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Casting the Bigger Shadow: The Methods and Business of Petrucci vs. Attaignant

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Abstract

The music printing of Ottaviano Petrucci has been largely regarded by historians to be the most elegant and advanced form of music publishing in the Renaissance, while printers such as Pierre Attaingnant are only given an obligatory nod. Through historical research and a study of primary sources such as line-cut facsimiles, I sought to answer the question, how did the triple impression and single impression methods of printing develop, and is one superior to the other? While Petrucci's triple impression method produced cleaner and more connected staves, a significant number of problems resulted, including pitch accuracy and cost efficiency. Attaingnant's single impression method solved most of these difficulties, while only sacrificing a small amount of visual aesthetic. Despite these advancements, Petrucci managed to dominate the music publishing industry in Venice during his lifetime while Attaingnant achieved success to a lesser degree. Based on an overview of their business skills, I concluded that Petrucci obtained this success through his twenty-year legal monopoly in Venice, and by staying in tune with his clients' needs and printing music that was in demand. The single impression method of Attaingnant outlasted the triple impression method of Petrucci because his technology was more efficient and accurate, but Petrucci was more successful during his time because of his business skills.

Keywords

Petrucci, Attaingnant, Josquin, Castellanus, publishing, printing, engraving, Odhecaton, Renaissance

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Casting the Bigger Shadow: The Methods and Business of Petrucci vs. Attaignant

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The music printing of Ottaviano Petrucci has been largely regarded by historians to be the most elegant and advanced form of music publishing in the Renaissance, while other printers, such as Pierre Attaignant, are given only an obligatory nod. While Petrucci's triple impression method produced cleaner and more connected staves, it resulted in a significant number of problems, including loss of pitch accuracy and decreased cost efficiency. Attaignant's single impression method solved most of these difficulties, while only sacrificing a small amount of visual aesthetic. Despite Attaignant's advancements, he achieved success to a lesser degree while Petrucci managed to become the most prolific and widespread music publisher during his lifetime. How did Petrucci manage to gain a twenty-year legal monopoly in Venice, and how did he stay in tune with his clients' needs and music demands? While the single impression method of Attaignant outlasted Petrucci's triple impression method due to more efficient and accurate technology, Petrucci was more ultimately more successful during his time because of his business skills.

Petrucci has often been recognized as the father of music printing, and with good reason. However, he was not the first to publish music with a printing press. His first volume appeared in 1501, but other published music in varying forms serves as a precursor to his first great work.¹ For instance, liturgical chant had been printed from type during the last decades of the fifteenth century; wood-block carvings and metal cuts

¹ Stanley Boorman, *Studies in the Printing, Publishing and Performance of Music in the Sixteenth Century* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 303.

were occasionally in use; and some books had printed staves with the notes written in by hand.²

Some scholars assert that Petrucci brought to “perfection” the method of music printing, but this also is a bit of an overstatement.³ Petrucci did not add to or change anything regarding the actual mechanics of music publishing, yet something in his methodology enabled him to produce the most undoubtedly elegant sheet music available during his time and for years to come.⁴ Unfortunately, very little is known today about the materials, technology, and methods used by Petrucci and his counterparts because no actual machinery survives. Most existing information comes from the printed books themselves, from illustrations of presses and printing shops, or from descriptions.⁵ However, from these few sources, several key facts can be discovered regarding Petrucci’s paper, type, spacing, and ink.

Paper was a major expense of the industry, comprising anywhere from thirty to fifty percent of the total cost of a book. Petrucci’s preferred paper was in landscape format and probably measured approximately 347 x 482 mm, although these numbers are difficult to prove; as evidenced by the watermarks, almost all of the surviving copies have been trimmed for binding.⁶ As Petrucci’s career developed, he began to use paper of a less consistent quality. Books printed around 1510 have paper of variable color, thickness, and quality of finish.⁷ It would seem that he set out in 1501 with high standards but that by the time he left Venice, they began to diminish. It may also be possible that as his career developed and the demand for his publications increased, Petrucci couldn’t afford to spend as much time searching for the perfect paper. The fact that he spent a preparation period of three years between gaining his monopoly and publishing his first edition of *Odhecaton A* suggests that he treated his initial works as a springboard for his career. Once he amassed a successful customer base, he might not have been as

² Howard M. Brown and Louise K. Stein, *Music in The Renaissance*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1999), 167.

