotta, one of the really knowledgeable persons in this field, knows better.

It is not surprising to me that no attempt to solve the case of the missing Quattrocento music has led to a satisfactory answer. It has been my contention that the secret, if there is one, is in the island, not in the gap that divides it from the continent. For the island is largely a mirage of our historical perspective, a tiny object magnified by our faith in the written tradition, at best a floating island, not only surrounded but also supported by the waves of a sea now opaque to our eye, once full of light, of life, and of sound—the sound of unwritten music.⁴

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⁴ Nino Pirrotta, ‘*Ars Nova and Stil Novo*’ in *Music and Culture in Italy from the Middle Ages to the Baroque* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 28, where he devotes a more lengthy argument to this contention.
What he means is that written music, namely Church music, was really just one kind of music performance. Pirrotta hastens to add that we must not assume that the ‘unwritten’ music of the fourteenth century was only monophonic.\(^5\)

Palisca, another distinguished authority on fourteenth-century Italian music, addresses the same limited perspective found in general music history texts:

The conditions that led to the reanimation of literature, the visual arts, and learning also deeply affected music in Italy throughout the period of the Renaissance. Music historians generally have overlooked many of these manifestations because their stated objective has been a history of musical style. But style is only the audible surface of a musical culture, the essence of which must be sought beneath. Style as a criterion is particularly misleading in the Italian Renaissance, because some of the most characteristic music of the period is not preserved in writing, and much of the written music exhibits style elements of undeniably transalpine origin. But this should not lead us to the conclusion that the Renaissance was a northern phenomenon.\(^6\)

But, we would go further than Palisca here. He is correct to say that music historians have concentrated on style. A traditional textbook attempting to find the Renaissance in a church work of Machaut will generally describe the conceptual parts, the components of that work, things like the major chords passing unobtrusively by. But these things are not what makes Machaut sound different, they are only the result of what makes Machaut sound different. A new emphasis on the importance of expressing feeling is what prompted Machaut to make the choices he made. Most music texts which look for early humanists speak primarily of the renewed interest in ancient Greek writings. But for us feeling is the key, not scholarly retrospection. It was not their interest in Greek treatises, but what they found in them which distinguishes the humanistic point of view. In our view, it was the intellectual freedom to think about and value his own feelings which most distinguishes the Renaissance man from Medieval man.

The humanist was the man who discovered that music has to do with the communication of feelings, not numbers. There are theorists today who still don’t ‘get it,’ who teach altered tones and altered chords without reference to the change in feeling which necessitate


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INDEX

A

Adam, first man, 269
Alberti, Leon Battista, b. 1404, Florentine philosopher, 161, 164ff, 167, 169, 172ff
Alberto, Florentine artist, 8
Albrecht of Brandenburg, 1440–1486, 282
Alcibiades, 5th century bc, nephew to Pericles, 36
Alexander the Great, 356–323, 9
Alfonso V, 1416–1458, of Aragon, 295
Ambrosio da Pessano, 15th century church singer in Milan, 188
Anthony of Dornstätt, flutist under Maximilian I, 280
Antigonus, teacher of Alexander the Great, 9
Aquilanus, Seraphinus, 15th century singer, 184
Aristotle, 384–322 bc, Greek philosopher, 5, 27, 105, 239, 241, 261, 289
Aristoxenus, 4th Century bc philosopher, 90, 171
Athanasius, 296–373 writer of Alexandria, 35
Augustin, cornettist under Maximilian I, 278
Augustine of Augsburg, 15th century civic musician in Florence, 178

B

Bembo, Pietro, 15th century poet, 181
Binchois, ca. 1400–1460 Franco-Flemish composer, 211, 221, 228, 241
Boccaccio, Giovanni, 1313–1375, Italian writer, 1ff, 8, 18, 28, 32, 45ff, 144
Boethius, 475–524 AD, mathematician, politician, 147, 238ff, 255
Boiardo, Matteo Maria, 1434–1494, Italian philosopher, poet, 165, 168
Boldrini, Pietro, trumpeter in Treviso, 11
Bonandrea, Giovanni, 14th century lecturer in rhetoric at Bologna, 13
Bono, Pietro of Ferrara, Lutanist, 250
Borsos d’Este of Ferrara, 1450–1471, 179
Brant, Sebastian, 1457–1521, German writer, 256ff, 260ff, 266, 271, 284ff
Brunel, 162
Burgkmair, Hans, 15th century artist, 277

