Tidings of Antiquity: 
A Transcription of Sixteenth-Century Polyphonic Music

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For music scholars, sixteenth-century polyphonic music is not an unknown variety. This style belongs to the Renaissance, which spans roughly from 1400 A.D. to 1700 A.D., and is known for its highly contrapuntal and syncopated design. Being a predominately vocal genre, polyphonic music of the Renaissance is still performed by choirs and vocal ensembles regularly. What is not often discussed, however, is the fact that the modern publications of Renaissance music are in fact transcriptions from an old system of notation, ‘White Mensural’ notation, to modern notation for the sake of convenience.

In order to truly understand this music, knowledge of how this music was conceived, created, and performed is needed. Composers and musicians of the sixteenth century did not read, write, or think about music in the same way as their modern counterparts. However, it is all equally music. To better understand this, it is important to remember that the ‘music’ we see everyday in notated form is not, in actuality, music. Alternatively, it is merely a representation of music, giving the reader an elaborate set of instructions as to how to perform a piece. Furthermore, what is currently recognized as music notation is not a constant, as seen in Renaissance. Instead, it is a result of a long history of the development and refinement of the transmission of music that has its beginnings in the birth of humanity.

Music has been a vital part of human cultures from their very beginnings. With the birth of music, however, came the issue of how this music would be remembered and passed on. The creation of music notation practices developed out of this need to record,
recall, and transmit music. On the discussion of the development of music notation up to the period of discussion, the late musicologist Willi Apel wrote:

> We are presented here with a seven-hundred-year-long development embracing the period from about 900 to 1600, during which the principles of notation underwent such radical changes that a series of different systems arise, each of which demands a unify separate study.¹

Over the centuries, music notation systems have come and gone. Some systems have evolved and contributed to the development of modern notation, while others have died out. All, nonetheless, provide a portal to the past and with study provide us with the tools to look at music within the historical past. Transcriptions, therefore, offer us a tool to study the music of the past by putting it into a modern context that is easily understood by today’s scholars and musicians.

The following discussion is prompted by the transcription of an introit by sixteenth-century composer Henricus Isaac, which will be referred to as ‘Puer natus est’ (taken from the first line of text) for the remainder of this essay. In order to fully understand this piece, the following discussion will center around it’s the piece and its composer, the musical practices of the sixteenth century and its notational system, and the process for transcribing music from white mensural notation to modern notation, as well as an examination of issues related specifically to ‘Puer natus est’ and its transcription.

**Profile of ‘Puer natus est’**

First let us take a closer look at the piece that has prompted this discussion. Written by Henricus Isaac, ‘Puer natus est’ is an introit: part of the Roman Catholic Mass.² An introit takes place at the beginning of the mass as the presiding officials or
clergy enter and advance to the altar. It is part of the mass Proper, indicating that it changes in accordance with the date in the liturgical calendar, unlike the mass Ordinaries which remain relatively constant throughout the church year. An introit is usually comprised of an antiphon whose text corresponds with the specific day, a short psalm verse relating to or supporting the antiphon, and the doxology (i.e. “Glory be to the father, and to the son, and to the holy ghost”). The introit would then end with the restatement of the antiphon, which is the longest of the three parts. However during the renaissance, composers took to omitting the doxology when setting introits.

Isaac’s ‘Puer natus est’ was written for the Christmas season in the liturgical year. It is based on a traditional chant which appears in the Liber Usualis, a compellation of frequently used Gregorian chant Propers. The chant ‘Puer natus est’ is found there in the section pertaining to the ‘Nativity of our Lord’ and specifically for the third mass of Christmas day. The translated text of the antiphon reads: ‘A boy is born to us, and a Son is given to us: Whose government is upon His shoulder: and His Name shall be called, the Angel of Great Counsel.’ Following the antiphon is the psalm taken from Psalms 98:1 which reads: ‘Sing ye to the Lord a new song: because He hath done wonderful things.’ In correspondence with the tradition of the times, ‘Puer natus est’ contains no setting of the doxology. ‘Puer natus est’ therefore ends with the repeat of the antiphon following the psalm as was custom.