³ Peter J. D. Scott, “Ottaviano Petrucci, Paragon of Printing Perfection?: Observations on His 1506 *Lamentationum Jeremie Prophete Liber Primus* and *Liber Secundus*,” *Fontes Artis Musicae* 51, no. 1 (2004): 74.

⁴ Boorman, *Studies in Printing*, 303.

⁵ Boorman, *Ottaviano Petrucci: Catalogue Raisonne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 109.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 110–111.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 112–113.

concerned with paper perfection. Another possible explanation may simply be that quality paper was less available in Petrucci's later career, due to either a lack of supply in the economy or a shortage of materials for paper suppliers. While the creation of paper was certainly a difficult and expensive endeavor, this last explanation seems unlikely since the cost of paper declined during the sixteenth century, whereas an increase would be expected if it became harder to obtain.⁸ Perhaps the most valuable information to be learned from Petrucci's paper is that he probably had more than one actual press. In certain manuscripts, two or more different kinds of papers will run tandem through a series of books. Most likely, this was a result of two typesetters, or *compositors*, working on two presses with the same supply of paper. When one supply of paper ran out, they moved on to the next.⁹

Petrucci's type was unique in a few aspects but, for the most part, conformed to the normal practice of the period. Because no remaining evidence indicates that Petrucci purchased his type from an independent punchcutter, the assumption is that he engraved his own. One of the defining aspects of Petrucci's type was his use of a metal known as fused marcasite of antimony.¹⁰ The characteristics of this metal allowed him to create very fine elements even from his earliest works,¹¹ such as *Harmonice musices odhecaton A*, in which elements such as flats, clefs, mensuration signs, double bar lines, and ledger lines appear quite thin.¹²

Perhaps the most complex and outstanding detail which Petrucci used to beautify the notes was kerning. A kerned character is one in which the symbol to be printed projects beyond the body of the type. One of the essential elements of the beauty of a font is the different spacing between different letters. For instance, two consecutive letters "w," such as in "glowworm," will appear too far apart if they are spaced in the same manner as two letters "m," such as in "hammer." The same principle applies to noteheads, especially those with flags. Petrucci chose to mount his notes on small bodies, with the tails kerned.¹³ In this manner, the

⁸ Boorman, *Ottaviano Petrucci: Catalogue Raisonne*, 110.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Ottaviano Petrucci, *Harmonice musices odhecaton A* (New York: Broude Brothers Limited, 1973).

¹³ Boorman, *Ottaviano Petrucci: Catalogue Raisonne*, 124.

flagged notes do not appear widely or awkwardly spaced in relation to the notes with no flag or stem (Figure 1).

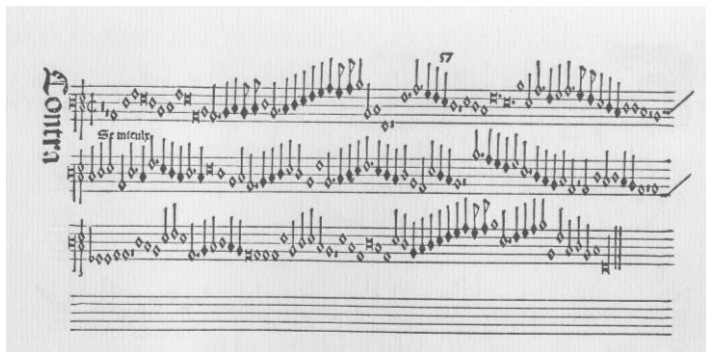


Figure 1: Kerning in *Harmonice musices ocheaton A*¹⁴

Petrucci's ink does not appear to be exceptional in any way, and it was likely similar to normal ink recipes of the time. Most of his editions still appear black and glossy, and the few exceptions are probably a result of a faulty impression, not poor ink.¹⁵

Exactly how Petrucci used his press has actually been a point of contention. Of course, the element that makes Petrucci's style so outstanding is the fact that he used multiple impressions, but whether he used two or three impressions is somewhat up for debate. Most evidence shows that, at least for the earliest editions, Petrucci used three impressions: one for the staves, one for the music, and one for the text.¹⁶

While the type-setting of staves and text would have been relatively simple, the setting of the music notes would have presented some unique challenges. First, the bodies of the notes would have been different sizes. Second, their vertical spacing in relation to one another would have varied depending on where they were to be placed on the staff. Petrucci's solution was to use very small pieces, known as spacing sorts, to place the symbol at the correct pitch and to hold it in place.¹⁷

¹⁴ Petrucci, *Harmonice musices ocheaton A*, 57r.