C

Caligula, 12–41 AD, Roman emperor, 36
Calmeta (Colli), Vincenzo, 1460–1508, Italian writer, 172
Caxton, William, 1422–1491, English writer, 310, 317
Celts, Conradus, 1459–1508, German humanist, 253, 279
Chadés, John, singer under Edward III, 132
Charles IV of France, 14
Charles the Bold of Burgundy, 1433–1477, 214, 216, 223, 229ff, 250
Charles V, 69 footnote 1, 95
Charles VI, 1368–1422, King of France, 212, 320
Charles VII, 1403–1461, King of France, 224
Charles VIII of France, 1483–1498, 213
Charles, Duke d’Orléans, 1394–1465, 213
Chastellain, George, 15th century French chronicler, 228
Chaucer, Geoffrey, 1340–1400, English writer, 137ff, 319, 324
Christine de Pizan, 1364–1430, French writer, 95, 224ff
Cicero, 106 – 43 bc, Roman orator, 18, 26, 36, 56, 171, 245
Ciconia, Johannes, 1335–1411, Italian composer, 11
Colonna, 14th century cardinal, 18
Colonna, Francesco, 1433–1527, Italian monk, writer, 18, 161
Compère, Loyset, 1445–1518, French composer, 162
Confrérie de St. Julien, 14th century, 101
Conrad von Zabern, 1410–1481, writer on church singing, 272ff
Convenevole da Prata, 13th century, teacher of Petrarch, 21
Copernicus, Nicolaus, 1473–1543, 1
Corio, Bernardino, 15th century historian, 180
Cortesi, Paolo, 1465–1510, Italian humanist philosopher, 162 footnote 6, 168, 170, 186
Corvinus, Matthias, 1443–1490, King of Hungary, 283
Cyrus of Persia, 6th century BC, 212

D
Dante, 13th century Roman poet, 12
Demetrius, 2nd century BC, painter, 170
Demoncritus, 460–370 BC, Greek philosopher, 7
Dolcibene, distinguished 14th century performer, 14
Domenico da Prato, 1389–1433, Florentine writer, 10
Domitian, 81–96 AD, Roman emperor, 25, 33
Douglas, Lord James of Scotland, 131
Dufay, Guillaume, 1397–1474, Burgundian composer, 211, 221, 228, 231, 236, 238ff, 244
Dunstable, John, 1390–1453, English composer, 211, 221, 239
Durán, Domingo, 15th century Spanish music treatise, 299

E
Edward II, 1284–1327, King of England, 134
Edward III of England, 1327–1377, 128, 132
Edward IV of England, 1461–1483, 320
Enrique IV, 15th century King of Castile, 301
Ercole I of Ferrara, 1471–1505, 179
Este, Beatrice, 1475–1497, 180
Este, Isabella, 1474–1539, 1805ff
Eustache Deschamps, ca. 1346–1406, French poet, 69, 83, 93, 102

F
Federigo da Montefeltro, 1444–1482, of Urbino, 182
Feltre, Vittorino da, leader of humanist school in Mantua, 185
Ferdinand I of Naples, 237
Fernando V, 1474–1516, of Aragon, 295ff
Ficino, Marsilio, 1433–1499, humanist philosopher, 164, 173
Francesco da Milano, 16th century lutanist, 323
Frederick III, 1440–1493, emperor, Holy Roman Empire, 229, 249, 277
Froissart, 1337–1405, chronicler, 131ff, 227

