



Music Printing

Letter Press: an example

VOICE OVER

You can see how all this fits together in one of the most ambitious books printed by Christopher Plantin. Here in the library there is a copy of that book – it's a collection of masses by George de la Hele and published in 1578. It's a very big book and it has to be because it shows the parts for the 6 singers laid out on one double opening of pages. The start of each part is marked by the large capital letters. Remember also that the size of the type would have to be large because 6 people would be singing from this book at the same time...it's not just like one person reading a book by themselves.

Here at the Plantin Museum they've made a reconstruction of the complete set of type, or form, for one of the parts. It would have come off the press like this and if we look at the type it appears to us as upside down. If you look at the form the other way round so that the words are underneath the notes you have to read the music from right to left. Here you can see the wood cut for the capital F and the pieces of type for the clefs at the start of each line. Here you can see how the separate pieces of type have made the stave line broken and uneven and where the printer had to put in a rest he had to make this up from the separate pieces of type – you can see the gaps between them falling into the spaces between the stave lines.

The dot after this note also had to be made out of 5 separate pieces of stave line. The sharp sign here is on a piece of type that covers 3 of the lines so it had to be made up with an extra piece of type for the line at the top and another piece of type for the line at the bottom. Although the letterpress style of music printing was rather fiddly to set up, it could still look quite attractive if it was based on type designed by such masters of the craft as Granjon and Fournier. It proved inadequate though as new styles of music developed. Separate notes to / each syllable in vocal music quite suited the letterpress style / but successions of fast notes for violin or harpsichord didn't suit it so well. For these a different sort of technology was needed.