¹⁵ Boorman, *Ottaviano Petrucci: Catalogue Raisonne*, 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 160–161.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 167–168.

Up to this point, great emphasis has been placed on the “elegance” of Petrucci’s prints. While the visual appeal of his music is certainly striking, his materials were fairly ordinary for the time. Like any other printer, Petrucci was limited by what his technology and composers could provide him. The triple-impression method certainly had its difficulties. First, the production costs and time involved with multiple impressions limited the amount of music that could be printed at any given time.¹⁸ Second, great attention and precision was required in order for the staves and notes to line up accurately. Although visually elegant, pitch ambiguity in the final product was not uncommon.

Because of this, printers began searching for a way to print music in a single impression. Awarding credit for the first practical application of this method has proven to be very puzzling. Some sources name John Rastell, an author, politician, and entrepreneur from England.¹⁹ Others name Winterburg from the Viennese “house of Winterburg.”²⁰ Without a doubt, however, it was the work of one man that had popularized this new method.

When Attaignant appeared on the scene, the Parisian music industry was a very unsteady market. Several printers, including Michel Toulouze and students from the University of Paris, had been printing music in multiple impressions. Comparatively, their results were less accurate and by far less elegant than those of Petrucci.²¹

Attaignant quickly supplanted them as the most prominent figure in music publishing when he began printing in a single impression. With his technology, each piece of type contained both the note and a short fragment of the staff. Attaignant did not have to worry about note accuracy anymore; his notes were, by default, positioned correctly on the staff. In addition, his production time was reduced threefold, only requiring one impression. Although the single impression method was a workable solution to Petrucci’s most significant problems, this method created a few new problems. Attaignant was required to line up the vertical segments precisely in order to give the illusion of a continuous

¹⁸ Albert J. Geritz and Amos Lee Laine, *John Rastell* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Boorman, *Studies in Printing*, 235, 244.

²¹ Daniel Heartz, *Pierre Attaignant: Royal Printer of Music; A Historical Study and Bibliographical Catalogue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 44–45.

staff, and his fragments of staff had to be of equal spacing and thickness for the same reason.²²

To a certain degree, less study has been devoted to the exact materials and methods of Attaignant. Unlike Petrucci, he lacks the kind of historian like Stanley Boorman, who has relentlessly catalogued the minute details of his operations. Perhaps the scholar most dedicated to Attaignant would be Daniel Hertz, although he focuses more on Attaignant's typography than anything else. This is not to say that studies of Attaignant's activities are incomplete; they are simply not as in depth as those of Petrucci.

The earliest works of Attaignant, chansonniers in oblong part-books, use paper much smaller than Petrucci's, measuring about 15 x 10 cm.²³

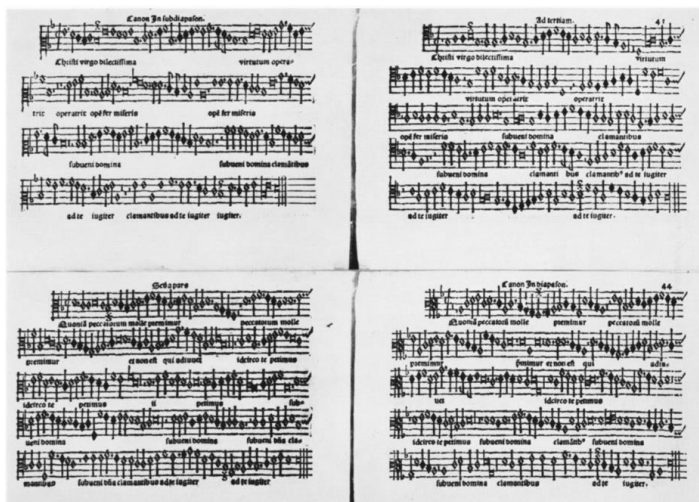


Figure 2: Typography I²⁴

Attaignant used two distinctly different kinds of type, making a change from Typography I (Figure 2) to Typography II (Figure 3) in 1530. The noteheads of Typography I are slender and diamond-shaped, with stems

²² Hertz, *Royal Printer of Music*, 45–46.