G
Gaffurio, Franchino, 1451–1522, Italian theorist, 161 fn. 1, 165, 171ff, 187
Galileo, 1564–1642, Italian physicist, 1
Gian Galeazzo, Visconti of Milan, 14th century, 15
Giovio, Paolo, contemporary biographer of Leonardo, 191
Giustiniani, Leonardo, 1388–1446, solo singer, 163, 188
Godefroidus, famous 15th century shawm player, 249
Gonzalo de Oviedo, 15th century Spanish writer, 296
Gower, John, 1330–1408, English philosopher, 111, 115
Greban, Arnoul, author of a 15th century mystery play, 221
Gregory the Great, pope, 540–604, 6
Guido d’Arezzo, 241, 299
Gutenberg, Johannes, 1398–1468, German printer, 1

H
Heinrich, German lutanist under Charles the Bold, 250
Henry IV of England, 1399–1413, 319
Henry V of England, 1413–1422, 319
Henry VI of England, 1422–1471, 320
Henry VII of England, 1485–1509, 320
Hoccleve, 1368–1426, English poet, 304
Horace, 65–27 BC, Greek poet, 27, 34, 248

I
Isaac, Heinrich, composer, 162, 183
Isabel of Portugal, 1503–1539, wife to Philip the Good, 232
Isabella of Urbino, 182
Isabella, 1474–1504, of Castile, 295ff

J
Jacopo da Bologna, 1340–1386, composer, 10
Jacques de Lièges, 1260–1330, music theorist, 70, 87ff
Jaime II, 1291–1327 of Aragon, 295
James I of Scotland, 1424–1437, 320
Jean de Gerson, 1363–1429, Chancellor of the University of Paris, 218ff, 226
Jean de Muris, ca. 1290–1350, music theorist, 92ff
Jean Froissart, 1337–1405, French poet, chronicler, 80, 86, 97, 99
Jehan de Lescurel, d. 1304, poet, 79
Index 335

John II of France, 1350–1364, 97, 227
John the Fearless, 1404–1419 of Burgundy, 227ff
John XXII, pope, 1324–1325, 90ff
John XXIII, pope, 282
Juan del Encina, 1468–1529, Spanish philosopher, 291ff, 293 fn. 25
Juan I of Aragon, 1350–1396, 287, 295
King of Cyprus, 97
Lala of Cyzicus, 1st century BC female ancient painter, 53
Landini, Francesco, Italian composer, 1335–1397, 10
Langland, William, 1332–1386, English writer, 105, 120ff, 127, 130ff, 135
Laudsingers of Santa Maria Novella, 66
Leonardo da Vinci, 1452–1519, Italian artist, inventor, 1, 161, 170, 180, 191ff, 324
Lido, Antonio, 14th century professor of medicine and music at Padua, 13
Lomazzo, 16th century writer on Leonardo as a musician, 191
Loqueille, Richard de, 15th century French poet, 225
Lorenzo da Pavia, 15th century Italian keyboard maker, 181
Lorenzo the Magnificent, 1449–1492, Florentine, 182ff, 185
Louis IX, 1214–1270, King of France, 224
Lovato de Lovati, 14th century Italian poet, 14
Luther, 253
Lydgate, John, 1370–1450, English writer, 303ff

Machaut, Guillaume de, 1300–1377, French composer, 4, 69ff, 324
Marchetto of Padua, 1274–1319, music theorist, 5ff, 8ff, 13
Marcus Brutus, 85–42 BC Roman politician, 19
Margaret of England, wife to Charles the bold of Burgundy, 233
Maria d’Aquino, daughter to Robert, King of Naples, 45
Martin le Franc, 1410–1461, French poet, 211
Matteo of Perugia, 15th century church singer in Milan, 188
Maximilian I, 1459–1519, emperor, Holy Roman Empire, 178, 229, 277ff, 283
Medwall, Henry, b. 1461, English playwright, 306ff
Meister Eckhart, 1260–1327, German philosopher, 255
Michelet, Jules, 19th century writer, 1
Monteverdi, 66
Mozart, 26
Müller, Johann, German Renaissance humanist, 253

Nero, 37–68, Roman emperor, 36
Newton, Isaac, 1642–1727, 1
Neyts, 15th century trombonist, Burgundian court, 277ff
Niccolò III of Ferrara, 1393–1441, 179
Nicholas of Cusa, 1401–1464, German philosopher, 254ff
Nicholas V, pope, 1447–1455, 161

