

CHAPTER 26

DIFFERENCE, DISABILITY, AND COMPOSITION IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

*Of Antonio “Zachara” da Teramo and
Francesco “Il Cieco” da Firenze*

MICHAEL SCOTT CUTHBERT

THE fourteenth century was a great and terrible time for western Europe. It was a period of incredible cultural and scientific innovation. Widespread dissemination of the technology to make clocks began to allow townspeople to organize their activities with a precision unknown to men and women of the past. Reports of new ideas and ways of life from the great civilizations of the East, including the Arab world, India, and China, began to enter European conversation in greater and greater numbers. Painters such as Giotto developed new techniques to depict the human, natural, and spiritual worlds with a richness that astounded viewers. In music, polyphonic song and Mass movements began to be cultivated and to spread from France into England, Spain, Italy, and the Germanic Empire. Amid so much to be optimistic about, great calamity was also the rule of the day. Beginning in 1348 waves of the Black Death, almost certainly the bubonic plague, swept over Europe. Though the outbreaks were relatively short-lived, they were devastating in their virulence, killing almost a third of the population and always threatening to return—as it did with force in 1361, 1383, and 1400. The spiritual foundation of everyday life was shaken as well with the schism of the church that began in 1378 when rival popes took up residence in Rome and Avignon, to be joined later by a third pope in Pisa. When the nearly continual warfare of the period is added to this list of calamities, it seems a miracle that any art, let alone highly sophisticated music, could flourish in these conditions.

Music did continue to thrive in the second half of the fourteenth century and to deepen in complexity, as Julie Singer’s contribution to this volume makes clear. While

the French contribution to the European musical soundscape was spread throughout the whole of the century, Italians came later to polyphonic composition. Their period of activity only began around the time of the plague, but their local style gained influence continuously into the second quarter of the fifteenth century, in a process of constant change and invigoration from foreign musical styles. This style and belief in the power of reinvention and transformation distinguished the Italian tradition sufficiently from its French predecessor such that I have begun to refer to it as a separate tradition, the *ars mutandi*, or changing style.¹

Many of the most important musicians of the *ars mutandi* were people known to have disabilities. For several composers and music theorists, disabilities, such as blindness and loss of fingers, played a direct role in how they conceptualized and wrote musical notation and, given the role of the (Guidonian) hand in education, instructed others in music. Understanding of disability in late-medieval music is thus essential to the comprehension of notation and transmission of music in these changing times. Conversely, evidence of how disability was described and conceived in the Middle Ages can enhance diachronic studies of music and disability in general.

That the most prominent musician of the *ars mutandi* wrote and played music without the aid of sight has long been known. The organist and composer Francesco (born sometime between 1325 and 1335 and died in 1397) was most commonly known by a name referencing his blindness, “Francesco il Cieco.” Other names for him use his toponym, Francesco da Firenze (the name that is used in this essay); his occupation, Francesco degli Organi; or his patronym, Franciscus Iacobi, that is, Francesco son of Jacobo. The Latin name applied to him accompanying one of the two surviving portraits of him, in the Squarcialupi Codex (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Mediceo Palatino 87), combines all but the last of these names along with an honorific, “Magister Franciscus Cecus Horganista de Florentia.” The portrait shown in Figure 26.1, along with the sculpture of the composer found on his tombstone (presumably near but not on his grave in the Florentine church of San Lorenzo), prominently depicts his blindness, but places this detail near another pictorial detail of great esteem: the laurel crown given to the greatest poets.² (The modern name given to the composer, Francesco Landini, seems to have been completely unknown to his contemporaries.)³ The composer and his music will return later in this chapter.