Henricus Isaac: The Life of a Composer

Henricus Isaac was one of the most influential composers of the sixteenth century. Josquin de Prez is the only figure to gain a greater reputation. A master of all genres,
Isaac wrote masses, motets, as well as both secular and sacred songs. However, he is probably best known for his mass settings; especially famous are his *Choralis Constantinus I-III*. His students included the prominent composers of the time Adam Rener, Balthazar Resinarius, Petrus Tritonius, and Ludwig Senfl.\(^5\) He descended from the Franco-Flemish musical traditions in northern Europe, but his influence spanned across the European continent. Reinhard Strohm writes:

> His career is more memorable than those of many contemporaries; his personal association with two of the greatest Renaissance patrons, his music on humanist texts and his voluntary choice of Florence as his permanent home place him at the centre of the so-called musical Renaissance. Isaac is unique, furthermore, in that he influenced not only the Franco-Flemish and Italian musical traditions, but also the Central European one (thus anticipating Lassus). As if in gratitude, German-speaking musicians of several centuries (particularly the 19th) have cherished him as the composer of *Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen* (which, contrafacted as *O Welt, ich muss dich lassen*, had been naturalized as a Lutheran chorale and set by J.S. Bach)…\(^6\)

Isaac’s music is an excellent example of sixteenth-century polyphony as well as his genius.

Henricus Isaac was born sometime in the mid-fifteenth century. There is some discrepancy as to the exact location of his birth, in later authenticated documents he claimed that he was from Flanders, however others wrote that he had been from Brabant. Some agreement can be made however in that he was most probably born and raised in the Flemish-speaking part of southern Netherlands, and area that may have been generally referred to as ‘Flanders’.\(^7\) Further, there is nothing known of his youth or social background.

What is known of Isaac’s early years can only be inferred from what is known of Isaac’s later life and a few documents that have surfaced. Isaac seems to have had a very good general education, but did not attend a university because of his family’s layman status.\(^8\) However, despite not having access to higher education, Isaac seems to have had
established himself as a musician in the Netherlands as he had three motets copied into an Innsbruck manuscript by 1470.9

What is known of Isaac’s musical career began in Florence, Italy. It was not uncommon for Italian patrons to recruit Flemish musicians10, and in July 1485 Isaac was employed as a singer at the baptistery of S. Giovanni in Florence.11 There he became part of the “domestic circle of artists and musicians” of Lorenzo de’ Medici (1449-1492), for whom he was to write music and set songs to enhance the musical life of the Medici family and the city of Florence.12

The Medici family played a large role in Isaac’s time in Florence. It is thought that Isaac may have given music lessons to Lorenzo’s sons, Piero and Giovanni, and it is said that Isaac’s marriage to Bartolomea Bello,13 the daughter of a Florentine artisan, had been arranged by Lorenzo himself.14 Lorenzo de’ Medici died April 8, 1492. Following which, the singers of S. Giovanni were disbanded, and by November 1494 the Medici family had been banished from Florence, leaving Isaac without employment.15

Isaac’s next place of employment was to be in Rome. Isaac’s first encounter with Rome was in 1492 following the death of Lorenzo de’ Medici, when Piero de’ Medici took Isaac and two other musicians to Rome for the coronation of Pope Alexander the IV.16 In November 1496 he took his position under Maximillian I, ‘King of the Romans’, and on April 3, 1497 Isaac was confirmed as the appointed court composer to chapel in Vienna, which had recently been instituted.17

From this time onward, Isaac experienced a considerable about of freedom to travel and establish himself in many areas of Europe. In 1506, Isaac joined the lay fraternity of the abbey of Neustift (now Novacella) near the town of Brixen (now
Bressonone), located in the Tyrol region of Western Central Europe; in 1510, Maximillian provided Isaac with a benefice near Verona; and in 1514, Isaac was in Innsbruck, Germany. The Medici family had been restored to power in Florence in 1512, now with Piero and Giovanni at the head, both of whom continued to favor Isaac, and on the recommendations of the Medici’s and Papal recommendations, Isaac was appointed provost of the chapter of Florence Cathedral in 1514. In 1515, Maximillian gave Isaac permission to live permanently in Florence with salary where he continued to live until his death in 1517.