Obrecht, Jacob, 1457–1505, Flemish composer, 231, 242
Ockeghem, Johannes, 1420–1496, Flemish composer, 211, 221, 238ff, 244
Odington, Walter, 14th century English politician, 110
Orbus, Charles & Jean, Flemish brothers, artists on the viol, 250

Pericles, 495–429 BC Greek General, 36
Peter I, King of Cyprus, 10
Petrarch, Francesco, 1304–1374, 1ff, 8, 10, 12, 18ff, 46, 324
Philip I of Castile, 1478–1506, son of Maximilian I, 230
Philip the Bold of Burgundy, 1363–1404, 227ff
Philip the Good of Burgundy, 1419–1457, 228ff, 280
Philippe de Commynes, 1447–1511, French writer, diplomat, 214ff, 223
Philippe de Vitry, 1291–1361, French composer, music theorist, 32, 92
Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni, 15th century philosopher, 161, footnote 2
Pierre d’Auvergne, 1130–1170 French poet, 31
Pierre de Prost of Bruges, 15th c. instrument maker, 228
Pietro d’Anghiera, Italian musician in Spain, 287
Plato, 429–347 BC, Greek philosopher, 36, 37, 164257, 261
Poliziano, Angelo, 1454–1494, Italian poet, 162ff, 167, 172, 183ff, 185, 187, 189
Porrus, king who fought Alexander the Great, 9
Praetorius, Michael, 16th century composer, conductor, 273
Prosdocimus de Beldemantis, 15th century Italian theorist, 172
Ptolemy, 90
Pucci, Antonio, 14th century singer, 12
Pythagoras, 570–490 BC, philosopher, 257, 267

R
Ramos de Pareja, 15th century professor at Salamanca, 299
René of Anjou, 15th century noble, 225
Richard II of England, 1377–1399, 128, 130ff
Richard III of England, 1483–1485, 320
Robert de la Magdelaine, singer under Philip the Good, 228
Rojas, Fernando, 15th century Spanish playwright, 288ff
Rolle, Richard, 14th century English poet, theologian, 110, 113ff, 117ff, 124, 126
Ruiz, Juan, 14th century Spanish poet, 287ff
Ruy Sánchez de Arévalo, 15th century Spanish educator, 296

S
Sacchetti, Franco, 1335–1400, poet & author of ‘tales,’ 7ff, 10, 12, 14
Salutati, Coluccio, 1331–1406, Church humanist, 6
Sardanapalus, King of, 264
Savonarola, 1452–1498, Florentine friar, politician, 162, 183
Seneca, 4 BC – 65 AD, Roman philosopher, 25, 43
Sforza, Bianca Maria, 1472–1510, 179
Sforza, Francesco, 1401–1466, Milan, 184
Sforza, Galeazzo Maria, 1466–1476, of Milan, 179
Sforza, Giangaleazzo, 1469–1494, Milan, 180
Sforza, Ludovico, 1481–1499, of Milan, 174, 180
Sigismund, 1368–1437, Emperor, Holy Roman Empire, 283
Socrates, 469–399 BC, Greek philosopher, 255, 257, 261
St. Ambrose, 374–397 Bishop of Milan, 6, 35, 66
St. Augustine, 354–430, Church leader, 6, 35, 105
St. Bernard, 12th century church leader, 6
St. Jerome, 347–420, 6, 254
Stewdl, trombonist under Maximilian I, 278
Valla, Giorgio, 1447–1500 Italian music theorist and philosopher, 166, 171
Varro, 116 – 27 BC, Roman writer, 38
Vergerio, Pietro, 14th century humanist and professor of logic at Padua, 13
Villon, François, 1431–1463, French poet and thief, 216, 218ff, 225
Virgil, 70–19 BC Roman poet, 6, 18, 38

W
Wenck, John, 15th century German writer, 255
William of Ockham, ca. 1300–1349, English philosopher, 106
Wimpheling, Jakob, 1450–1528, German Renaissance humanist, 253, 279