²³ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁴ Hertz, "A New Attaignant Book and the Beginnings of French Music Printing," *Journal of the American Musicology Society* 14, no. 1 (1961), unnumbered page.

that are quite long and thin in comparison. The noteheads of Typography II are less peaked and more rounded, and their size is small enough to fit in the staff without overlapping the staff lines.²⁵

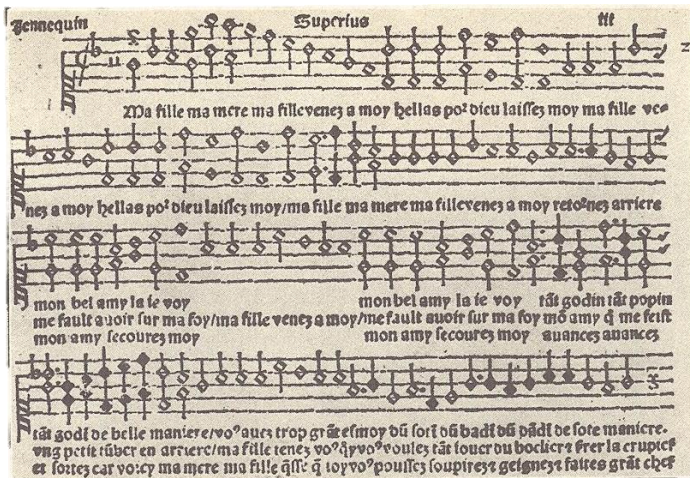


Figure 3: Typography II²⁶

Whether or not Petrucci did his own punchcutting is uncertain, but Attaignant almost certainly, at least for a time (perhaps early in his career), engraved his own type. A peculiar dispute led to a court case between Pierre Simon Fournier le Jeune and a family known as the Ballards, who had held a two-hundred-year-old monopoly on music printing despite their remarkably outdated technology. The resulting court documents name “atteignant” as the inventor of the “large chant note carrying its staff,” meaning the individual pieces of type carrying both a note and its staff fragment.²⁷ Hertz goes into great detail of this court case in his *Historical Study*, but the main conclusion applicable to this discussion is that Attaignant did indeed engrave his own type for a time.²⁸

²⁵ Daniel Hertz, “Typography and Format in Early Music Printing: With Particular Reference to Attaignant’s First Publications,” *Notes* 23, no. 4 (1967): 703.

²⁶ Georg Kinsky, ed., *A History of Music in Pictures*. (New York: Dover, 1951), 95.

²⁷ Hertz, *Royal Printer of Music*, 56.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49–56.

During Attaignant's later years, however, craftsmen such as Robert Granjon became famous enough to operate as freelance punchcutters, and Attaignant likely purchased type from him rather than engraving his own. Several examples of Granjon's type still survive (Figure 4). After comparison and study of both Granjon's specimens and Attaignant's later publications, I am led to believe that Attaignant did indeed purchase and use type from Granjon.²⁹

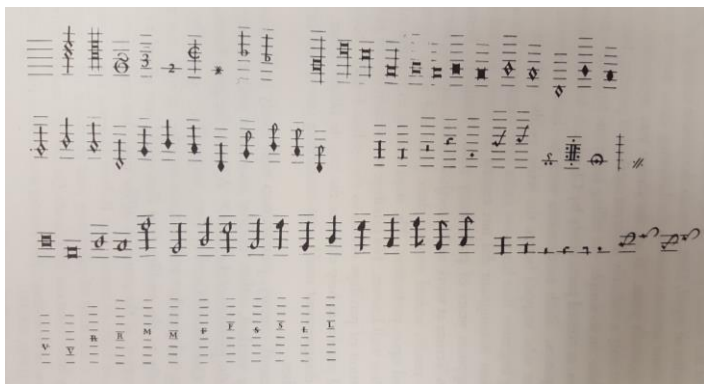


Figure 4: Music type made from Granjon's matrices³⁰

Regarding spacing, Attaignant and Petrucci took completely different approaches to the relative note positions. While Petrucci used kerning to space his noteheads as evenly as possible, regardless of flags and other protruding elements, Attaignant seemed to give more consideration to the duration of the notes, the position of the lyrics, and the spacing across systems.