**White Mensural Notation: an Overview**

The notation system used by Isaac and his contemporaries is known as ‘White Mensural’ notation which developed around the middle of the fifteenth century, and continued to be used through the end of the sixteenth century, and is most closely associated with the Renaissance. The beginning of the fifteenth century is the most generally acknowledged division between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but former University of Minnesota professor, Lloyd Ultan, reminds readers, “[T]he designation of a change in historical period should not imply a sudden change in style,” and notation is an overarching feature that connects the two. Therefore change in musical practice was a gradual practice.

The Middle Ages is generally recognized as the time spanning from the beginning of the ninth century through the fourteenth or fifteenth century. During this time, a large number of notational systems came and passed during, however the *Ars Nova* notation
toward the end of the Middle Ages became the predecessor of White Mensural notation of the Renaissance. In an introduction to the Middle Ages, Ultan writes:23

The fourteenth century in music history is characterized as the Ars Nova (new art). The name taken from the title of a treatise by the composer-theorist Philippe de Vitri (c. 1290-1361). It was used by theorist of the day to distinguish from the preceding period (the Ars Antiqua) this time of vigorous activity, significant development and compositional practice. (61)

In Ars Nova notation all note-heads were filled in, creating black notes.24 However, in the mid-fifteenth century this black notation underwent a change to leaving the note heads open to indicate a longer note value, and filling in note heads to indicate a shorter note value. The name ‘White Mensural’ notation comes from this change to using open note heads, or ‘white notes’.

Notes and Rests

In white mensural notation there are eight different note values, each with a corresponding rests: the maxima, longa, brevis, semibrevis, minima, semiminima, fusa, and semifusa. In sixteenth-century polyphonic music, the longest note value available, the maxima, was very rarely used. When it was used, it served mostly as a final tone of a vocal line that was to be sustained or for “representing a voice part augmenting the note values of another part.”25 Conversely, the smallest note value, the semifusa, was also rarely used in the ecclesiastical modes.

![Note values and rests diagram]

Note values, in order of duration held, and their corresponding rests
Ligatures

Unlike modern notation in which each one symbol represents one corresponding pitch and rhythm, white mensural notation employs the use of ligatures which are symbols which represent two or more pitches (and rhythms). Apel gives a brief definition and origin of ligatures, stating:

[M]ensural notation employs certain symbols which represent combinations of two or more tones and which are called ligatures. These forms developed from certain neumes (i.e., mnemonic signs indicating upward or downward progress of the melody without showing the exact pitches or the rhythm), such as were in use during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries for the writing of plainsong.  

There were four different types of neumes used in plainsong notation for indicating an approximated pitch: the punctum, virga, clivis, and podatus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>punctum</th>
<th>virga</th>
<th>clivis</th>
<th>podatus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Plainsong neumes

The punctum and virga were used to represent a single tone: in which the virga indicated a longer tone and the punctum a shorter tone— the other two neumes, the clivis and podatus, were used to represent more than one tone: in which the clivis indicated a downward motion in pitch and the podatus indicated upward motion in pitch. However, around the middle of the twelfth century these neumes were converted into more definitive forms in the ‘Roman chorale notation’. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>punctum</th>
<th>virga</th>
<th>clivis</th>
<th>podatus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Plainsong neumes with their respective form in Roman choral notation
It was not until around 1200 that these neumes were implemented in polyphonic music, thus assuming exact metrical values of the *brevis* (B) and *longa* (L) respectively; in which the first tone became a *brevis* and the second became a *longa*.

