

Tracing an Ontology of Voice-leading in Fifteenth-Century Counterpoint Regulation

With the treatises on counterpoint by, among others, Burtius, Gaffurius and Tinctoris, composers of music were exposed to pedagogy in a way that had previously been reserved for choristers and liturgists. To a certain degree, composers born during the second half of the fifteenth century shared a stylistically uniform counterpoint technique and explored many facets of polyphony before these had been discussed by theorists – yet the progressive elements seem related to points on which contemporaneous theorists had already criticised composers of the previous generation. Were the treatises primarily testimonies of established practice or breakthrough principles of composition? What instruction did original works and counterpoint pedagogy, respectively, bestow on composers *in spe* c.1500? Such chronological scrutiny is made complicated by the meagre information available as regards musical *curricula* of the period and the fact that distinction between composition proper and *ex tempore* practice cannot always be readily made. We shall here investigate the extant writings on counterpoint at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and ultimately evaluate its relevance in respect of our own times; are the cultural mores and the factors of music making incompatible to the point that we cannot understand the first stirrings of counterpoint pedagogy, the roots of our notion of polyphony?

Musical tuition at the end of the fifteenth-century was largely confined to reading the authorities of *musica speculativa*, as part of the *quadrivium* taught at Universities, and the practical craft of singing, taught at collegiate, monastic and significant ecclesiastical institutions. We know very little about private tuition of counterpoint of the period and as to which extent such tuition at all took place. Adrianus Petit Coclico's remark that Josquin des Pres never presented him with a single musical exercise is famous but historically dubious.¹ Its importance to our study lays in its implication of an ideal pedagogy, one which was not to be based on analysis of pre-existing music, but in the notion of composition as a concrete discipline in itself, a logical continuation from the exercise of singing.² On grounds of the documented discourse on music by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century composers it is safe to assume that what we today understand as the idiom of Renaissance polyphony was not taught in the manner of a foreign tongue but rather assimilated naturally in daily choral practice. This postulation finds further support in late fifteenth-century music theory. Nicolaus Burtius, as a case in point, emphasised that "when one wishes to compose a song it is necessary first to know much music, that is, to have studied thoroughly an infinite number of works".³ Knowledge of this kind was an assumed starting point of Burtius' readership. With every language follows, however, that one must perfect such naturally acquired skill with some regulation in order to achieve complete idiomatic fluency. It is likely that the treatises on counterpoint by Prosdocimo de Beldomandis, Ugolino Urbevetanis, Johannes Tinctoris, Franchinus Gafurius, Bartolomeo Ramis de Pareia, and Burtius responded directly to such a need.

Regulation

In their pedagogical tractates on counterpoint, these theorists presented sets of rules governing voice-leading and permissible dissonances. The concept of 'dissonance treatment' as found in later music theory is not applicable here – the consensus position in this era was that dissonance should be allowed with tactful restraint rather than exploited. The regulation proposed may appear to be of little direct practical value. Purposeful models of counterpoint are occasionally hinted at, but first and foremost there seems to have been a great collective desire to 'spruce' the tradition of polyphonic music. If one closely examines the didactic approach of these theorists it is clear to see that regulation of a pre-existent practical grounding was their prime intention. Whether the regulations were proposed as instruction or as description is open to deductive reasoning, but arguments advanced in the treatises are primarily empirically founded, far from

the speculative tradition of music theory of Boethius and Isidore of Sevilla (a theoretical tradition in which these theorists were nonetheless involved in other matters). The regulation of different authors naturally overlaps, and to make any assertion as to comparative originality would clearly border on the audacious. This table merely aims to offer an overview of principles which are shared between five of the foremost theorists, together spanning the entire fifteenth century:

Principle	de Pareia	Burtius ⁴	Gafurius ⁵	Tinctoris ⁶	Prosdocimo
Beginning and ending on perfect consonance	p. 65	f. 3 r., f. 5 r.	f. 1 r., f. 3 r.	p. 147	p. 58-60
No consecutive perfect consonances	p. 65	f. 5 r.	f. 1 r.	p. 148	p. 60-62, p. 66
Consecutives of imperfect consonances desirable	p. 65	f. 5 v.		p. 148	
If c. f. is static, counterpoint should move	p. 65			p. 148	
Closest possible movement desirable	p. 65	f. 4 v., f. 5 v.	f. 2 v.	p. 149	
Contrary motion desirable	p. 65	f. 5 v.	f. 2 v.		p. 64-66
No violation of modus (' <i>distonatio</i> ')	p. 71			p. 149- 150	
No melodic repetition				p. 150-151	
No repetition of cadence degree				p. 152	
No movement from perfect consonance to compatible dissonance		f. 5 v.			

We can note that Tinctoris alone is to some degree preoccupied with the concept of variation; in addition to his principles he also states a general decree of variation, which applies only to some general points made by other authors. The congruence illustrated by this table could not be explained only by derivative scholarship, even if such a tendency is strongly implied by the fact that theorists of this period only reluctantly admit to influence by their contemporaries. If there is any intrinsic worth in these principles it must have been derived from qualities established in pre-existing musical works. This links up with general contemporaneous tendencies in the natural sciences, where an increasing desire for ontological evidence was very much in evidence.