For example, in Figure 5 wider spacing is given to the phrase "luy dus me voulez vous" in order to accommodate the lyrics. Additionally, Attaignant has given this page narrower spacing as a whole in order to fit all the music on one page.

²⁹ Philippe Canguilhem, "Deux Recueils Inconnus de Pierre Attaignant Retrouvés à Montauban," *Revue de Musicologie* 93, no. 2 (2007): 473, 476.

³⁰ Hertz, *Royal Printer of Music*, 47.

Figure 5: Einstätt Fragment Plate I³¹

As mentioned previously, Petrucci reigns in the eyes of many historians as the father of music printing and, to them, his publications represent “perfection” in elegance and aesthetic. In each of the general music history textbooks which I have surveyed, Petrucci’s methods were elaborated upon and Attaignant received less mention, if he was mentioned at all. However, after this review of the materials and methods of Petrucci and their comparison to those of Attaignant, a convincing case has yet to be made for their superiority. Petrucci’s ink recipe was common for his time, and the quality of his paper was inconsistent throughout his career. His type, while spaced very evenly through the process of kerning, was never altered to accommodate lyrics or note duration. While Petrucci may or may not have engraved his own type, Attaignant had his professionally manufactured in his later career by Granjon—a decision which improved the visual quality of his publications. Petrucci’s method was far more expensive, due to both the need for type-setting with spacing sorts and the time required of multiple impressions. Even after all this, the notes were not guaranteed to end up on the correct line of the staff. Attaignant solved a great deal of these problems by capitalizing on the single impression method, and yet today’s historians seem to have forgotten him, merely because his staff lines are not as consistently smooth. Could Petrucci’s success and Attaignant’s relative obscurity be explained by some reason other than their differences in technical procedures?

³¹ Hertz, “A New Attaignant Book,” unnumbered page.

While he was alive, Petrucci dominated the music publishing market in Venice for the simple reason that he held a legal monopoly. Petrucci obtained this monopoly, known as a “privilege,” in two ways. First, Petrucci applied to the Venetian Signoria for a privilege in 1498 by presenting it as a patent. He claimed to have discovered a convenient way to print polyphony, although other printers of the time were completely capable of setting type for two impressions and registering them accurately.³² As mentioned before, it would be a mistake to claim that Petrucci truly “invented” a new method of printing when his true skill lay in the expert application of old methods. Nonetheless, Petrucci apparently presented a convincing case, with no small amount of flattery towards the city of Venice, and he was granted his privilege.

Petrucci’s patronizing approach was not unusual. Standard practice of the time was to praise the city to which one was applying and to mention the strengths of the city while making a case for one’s own loyal citizenship. Petrucci abided by this convention and followed it with a piece of deliberate campaigning for granting his privilege: he argued that his method would benefit the Christian religion significantly by making chant much easier to print. Boorman finds this claim to be a bit ingenuous, since “there had been over fifteen years of successful liturgical music printing in Venice, and Petrucci’s method was comparable with that employed by the printers [already] involved.”³³ Boorman suggests that since Petrucci could not point to any direct benefits related to the Venetian state or economy, he felt it necessary to produce some other form of advantage. Petrucci’s argument for the benefit to Christianity directly appealed to the moral sense of the city’s rulers. Just this kind of marketing is sprinkled throughout most of the periods and facets of Petrucci’s career, from his privilege, to his technology, to his musical content.

Lest it be concluded that Petrucci was merely at the head of a money-making scheme, enabled to sit on his laurels for the next twenty years, it must be noted that his privilege was not necessarily respected by other printers. Certain publishers sometimes needed to petition in order to prevent other publishers from printing texts they should not.³⁴ It is likely that Petrucci had to compete with many minor names in publishing.

³² Boorman, *Ottaviano Petrucci: Catalogue Raisonne*, 77–79.

³³ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

Beyond his city-wide monopoly on music publishing, Petrucci had to find a way to distance himself from names in the international market. At this point in Petrucci's story it is necessary to introduce two new characters: his editor, Petrus Castellanus, and his most-often published composer, Josquin des Prez.