This was the combination of metrical values considered the most appropriate, but other metrical combination were available. This created the terminology labeling such combinations as proper (*cum proprietatibus*) if the first tone was a *brevis* and perfect (*cum perfectio*) if the second tone was a *longa*, and alternatively labeling as without (*sine*) these qualities if their metrical values did not ascribe to the preferred metrical values. The following table shows a list of the possible metrical combinations in ligatures and how they would thus be notated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Terminology</th>
<th>Ascending Form</th>
<th>Descending Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B L</td>
<td><em>cum proprietate et cum perfectione</em></td>
<td>![Ascending Form for B L]</td>
<td>![Descending Form for B L]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L L</td>
<td><em>sine proprietate et cum perfectione</em></td>
<td>![Ascending Form for L L]</td>
<td>![Descending Form for L L]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B B</td>
<td><em>cum proprietate et sine perfectione</em></td>
<td>![Ascending Form for B B]</td>
<td>![Descending Form for B B]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L B</td>
<td><em>sine proprietate et sine perfectione</em></td>
<td>![Ascending Form for L B]</td>
<td>![Descending Form for L B]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S S</td>
<td><em>cum opposita proprietate</em></td>
<td>![Ascending Form for S S]</td>
<td>![Descending Form for S S]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Possible ligatures and their corresponding notations

**Colored Notes**

The coloration of notes is a practice in which notes that usually had an open or ‘white’ note head are filled in to create rhythmic variations. A colored note receives two-thirds the value of the original note value. Therefore if the *semibrevis* equals a quarter note, a colored *semibrevis-minima* pattern becomes a dotted eighth-sixteenth rhythm in modern notation.
Musica Ficta

*Musica Ficta* is a term used to refer to accidentals, or altered pitches in sixteenth-century polyphonic music. Sixteenth-century music was based in the ecclesiastical modes. In Gregorian chant, in order to correct the unpleasant tri-tone created between F and B, especially in the Lydian and Mixolydian modes, a B-flat (never F-sharp) was implemented. However, with the advent of polyphony, more accidentals were added in order to correct the unused intervals of the seventh, the tri-tone, and any other augmented, diminished, or chromatic interval as well as provide a leading tone in cadential formulas.³³

The name *musica ficta*, or fake music, derives from the fact that these accidentals were not written in the actual music. Instead, performers knew the rules and practices regarding what intervals and leaps were acceptable and inserted these altered pitches into the performance in accordance with the practices of the time.

The Direct

The ‘direct’ is a unique feature in white mensural notation, to which we have no equivalent. It consists of a marking at the end of each stave signaling what the first note of the following stave will be. The ‘direct’ has no uniform appearance, but instead its physical characteristics were up to whoever was making the copy. An example of a ‘direct’ follows. (Note: this is the same as the direct found in ‘Puer natus est’ as seen in Appendix B.)

\[ \text{A ‘Direct’} \]

The Division of Time
One of the most striking elements when approaching music in white mensural notation, is that this music does not contain measures or barlines. While double barlines may exist to denote changes in sections, these are the only units of division found in white mensural notation. Although the concept of the measure did not exist in sixteenth century music, there was an organized system of beats.

While modern conceptions of time signatures and tempo markings were nonexistent in sixteenth century polyphony, the concepts of meter and pulse were still driving forces behind the music. The tactus is the conception of beat or pulse in sixteenth century music. It is a large beat conception which can be subdivided into groups of three (tempus perfectum) or two (tempus imperfectum). One tactus was usually recognized as the amount of time it took for the conductor to show a single complete hand movement, almost always consisting of a downbeat and an upbeat; in which duple meter was shown in equal length subdivisions, where in triple meter the downbeat was twice the duration of the upbeat.\textsuperscript{35} In most cases, this steady pulse was to remain constant throughout a piece of music. The tempo or speed of the tactus was originally conceived to be the rate of the human heart beat in the fifteenth century, but as the sixteenth century progressed more liberties were taken with this tempo. Although once slower, by the sixteenth century the tactus was usually conceived as the length of one semibreve.\textsuperscript{36}.

**Musical Practices in the Sixteenth Century**

In addition to the notation itself, there are specific music practices of the sixteenth century that are important to understand. Namely what type of music was being written and how it was performed.
Renaissance polyphonic music was primarily a vocal genre. While, instruments were frequently used, they functioned principally as accompaniment to or doubling of the vocal parts. Smith writes, “Melody in sixteenth-century music is essentially vocal melody, reflecting the range and natural tendencies of the human voice.” Because this music centered around the voice, the function of choirs is especially important.