T
Terence, 195–159 Roman playwright, 38
Tinctoris, Johannes, 1435–1511, music theorist, 237ff
Traversari, Ambrogio, 1386–1439, monk, 163, 188
Trithemius, Johannes, abbot of Sponheim, 253
Tunstede, Simon, 14th century English theorist, 110

U
Ugolino of Orvieto, fl. ca. 1430–1435, Italian philosopher, 165

V
Valgulio, Carlo, papal secretary, 1481–1485, 170, 186
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. David Whitwell is a graduate (‘with distinction’) of the University of Michigan and the Catholic University of America, Washington DC (PhD, Musicology, Distinguished Alumni Award, 2000) and has studied conducting with Eugene Ormandy and at the Akademie fur Musik, Vienna. Prior to coming to Northridge, Dr. Whitwell participated in concerts throughout the United States and Asia as Associate First Horn in the USAF Band and Orchestra in Washington DC, and in recitals throughout South America in cooperation with the United States State Department.

At the California State University, Northridge, which is in Los Angeles, Dr. Whitwell developed the CSUN Wind Ensemble into an ensemble of international reputation, with international tours to Europe in 1981 and 1989 and to Japan in 1984. The CSUN Wind Ensemble has made professional studio recordings for BBC (London), the Koln Westdeutscher Rundfunk (Germany), NOS National Radio (The Netherlands), Zurich Radio (Switzerland), the Television Broadcasting System (Japan) as well as for the United States State Department for broadcast on its ‘Voice of America’ program. The CSUN Wind Ensemble’s recording with the Mirecourt Trio in 1982 was named the ‘Record of the Year’ by The Village Voice. Composers who have guest conducted Whitwell’s ensembles include Aaron Copland, Ernest Krenek, Alan Hovhaness, Morton Gould, Karel Husa, Frank Erickson and Vaclav Nelhybel.

Dr. Whitwell has been a guest professor in 100 different universities and conservatories throughout the United States and in 23 foreign countries (most recently in China, in an elite school housed in the Forbidden City). Guest conducting experiences have included the Philadelphia Orchestra, Seattle Symphony Orchestra, the Czech Radio Orchestras of Brno and Bratislava, The National Youth Orchestra of Israel, as well as resident wind ensembles in Russia, Israel, Austria, Switzerland, Germany, England, Wales, The Netherlands, Portugal, Peru, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Canada and the United States.

He is a past president of the College Band Directors National Association, a member of the Prasidium of the International Society for the Promotion of Band Music, and was a member of the found-
ing board of directors of the World Association for Symphonic Bands and Ensembles (WASBE). In 1964 he was made an honorary life member of Kappa Kappa Psi, a national professional music fraternity. In September, 2001, he was a delegate to the UNESCO Conference on Global Music in Tokyo. He has been knighted by sovereign organizations in France, Portugal and Scotland and has been awarded the gold medal of Kerkrade, The Netherlands, and the silver medal of Wangen, Germany, the highest honor given wind conductors in the United States, the medal of the Academy of Wind and Percussion Arts (National Band Association) and the highest honor given wind conductors in Austria, the gold medal of the Austrian Band Association. He is a member of the Hall of Fame of the California Music Educators Association.

Dr. Whitwell’s publications include more than 127 articles on wind literature including publications in Music and Letters (London), the London Musical Times, the Mozart-Jahrbuch (Salzburg), and 39 books, among which is his 13-volume *History and Literature of the Wind Band and Wind Ensemble* and an 8-volume series on *Aesthetics in Music*. In addition to numerous modern editions of early wind band music his original compositions include 5 symphonies.

David Whitwell was named as one of six men who have determined the course of American bands during the second half of the 20th century, in the definitive history, *The Twentieth Century American Wind Band* (Meredith Music).

A doctoral dissertation by German Gonzales (2007, Arizona State University) is dedicated to the life and conducting career of David Whitwell through the year 1977. David Whitwell is one of nine men described by Paula A. Crider in *The Conductor’s Legacy* (Chicago: GIA, 2010) as ‘the legendary conductors’ of the 20th century.

‘I can’t imagine the 2nd half of the 20th century—without David Whitwell and what he has given to all of the rest of us.’ Frederick Fennell (1993)