The most collected and renowned composer of sacred music in Italy was a man known until recently only to a few specialists in the period. Antonio da Teramo was a composer, singer, and copyist for at least two popes during the Great Schism, first the Roman Pope Gregory XII and then the Pisan Pope John XXIII (now regarded as an anti-pope by the Catholic church). While Antonio’s birth year is unknown (probably in the 1350s), we know that he died in 1413.⁴

Antonio’s stock rose in the eyes of musicologists in the past thirty years when the evidence became insurmountable that the compositions variously ascribed to “Antonio Zachara da Teramo,” “Zacar,” and “Magister Çacherias Chantor Domini nostri Pape,” all referred to a single person. This composer was named in full in a contract of 1390 as “Magist[er] Antoni[us] Berardi Andree de Teramo alias dicto vulgariter Zacchara,” or



FIGURE 26.1 “Magister Franciscus Cecus Horganista de Florentia,” f. 121v in the Squarcialupi Codex

“Master Antonio son of Berardo (son of Andrea) from Teramo [in the Abruzzi region of central eastern Italy] otherwise called in the common tongue ‘Zachara.’”⁵ The term “Zachara” is written as “Zacara” in recent literature, though not a single instance in the manuscript sources uses this orthography (Cuthbert 2006, 495).

Antonio was the most widely copied composer of sacred music of his time or of any time before him. Although the most well-known, complete Tuscan manuscripts of the period have few of his pieces—the Squarcialupi Codex contains only seven of his pieces, three of which are highly conventional and did not seem of interest to other scribes—Northern Italian manuscripts, sources connected to the papal chapel, and books from Spain, Germany, and Eastern Europe are better testaments to his reputation. He was the only Italian composer of his time whose music was known in France and in England (via the Old Hall Codex: London, British Library, Additional 57950). His music was collected into the era dominated by Du Fay, when multiple Mass movements of his were put together with isolated movements by others to suit the new trend of the complete polyphonic Mass Ordinary.⁶ Given his prominence in the surviving sources from this time it is no surprise that biographies of the composer written a half century after his death report that not only was his music still being sung in Italy but also that he was “held in the highest regard by French and German singers” and that “his compositions are considered oracles” (Pirrota 1971, 153–154). A contract from his lifetime calls him “optimo perito et famoso cantore, scriptore et miniatore” or “best, most skilled, and famous singer [or composer], scribe, and artist of miniatures,” that is, of illuminated letters and manuscript decorations.

Antonio’s skill as a scribe was such that he was not only commissioned to copy and decorate entire chant books, but also to create presentation copies of papal bulls. Only a single letter in his hand, signed “A. de Teramo,” survives, today in London’s National Archives (SC 7.41.7.A2), but a glance at the elegance of his handwriting shows that he was a great talent (Figure 26.2 gives two views, the first in close-up).

The same biographers that give us such insight into Antonio’s fame also show his connection to the topic of this volume on Disability Studies. Immediately after the description of his fame among French and Germans, the fifteenth-century necrology of “Zaccarias Teramensis” continues by describing his physical features:

fuit statura corporis parva, et in manibus et pedibus non nisi decem digitos habuit, et tamen eleganter scribebat. In Curia Romana principatum obtinens magna stipendia meruit. (Ziino 1979, 314)

The beginning of the first sentence describes his body as small in stature. The second clause says that between his fingers and his toes he had fewer than ten digits. But the final phrase says “yet he wrote elegantly,” as has already been demonstrated. The praise continues in the next sentence by noting that he occupied the leadership of the Papal curia and earned great wages. The physical details of Antonio’s body are confirmed in the only surviving portrait of him—again, an image in the Squarcialupi Codex (Figure 26.3). At least three fingers on his left hand are missing as are two on his right. His “statura parva”