Chapel choirs were the predominant performing vehicle for sixteenth-century music. These choirs were organized in order to provide music for the daily services of the church. Usually comprised of about twenty to thirty singers, these were the best musicians of a city, often containing composers who would meet the need for a large amount of music. These choirs primarily sang a cappella, as adding instruments was usually seen as a secular style. Furthermore, choir membership was restricted to only male. Boys were used to sing the highest vocal lines and were usually trained in the cathedral school.

Just as modern choral music separates voices into four distinct strata, sixteenth-century music also employed distinction between voice range and quality. Similarly, there are four types of “vocal tones” denoted in Renaissance music: cantus (descantus) or superius, which required a pure vocal tone and was usually sung by boys ages eight to thirteen and occasionally by men in falsetto; altus, which is described as a “young man’s voice” usually sung by young tenors; tenor, which denoted singer’s with a medium range and a voice ‘par excellence’ as compositions usually centered around this part; and bassus, which called for a deep voice that could support the other parts. Although there were only four distinctions between voices, it was common to have music in more than
four parts. If such was the case, one of the voice parts would be doubled (i.e. two descantus lines).

Unlike modern scores in which all parts are printed one system, in sixteenth-century polyphonic music each vocal line was written, printed, and read on separate scores. Thus instead of a single score, parts were printed into part-books, such as ‘Puer natus est’, which contained a collection a music pieces with the vocal lines of a single voice part.  Or alternatively, these parts could be printed into choir-books, which contained all four vocal parts with in it, but laid them out side by side. Such as the following:

From the Collection of Polyphonic Hymns and Magnificats, Costanzo Festa: c. 1538

Because these choirs were primarily based in the churches, music for the Mass was in constant want. Therefore, the Mass became the most abundant and most
important musical form of the Renaissance. Music for the mass originated in the ecclesiastical modes. These were a system of eight modes that were established by Pope Gregory I and are found in plainsong and Gregorian chant. These eight modes were the only sanctioned modes from which sacred music could be written, all sacred music of the sixteenth century was based in these church modes.

**The Transcription Process**

With all this in mind, transcribing a piece of music from white mensural notation, specifically ‘Puer natus est’ in this case, becomes a task understanding the rules and implementing them to recreate the music in a modern form. From here, the discussion will focus primarily on transcription procedures and how these are demonstrated in Isaac’s ‘Puer natus est’.

**Time Signature**

When going about putting meter to white mensural notation, it is first important to keep in mind that this is a modern convention that serves only as a means of convenience to aid modern society with a music notation system that is readily understandable. Ultan explains:

> Two modern notational devices that were not available during the period we are considering are the barline and the tie. We must not be misled by the metrical implications of the former as they appear in the examples, and we must understand that the later was accommodated by the use of the appropriate note values.

To determine a time signature for a transcription of a piece of music written in white mensural notation, one must first determine whether the piece is comprised of beat groupings in two or in three. In the case of ‘Puer natus est,’ we have a piece based in groups of two. This gives us two beats per *semibreve*; or two *minimas* per semibreve.
Because the minima contains the pulse, it will be assigned the value equal to the modern quarter note, we can decide upon a time signature of 2/4.

**Value Conversion**

Since it has been decided in determining the time signature that the minima will be equal to a quarter note, the rest of the note values can be determined from that constant. Each note value in white mensural notation that that increases or decreases the duration of the pitch corresponds accordingly with each increasing or decreasing note value in modern notation. Accordingly, a semibreve is equal to the modern half-note and the semiminima an eighth-note; the breve would then be equal to a whole note and the fusa a sixteenth-note, and so on and so forth.

**Identifying Ligatures, Colored Notes, and Musica Ficta**

In scholarly transcriptions of white mensural notation, notes that were originally grouped together into a ligature are denoted by a bracket ( [ ] ) over the relevant notes. Alternatively, rhythmic patterns that are produced by colored notes are denoted by a broken bracket ( ( ) ) over the notes concerned. Musica ficta is denoted by the accidental placed above the note affected.