While almost nothing is known about the life of Castellanus, significant research on his contribution to Petrucci's works has been done by Bonnie J. Blackburn. Petrucci names Castellanus as the editor in *Odhecaton B* and notes that it is from his musical "garden" that at least some, if not all, of the music has been selected.³⁵ According to Helen Hewitt:

As an editor. . . he did an excellent job. As one compares the version he prepared for publication with manuscript readings, one is constantly impressed with the accuracy and good judgment he displayed. In almost every case where a choice is possible the *Odhecaton* proves the better version. Of actual errors in the print the number is too slight to warrant mention. And his choice of compositions shows his penetration into the art of musical composition of his time.³⁶

Castellanus's careful selection of appropriate and relevant music contributed to the marketability of Petrucci's prints.

Perhaps no selection of music in Petrucci's works is more outstanding than that of Josquin, who is, perhaps, the most renowned composer of vocal music in the Renaissance and one of the first international musical celebrities. Prior to Petrucci's first publication of Josquin's works, only eight motets in seven manuscripts exist that predate 1502.³⁷ Although the number of lost manuscripts can only be speculated, current evidence suggests that Josquin may have been virtually unknown before Petrucci began to print his music. Although Petrucci published the works of many other Franco-Flemish composers, such as Compere, Gaspar, Brumel, Obrecht, Agricola, and Ghiselin, his most-often published was, without a doubt, Josquin.

³⁵ Bonnie J. Blackburn, "Petrucci's Venetian Editor: Petrus Castellanus and His Musical Garden," *Musica Disciplina* 49 (1995): 17.

³⁶ Helen Hewitt and Isabel Pope, eds., *Harmonice musices odhecaton A*, (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1942), 9–10.

³⁷ Marilee J. Mouser, "Petrucci and His Shadow: A Case Study of Reception History," *Fontes Artis Musicae* 51, no. 1 (2004): 20–21.

Since Josquin rose to fame through his motets, especially those published in Petrucci's *Motetti A* of 1502, it is questionable which entrepreneur promoted the other. Did well-known music publisher Petrucci, through his *Odhecaton A*, champion the music of a budding composer and thus give it prominence in the public eye? Or did Josquin, the rising composer of polyphony, provide the material necessary for a novice music printer to gain an international reputation? After my research, I have concluded that these two businessmen rose at roughly the same rate, promoting each other equally with their respective skill set. Petrucci exhibited the characteristics of a knowledgeable businessman; as the works of Josquin became more and more in vogue, he published what the public demanded.

Comparing Petrucci's business model to Attaignant's is a stark contrast indeed. Attaignant probably did not have an editor selecting the works to be published, and he likely completed this process himself. While Petrucci had the advantage of delegating this task to someone apparently more specialized (Petrucci may not have been a musician at all), Attaignant was loaded with the responsibilities of both compiler and publisher.

In his early works Attaignant shows a definite "preference for lament-type poems rather than light, 'popular' ones," as drinking songs, pastorals, and narratives account for less than twenty percent of the pieces. As his career developed, Attaignant demonstrated a shift towards these types of more popular pieces, such as dance music.³⁸ This is not to say that Petrucci only published lighter, more frivolous kinds of music, or that Josquin's music was unsophisticated. However, never in his lifetime did Attaignant establish any sort of "partnership" with a composer or foster the popularization of new music as did Petrucci and Josquin.

In many ways, Attaignant's historical longevity has been cut short by his lack of marketability. His notes were printed with perfect accuracy, his single-impression method was much cheaper, and his work flow would have been three times as efficient, but he lacked the "right time, right place" opportunities that Petrucci, somehow, always seemed to obtain. Marilee J. Mouser writes about Petrucci:

³⁸ Courtney S. Adams, "The Early Chanson Anthologies Published by Pierre Attaignant (1528–1530)," *The Journal of Musicology* 5, no. 4 (1987): 528.

Long before the advent of the Hollywood sequel, entrepreneurs realized that their success was dependent not only on innovation, creativity, and presentation, but also on capturing the interest of the market. A product that is beautiful and unique may have aesthetic value, but unless it also has market value, it is of little use in a capitalist venture.³⁹

The single impression method of Attaignant outlasted the triple impression method of Petrucci because Attaignant's technology was more efficient and accurate, but Petrucci was more successful during his time because of his business skills. Because Petrucci dominated the music printing market both in the city of Venice and internationally, and because he associated himself with the life and works of Josquin, he permanently sealed his place in music history as the most prominent publisher of music in the Renaissance.

³⁹ Mouser, "Petrucci and His Shadow," 19.

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