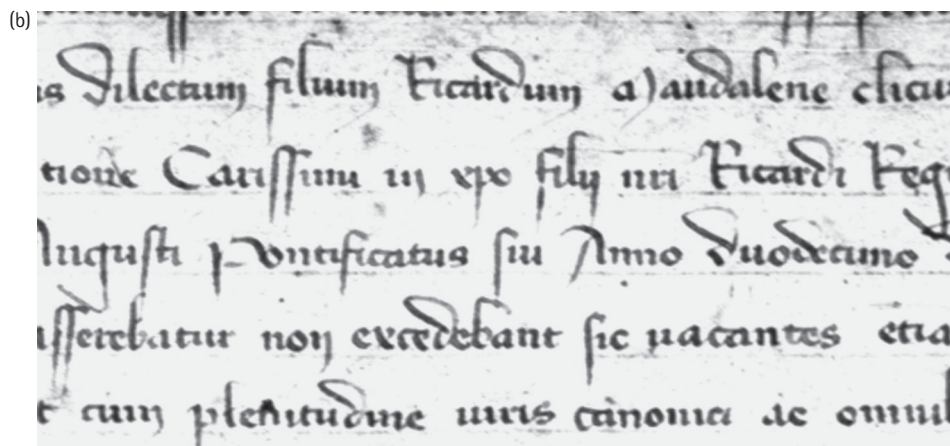
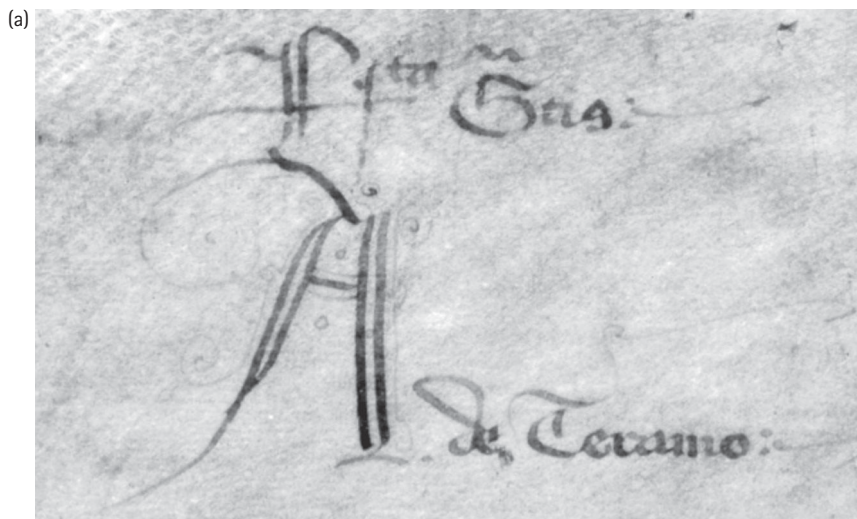


FIGURE 26.2A AND 26.2B Signature of “A. de Teramo” and the only surviving example of his handwriting, from the London, National Archives.

is shown in the sling that holds his left arm. Nádas (1986, 171) believes that his left foot may also indicate an unusual formation. The image is not detailed enough to precisely confirm this aspect, but it is striking that of the fifteen portraits of composers in the manuscript, Antonio’s is the only one that shows any more than a glimpse of a foot poking out of a gown.⁷ The emphasis of physical condition is also reflected in Francesco’s portrait (Figure 26.1), which is the only portrait of an individual composer to have only a single eye visible to the viewer.⁸

The name “Zachara” was a sobriquet or nickname, as certain of the longer attributions to the composer that include the phrase “dictus Zacharas” make clear. The origin of this name is less noble than one would like. The term probably comes from the biblical figure of Zacchaeus, a hated tax collector who “wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig



FIGURE 26.3 “Magister Çacherias Cantor Domini Nostri Pape,” f. 175v in the Squarcialupi Codex

tree to see him” (Luke 19:3–4, New International Version). Various dictionaries of Italian dialects confirm that such a term was in use for men of short stature, and these definitions move the negative connotations of Zacchaeus’s tax collecting to the height itself. “Zaccheo” in Neapolitan means “midget” or “pigmy”; in Calabrese “zaccanu” signifies a nearly worthless little piece of land. Even more repugnant are definitions found in other contemporary contexts using the word “zacchera” to mean an object of little value or a man of little worth.⁹

While modern scholarship has settled on the name “Zachara” (or a variant) to refer to the composer who invariably signed his name as Antonio or Antonius in church documents, he did not completely avoid the name, but chose to use the term to refer to himself in code. For example, the text of his *ars subtilior* Latin ballade *Sumite karissime* is

an elaborate puzzle, leading the unscrambler to find the phrase “in all this Zacharias salutes in recommendation.” His macaronic ballata *Je suy navvrés tan fort/Gnaff’ a le guagnele*, whose text was also likely written by Antonio, includes lines that come across as a reminder to himself that he has chosen the path of knowledge rather than of wealth: “Homines nobilitant scientie septet artes. Saccra sacra non seray may ricche. Non venditur auro” (“The seven arts of knowledge ennoble men. Zachara, Zachara, you will never be rich. It is not sold for gold”).¹⁰ Thus just as we now use the term “baroque” without reference to its origin as a term for a misshapen pearl, the name Zachara is often used by modern scholars for the celebrated composer without any implication of a lack of worth. Zachara, or a variation on that spelling, is also the most common way his contemporaries referred to him. Antonio does not use the term when signing his name, as it is an act likely to convey the negative associations of the word to his person. That he does use this nickname to refer to himself in his creative art that is, in his texts, shows an act of claiming or reclaiming disability in a positive context associating it with lasting and admired art.¹¹