**Text Underlay**

The underlying of text is one of the most tedious parts of the transcription due to the fact that syllables and notes do not always line up in sixteenth-century music. Even in the time of this music’s conception, it was up to the performers to decide precisely how words were to be divided and on which notes specific syllables where to be placed. Therefore, when setting text to a transcription, much of the exact placement of syllables is up the judgment of the transcriber. However, general practices and ‘rules’ of the time
are known, and some general guidelines and principles are laid out in the *New Grove Encyclopedia of Music*:

### General Principles of Text Underlay

1. **Syntactic articulation:** coordinating the musical phrases with larger and, as far as possible, smaller verbal units;

2. **Initiality:** it is usually safe to assume that the first note of a phrase will carry the first syllable of a word;

3. **Finality:** the last syllable is likely to fall on the last note of a phrase;

4. **Ligature groupings:** the syllable usually falls on their first pitch only;

5. **Successivity:** for purposes of understandability it is preferable to present syllables in close succession, leaving the last accented one to be delivered on the notes that remain;

6. **Accentuality:** long notes suggest an adaptation to stressed syllables and shorter notes to unstressed ones. But other kinds of accents should be considered, namely the rhetorical accent, which implies its own patterns of stress; and the musical accent, whereby certain words are highlighted for inherently musical reasons;

7. **Verbal substantiality:** where possible, significant notes should be associated with significant syllables;

8. **Linguistic consistency:** different systems of accentuation apply to different languages, and the same language may be pronounced differently by speakers of different nationalities;

9. **Textural demands:** syllabic writing premises a tighter co-ordination of musical and verbal elements than does melismatic writing.

By implementing these rules, the task of setting text becomes much easier, but the exact text underlay is up for interpretation.

### Melodic Analysis of “Puer natus est’ and Specific Issue

Once the piece has been transcribed into modern notation, out of part-books and into a form which lets the reader look at all parts simultaneously in vertical alignment, analyzing and understanding how a piece of sixteenth century music is constructed and organized becomes much easier. Such as in ‘Puer natus est’, it is only now that it can be
seen how each individual part comes together with the others and how they intertwine and interlock.

The first thing that can easily be seen once a piece is transcribed is the mode. ‘Puer natus est’ is in the Mixolydian mode, which means that the fifth scale degree in a major scale serves as the tonal center for the piece. Because “Puer natus est” is in a nontransposed mode, or is without a key signature, this means G serves as the tonal center, also known as the final. The mode can usually be determined from the starting pitch and the final pitch of a piece of music. Although it is not required for a first note of a piece to point to the mode, it is a very common practice to begin and end a piece on the final or its dominant. ‘Puer natus est’ begins with the soprano chant which starts on G, after which all subsequent parts enter on G, except the alto which enters last on scale degree four. Furthermore, the parts end with soprano, tenor, and bass all on the final, and with the alto on the dominant D.

Another interesting feature in ‘Puer natus est’ that becomes readily noticeable once transcribed is the use of ‘imitation’ and ‘paired imitation’ to construct much of this piece. In sixteenth-century music, a common practice was to take a small melodic idea and have it occur throughout two or more parts successively, known as imitation. The most common point of imitation is at the fourth or fifth, intervallically from the original statement. Entering of the unison or octave, however, is the second frequent point of imitation, while other intervals could be used as well but are not frequent.

In the antiphon of ‘Puer natus est’, four-voice imitation is used to start the polyphonic section. The motive, taken directly from the Gregorian chant, starts in the tenor, the imitated in the bass two beat later at the unison. The motive then gets passed to
the soprano, entering at the octave, and finally the alto comes in, only coming in on the pitch C, a fourth above the original statement, each entering sequentially two beat after the proceeding voice enters. From this point, the tenor, bass, and alto continue using imitation at the unison and octave. Such as in the phrase ‘et filius’ starting in measure eight and ‘cujus imperium’ starting in measure fourteen. In both instances, the tenor remains the originator of the imitation. In measure twenty-five, four-voice imitation is employed again, this time starting in the bass and then moving to the tenor, soprano, and alto respectively; each voice entering at the unison or octave. A new phrase is originated in measure thirty in the alto line which is imitated by the bass, tenor, and soprano at the fourth in two-beat intervals, similar to the beginning. After which the bass, tenor, and soprano continue imitation at the unison and octave leading to the final five bars of the antiphon.