Theory and Practice

In spite of the clear distinction often made between *cantores*, *modulatores* and *musici* in early music theory, no polarisation between theory and practice is evident in late fifteenth-century published counterpoint instruction. We know that music of this period were composed both in premeditated and *ex tempore* manners. One must not be under the impression that the former necessarily embodied a higher degree of sophistication nor that the latter was confined to homophonic fauxbourdon (although this might well have been the most widely cultivated method of improvised polyphony). Prosdocimo establishes a distinction between vocal ('*vocalis*') and written ('*scriptus*') counterpoint but then goes on to state that in his thesis, everything that will be said of counterpoint is to be understood to pertain to both these disciplines.⁷ (Tinctoris similarly discriminates between "*mente*" and "*scripto*"⁸). In the sixth chapter of his *Musices opusculum* (*liber secundus*), Burtius describes the counterpoint he learned in his childhood. This improvised method allegedly adhered to rules of voice-leading which were used daily in the chapels of princes, particularly by "*ultramontanis cantoribus*", that is to say by singers from regions north of the Alps.⁹ Fol. E 8 v.

These, and plenteous other reports of a similar kind, confirm the inherently practical origins of voice-leading regulation.

The practice of so-called simultaneous composition gradually became manifest during the course of the period discussed in this study. Johannes Cochleus seems to have been the first theorist to mention this procedure in his *Musica* of 1507.¹⁰ Pietro Aaron then discussed it further in his *De institutione harmonica* of 1516. At the time of publication of these two treatises, however, music with considerable equality of part-writing had already been composed and Loyset Compère had even used imitation with three different pitches of entry. Simultaneous composition is a precondition for this type of constructive counterpoint, which entails that Cochleus is essentially descriptive in his discussion. Consequently, some method of simultaneous composition must have been developed by composers of the Josquin generation. If we examine the bulk repertoire at the turn of the two centuries in question it becomes clear that the older practice of c. f. treatment, successive counterpoint, was unquestionably the normal working method, and indeed the sole idiom, for most composers, whether in the form of paired imitation or strict c. f. works. Gafurius asserts: "When one wishes to add a quintuple or fifth part, concordant with these four, one should take care to join this fifth part first to one and then to another of the parts by means of diverse species in accordance with the rules and mandates of counterpoint."¹¹ He also describes the compositional method of parallel writing in outer parts with 2:1, or 4:1, rhythmic relation to the tenor c. f.. He lists Tinctoris, Guarnerius, Josquin, Werbecke, A. Agricola, Compère, Brumel and Isaac as composers cultivating this technique. Alongside the new constructive polyphony with equal part-writing, successive composition was thus continually cultivated by 'modern' Franco-Flemish composers well into the sixteenth century.

Humanism and Gothicism

Fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century music theory has sometimes been made to look orthodox and stringent as compared to the supposedly humanist expression of original works of music from the same period. Such a notion fails to recognise the close interrelationship between theory and composition of the time. From what we have seen, it may be argued that Gafurius sought the refinement of the declining c. f. techniques whereas progressive Flemings had more eclectic aspirations. Perhaps the perceived 'gothicism' of the theorists is connected with the fact that these frequently described and examined the styles of their immediate forbears. If this was done for the reason of admonition, which is often the case, the 'modern' style of late Josquin, Brumel, and Compère was not so much a deviation from the principles of contemporary music theory, but rather something directly instigated by those. To purport that the Josquin generation represented a 'humanist', or 'classical' ethos can, of course, be done in the analysis of isolated works (and then chiefly as regards broader interdisciplinary scholarship). The problem with such a notion is not primarily whether late fifteenth-century theorists had descriptive or instructive intentions. Rather, it is in presupposing a clear distinction between theory and practice, as discussed earlier, that the modern mind fails to support such a simplification. Ramis de Pareia definitely did not represent any retrograde faction when he stated that singers "should avoid doing anything against the rules because, even if they are approved very little, they still do not depart from the truth."¹² One may also consider Gafurii's humanist-tinged statement that "the interval of a sixth mediated by a third above a tenor harmoniously supports a fourth between those two concordant, though imperfect, intervals. The third and the sixth are obscured by these intervals in the way that smaller things are obscured by larger ones. Even so, this fourth is recognised to have been evolved both from art and from nature."¹³ "Et si sexta per tertiam supra tenorem mediata quartam inter medium terminum concorditer sustinet et acutum: quoniam inter duas ipsas concordantias tertiam scilicet et sextam (quamvis imperfectas) disposita est ab ipsis tanquam minor a maioribus obumbrata. Id tamen noscitur etiam natura atque arte deductum." fol. D 4 v.