Antonio never directly mentions his disabilities in his compositions, but one piece may reflect the reception he received from other members of medieval society. In his ballata *D’amor languire*, the narrator, who (given similarities in style to his other texts) may be Antonio himself, laments that he is sad of languishing in love and sad of spirit. He is in this situation because of “Cucci” (a name written as “cento-cinque e duy cento’uno,” hiding the roman numerals “CVCCI”), who evidently will not embrace him because of a beard that his barber refuses to shave. The speaker describes how he “scratches manglely without having scabs,” an action that fills him with every sort of melancholy. The remainder of the text gives a series of animal analogies that are in part about the scratchiness of his beard but also about the isolation and discrimination he faces because of disease: like a hunted pig filled with rabies (or anger) or like a frog’s body bursting within a bird’s crushing, silent beak.

If one supposes that the text was written by Antonio himself, as many of his texts using the Abruzzese dialect seem to have been, and that it is at least somewhat self-referential (if not autobiographical), then can this work tell us about the reception of disability in fifteenth-century France? To pick up on Antonio’s central conceit, why does the barber avoid shaving him? One answer may lie in other’s fear of contracting a disease from the composer, possibly Hansen’s disease (leprosy). The composer probably lost digits over the course of his life: if his disability were lifelong it is unlikely that he would have been trained as a scribe, and if he had a contagious condition such as Hansen’s disease it is unlikely he would have enjoyed close access to the inner circle of the papacy. An explanation can be gleaned from a close examination of his single surviving portrait (Figure 26.3). The coloration on his cheek, especially under his eyes, may not represent a poor choice of shading by the miniaturist, but instead an accurate depiction of a skin condition, possibly Sturge-Weber syndrome or more likely systemic lupus erythematosus or a similar condition.¹² Untreated with modern medicine, lupus could lead to a loss of sensation in the extremities resulting in the loss of digits. But the barber’s reaction (which, like everything in this text, could be metaphorical) does not seem to have been typical

for the composer. Antonio more usually was surrounded by other talented singers, composers, and church officials eager to enjoy the products of his elegant pen, whether beautifully copied letters and manuscripts or the latest compositions in diverse styles, with hidden riddles and new melodic invention.

The depictions of disability and musicians with disabilities in the Middle Ages are distant from the social contexts of disability today. Composers with disabilities had such aspects of their lives heightened, particularly by the use of physical characteristics as names. Beyond Francesco and Antonio other examples abound, such as the fourteenth-century music theorist Petrus frater dictus Palma ocosa, or “Brother Peter called” (*dictus*: that word again) “deformed hand,” or the eleventh-century theorist Hermannus Contractus (“Herman the Lame”), or the ninth-century composer of tropes Notker Balbulus (“Notker the Stammerer”).¹³ In a world with few family names and the commonness of given names and toponyms, descriptions of disability assume a place of normalcy little different than identifiers such as Redbeard.¹⁴

Yet, for several composers, in particular Francesco, disability formed an important part of narratives of compensation, even at the time. Francesco was said to have a mind’s eye “as sharp and acute as an eagle’s,” according to his earliest biography. Notker was supposed to have channeled his inability to speak into composing long textual forms, particularly sequences and hymns, that could be sung beautifully. Petrus dictus Palmus ocosa’s teaching of accidentals (*musica ficta*) and proper ways of singing in improvisation can be viewed in the same light, seeing as the so-called Guidonian hand and specific and rapid movements of the hand were generally considered essential to music making at the time. The disabilities to which no positive effects seem to have been ascribed were only those that would no longer be considered disabilities today, such as the “defectu natale” or “birth defect” of Antonio’s contemporary Johannes Ciconia, which referred to his illegitimate birth, and thus lowered social status, as the son of a priest.