In the psalm, instead of each voice entering individually, the use of paired imitation drives the piece forward. The polyphonic section begins with the soprano and alto entering together, laying out a two-bar statement. In measure three, the tenor and bass enter at the octave, repeating the same two-bar phrase. This is followed immediately by the soprano and alto setting out a new idea in measure fifty-three, imitated at the fifth by the bass and tenor a beat and a half later.

One especially unique feature of this particular piece is its bass line. The bass line employs an extended range as well as demands great vocal flexibility of the performer. The vocal line spans a range from B6 to F4. While not a particularly low range, the continual melismas leading to Es and Fs above middle C, are at the very top, or even slightly above, the range usually considered appropriate for basses. Additionally, the
highly melismatic line is not typical of bass lines, which are usually used to function as a base to ground the harmony of a piece of music. One possible reason for such an unusual bass line is that this part was actually written for Isaac himself. Also a highly skilled vocalist, it is thought that Isaac may have written this particular bass line to show off his own skill as a singer.

**Moving Forward**

Through this process of study and transcription, we can better understand the music of the past and how it relates to modern music of today. A popular style of music still today, sixteenth century music is a mainstay of choral repertoire throughout the western world. The more that is understood about this music—how, where, and why it was written—the more authentic such pieces will be. Further more, it is important to understand the music of the past in order to understand the music of today. Just as white mensural notation and the musical practices of the sixteenth century were influenced by the musical practices of the ages before, much of modern musical practices are the direct descendent of sixteenth-century practices.

While it is doubtful that anyone is going to go out and start writing music in white mensural notation today, at least they will not be making any doing so, it is important to understand about this past musical practice. It is our past; our history. Cicero once said, “History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illumines reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life and brings us tidings of antiquity.” Through the study and understanding of musics of the past, we can see how far we have come and
how our music is a product of that musical past. It brings a better understanding of the present, while letting us experience the past—‘Tidings of Antiquity’.

1 Apel, Willi, *Notation of Polyphonic Music* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1953), 85
2 The inscription Introitus Primus Henricus Isaac is found on the Altus print.
3 See ‘Appendix A’
5 Strohm, 2007
6 Strohm, 2007
7 Strohm, 2007
8 Strohm, 2007
9 Strohm, 2007
10 It is known that Piero de’ Medici recruited in the southern Netherlands in 1468: Strohm, 2007
11 Strohm, 2007
12 Strohm, 2007
13 Isaac was married to Bartolomea Bello sometime before 1490. It is not believed that they had any children as no children we ever mentioned in any of Isaac’s three wills: Strohm, 2007
14 Strohm 2007
15 Strohm 2007
16 Strohm, 2007
17 Strohm, 2007
18 Strohm, 2007
19 Strohm, 2007
20 Isaac’s continued salary was most likely for compositions including parts I and III of the *Choralis Constantinus* and for diplomatic activities. (Strohm 2007)
21 Strohm, 2007
23 For more in-depth study of Medieval music and the *Ars Nova* see *Music Theory: Problems and Practices in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* by Lloyd Ultan, 1977.
24 With the exception of colored notes, or red notes, to create syncopation: Ultan, 64-5
26 Apel, 87-8
28 Apel, 88
29 Apel, 88
31 Apel, 88
32 Compare ‘Appendix B’ (soprano prints: first print, third and fourth notes on second line) with ‘Appendix C’ (soprano line m. 12)
34 Image from Dolmetsch Online, admin. Dr. Brian Blood. <http://dolmetsch.com>
36 Brown, 2008
37 Smith, 28
38 Smith, 11
40 See ‘Appendix B’
42 Ultan, 150
43 Ultan, 144
44 Smith, 14
46 Smith, 17
47 Smith, 99
48 See ‘Appendix C’
49 See ‘Appendix C’
50 From Cicero, *Pro Publio Sestio*
Bibliography