The connection between music, health, disease, and disability was a close one in the Middle Ages. As John of Trevisa notes in his elegant fourteenth-century translation of the thirteenth-century writer Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De proprietatibus rerum*:

For musike meueth affeccious and exciteth the wittes [t]o dyuers disposiciouns. . . . And comforteth schipmen to suffre al disese and trauayle. And conforte of voice pleseth and conforteth the herte and wittes in alle disese and trauayle of workes and werynesse. And musik abateth maystry of yuel spirites in mankynde . . . And so veynes and synewes of the body, and puls therof, and so alle the lymes of the body beth socied togideres by vertu of armony, as Ysider seith. (Seymour 1975–1988, 2:1386)

For music moves emotions and excites the mind to varied dispositions, and comforts sailors to suffer all sorts of diseases and travails. And the comfort of the voice pleases and comforts the heart and mind from every disease and travail of work and weariness. And music removes the domination of foul spirits in mankind. And thus the veins and sinews of the body, and its pulse, and all the organs of the body are

bound together by virtue of harmony, as Isidore said. (translation by the author; the end of the passage paraphrases Isidore of Seville, *De Musica*, chapter 17).

Despite this connection, modern scholars, as Straus notes, have been quick to create a story of a “triumphant overcoming” of disability by medieval composers, or have found no need to mention it “for it has no bearing on the music” (Straus 2011, 20–21). He is correct to point out that the viewing of disability as difference, and not as a deficit to be overcome, can in Francesco’s case lead to a greater understanding of the role of memory for composers and the admiration thereof for medieval listeners. It is not, however, correct to say that such difference isolated him from the world of notation, any more than Antonio’s differences cut him off from the world of writing. In a contemporary reference that elsewhere calls him “impotens,” Francesco is praised for his “scrittura,” which is generally used to refer to direct writing (Fiori 2004, 28). Though it is still presumed, even by this author, that he used an intermediary for notating his songs, there is no mention of such a person, nor the role that such an assistant would play. Instead, Francesco was held directly responsible for the graphical form of his music, as an anonymous writer (Coussemaker’s Anonymous V) reports:

And Nicolaus of Avera, of the order of the Celestines, said that when the Blind Man of Florence placed red imperfect semibreves in the discant of his ballata [i.e., *Donna che d’amor*] he did not err, but rather he did make a mistake in placing red semibreves in the tenor, since the tenor is of minor prolation.¹⁵

The errors (for all differences in notational systems were considered errors by theorists) that bothered Nicolaus so much about the ballata are not ones that could be perceived aurally, but only by reference to notation. Nicolaus, who refers to Francesco as “the Blind Man of Florence,” was certainly aware of his lack of sight. Francesco was thought to be, and seems to have been, directly invested in the notation of his works, and his critical contemporary held him accountable as he would any other composer. Francesco was not the only blind musician who cared deeply about notation. The slightly later organist Conrad Paumann of Nuremberg is said by Sebastian Virdung to have created a system of lute tablature—more idiomatic both to the instrument and to oral reading—that persisted for centuries after his death in 1473.¹⁶ In neither Francesco nor Conrad’s case is there any hint of less precision in the notation of their works than of their contemporaries. Except for a slightly greater flexibility of notation between the two principal rhythmic systems of the time (called *longa* and *brevis* notation today), Francesco’s works show the same degree of consistency of graphical signs from manuscript to manuscript as any of the sighted composers of his day.

The names and nicknames given to medieval composers and theorists may appear unsympathetic or even cruel by seeming to define people with disabilities by those disabilities. The surviving evidence shows that, at least in the most prominent cases, acknowledgment of difference was not an allusion to deficit. Italian composers with disabilities such as Antonio and Francesco were considered to have extraordinary minds and an ability to compose, indeed to write, beyond the other musicians of their time

(with the possible exception of Ciconia who, as was already noted, was considered by his contemporaries to have a defect of birth). These abilities were rewarded financially and with positions of power, and, more enduringly, their musical styles were considered exemplars for the next generation. The wide distribution and lavish praise of music ascribed to musicians known to most as “Zachara” and “Il Cieco” should embolden modern scholars to move away from marginalizing such differences, and embrace the variety of experience that shaped creative achievement in the vital period of change that characterized music’s history around 1400.

NOTES

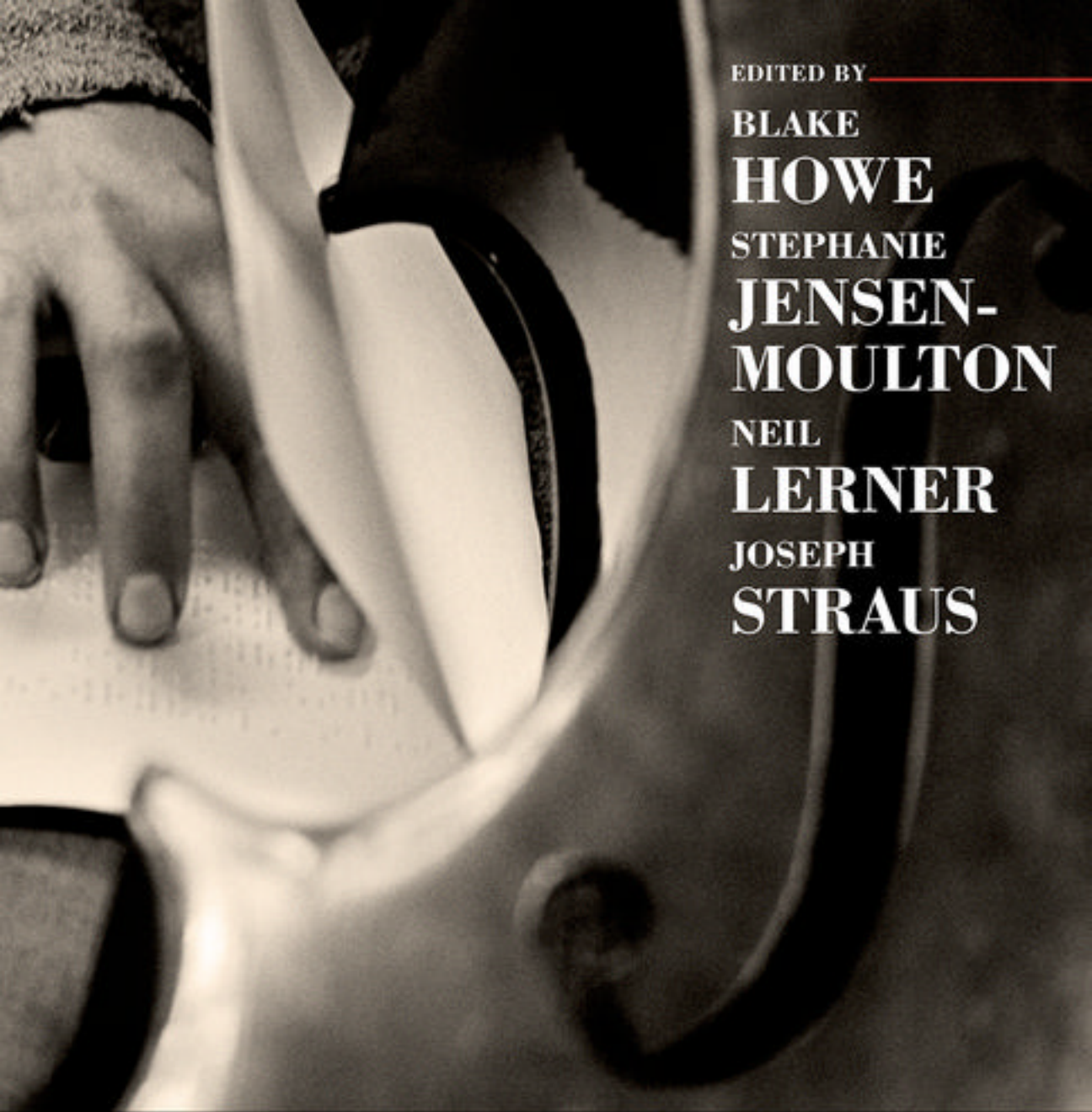
1. The theme of the embrace of change in this period is developed further in my forthcoming monograph, *Ars mutandi: Italian Sacred Music in the Age of Plague and Schism*.
2. On the impact of blindness on Francesco and on Guillaume de Machaut, consult Singer 2010.
3. Contra Singer 2010, 44. The contract she refers to in Fiori 2004 (28) uses his patronym, not a family name. The first usage of the family name Landino occurs in the works of Francesco’s great-nephew Cristoforo, though he does not apply it directly to Francesco. I believe that the name was a construction of Cristoforo’s at a time when he was attempting to marry into the prestigious Alberti family and needed to construct a noble lineage for himself; certainly Cristoforo knew nothing about his ancestor that could not be gleaned from already circulating biographies. That Francesco’s blindness in no way prevented him from being respected throughout Italy and Europe has been well established and now collected by Singer 2010.
4. For an extensively researched biography, consult Di Bacco and Nádas 2004.
5. The citation is reported in Esposito 1983, 334, and the connections among the various formerly separate candidates are found in Ziino 1979.
6. This trend is especially prominent in the way Antonio’s music was collected in the manuscript Bologna, Biblioteca della Musica, Q15. For inventory and discussion, consult Bent 2008.
7. I am grateful to Samantha Bassler for noticing this discontinuity with the tradition of portraiture.
8. The portrait is discussed in Straus 2011, 20. In the image on f. 173v, one of the figures is depicted in profile, presumably to show the discussion between Egidius and Guilielmus. The depiction of Francesco’s blindness contrasts in style, though not in emphasis, with the portraits of the early fifteenth-century poet and composer Oswald von Wolkenstein, who, perhaps because he had sight in one eye, is shown nearly face on in the three confirmed surviving images of him. Another, otherwise unknown, medieval musician named in the motet *Alma polis religio, Axe poli cum artica* is described through emphasis on his sightedness as “unioculus Teobaldus” or “Thibault the one-eyed” (I thank Karen Cook for bringing this reference to my attention).
9. All these definitions come from the research of Nádas 1986, 176, without which this essay could not be written.
10. Hallmark 2004, 218, from a suggestion by Francesco Zimei.

11. For this term I rely on Linton 1998, and I am grateful to Julie Singer for clarifying the implications of the contexts in which the composer names himself differently.
12. In Cuthbert 2004, 342, I discussed the possibility of this condition (corroborated by opinions by three doctors and a chance encounter I had with participants leaving a dermatology conference when I happened to have a large poster of Antonio with me) but with less understanding of the implications for Antonio's complete biography, social placement, or the negative effects of a focus on diagnosis in the discussion of disability.
13. The reinforcement of disability through naming was common enough that Adam le Boscu d'Arras or de la Halle, a thirteenth-century trouvère, needed to state that Boscu or Bossu was a family name and not a reference to the same word for a hunchback: "On m'apele Bochu, mais je ne le sui mie."
14. The normalcy (in terms of frequency) for disability in the ancient world of music has perhaps its strongest suggestion in the mathematical writings of the sometime music theorist Nicomachus of Gerasa of the first century CE. In his treatise on arithmetic he describes numbers whose proper factors sum to less than the number (i.e., deficient numbers) as similar to amputees, and numbers whose proper factors sum to greater than the number (i.e., abundant numbers) as a sort of polydactylism. Thus of the tens of thousands of numbers whose factors could be summed at the time, Nicomachus attributes no congenital diseases only to the four known "perfect" numbers 6, 28, 496, and 8128. This reflects a long-standing argument in Disability Studies that disabilities before the nineteenth century were conceived as imperfections, not abnormalities (Davis 1995, 23–49).
15. "Et Nicolaus de Aversa, Ordinis Celestinorum, cum dixit Cechus de Florentia in discantu illo sue ballade posuit semibreves rubeas imperfectas et male, salva pace, quod in hoc non peccavit; sed peccavit in tenore ponendo semibreves rubeas, cum sit minoris prolationis tenor ille" (Coussemaker 1864–76, 3:395–396). Translation adapted from Ellinwood 1945, 73. Nicolaus of Aversa was until recently completely unknown. However a newly identified manuscript in Melbourne includes a treatise attributed to him, though it is not the work that Anonymous V refers to. I thank Karen Cook for bringing this to my attention; the manuscript is currently the subject of a publication by Jason Stoessel.
16. Viridung 1511, f. K.iii.v.

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