It is in our times habitually asserted that music was gradually removed from the broad field of arithmetic to the humanities in Renaissance musical thought, a process in which progressive Burgundian composers are presumed to have played a crucial role. Here, on the contrary, we find that it is the theorists trained in the *speculativa* tradition which aim to uncover some natural order of things, suggesting both

regulation and liberation in that process. Tinctoris, positively the most distinctive empiricist of these, advocate a gloss on the 'closest possible movement principle' a matter on which, as can be deduced from the table above, practically all theorists agree: "But those who aim at a sweeter and more pleasant counterpoint than that constructed of neighbouring notes are freed from this rule".¹⁴ The suggestion of natural order is conveyed in the language used to explain the conventions of voice-leading, as when Ugolino describes that certain notes desires ('*cupit*') or seeks ('*vult*') certain progressions depending on their relation to the tenor.¹⁵

Dissonance is another issue on which there is a considerable degree of concurrence between the theorists. There is a marked discrepancy, however, between their views vis-à-vis those of contemporaneous Flemish composers. Gafurius commends the music of Josquin but of the kind of conjunct movement dissonance which is so frequently found in the motets of this composer he has to say: "To these I would rarely concede admittance, for their discordance is marked, even though the minim occupies only half the time of the semibreve [this refers to a given example] and proceeds swiftly"¹⁶ When the theorist says: "Slowness naturally requires more time for itself than does rapidity [this unquestionably refer to vibration rather than to tempo or rhythmic relationship]. Hence there can be more discordance in lower sounds, and consequently that discordance is more obvious....Among such low a sound, therefore, counterpoint does not tolerate the discordance of such a fourth."¹⁷ The general notion that the lowermost part has special obligations and cannot necessarily perform all the functions of a middle part is clearly stated. Gafurius here protests against an effect that is deliberately explored by Josquin in *Tu pauperum refugium* (*secunda pars of Magnus es tu, Domine*, ex. I), by Pierre de la Rue in *Lauda anima mea dominum* (ex. II) and elsewhere.¹⁸ The discords of seconds and ninths must, according to Gafurius, be concealed by rapid syncopation in order not to offend the ear.¹⁹ Here, they take pride of place in the lowermost part.

Ex. I

sa - lus me - a, Je - su Chri - ste...
sa - lus me - a, Je - su Chri - ste...
sa - lus me - a, Je - su Chri - ste...
sa - lus me - a, Je - su Chri - ste...

Ex. II

...u e - ro.
...i - u fu - e - ro.
...ro.
...u

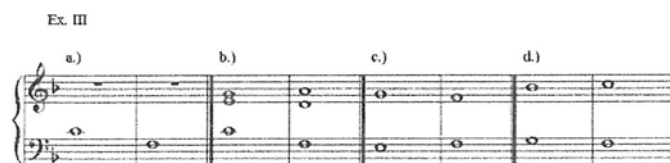
The attention of the composer and that of the theorist was turned to the same object and are thus inevitably related, the question of mutual influence or *Zeitgeist* issues notwithstanding. It is a reasonable assumption that this issue was academically instigated and subsequently became an expressive mannerism among sixteenth-century composers. It clearly foreshadows a later dictum, quite opposed to that of Gafurius: the commonly held opinion that dissonances should occur with accentuation and be resolved with non-accentuation.²⁰ Josquin's liberty in part-writing was not, however, of necessity leading some collective tendency in a new direction. As late as 1547, he is unfavourably compared to Jacob Obrecht by humanist music theorist Henricus Glareanus, who criticises Josquin's excessive pursuit of '*raritates*', compared to

which Obrecht's polyphony appears tactfully moderate.²¹ We have noted that Tinctoris considered any kind of repetition as altogether undesirable. Nevertheless, some composers, perhaps most prominently Jean Mouton, did use exact replication of passages in order to interlink related sections within a work. Again, practitioner and academic appear to have responded to the same stimulus, being in total disagreement as regards its effect.

Is a Musical Ontology Evident in the Contrapuntal Tradition?

After the first quarter of the sixteenth century a new generation of theorists had already established novel, and substantially different, types of counterpoint methodology. Among these, Aaron (who enjoyed a wide readership all through the century) cites, discusses and acclaims many works by Josquin. Even if Josquin and his fellow composers instructed many young composers, it was in all probability through dissemination of their works and by virtue of treatises such as Aaron's that they had a pedagogical impact. Thus the posthumous reputation of Josquin, de la Rue *et al* was most likely a determinative factor in the pedagogical history of counterpoint. The vast majority of composers born in the late fifteenth-century, however, must still have received instruction in the form of regulating principles. Here we may recall Adrianus Petit Coclico's mention of Josquin supposedly adapting his method to the aptitude of his pupil. Coclico praises the practical and direct nature of Josquin's teaching, but the method which is deemed suitable for the more gifted pupil resembles closely that taken in the treatises of Tinctoris and Burtius and is definitely far removed from the tabulated schemes of possible cadential formulæ that came to dominate early sixteenth-century teaching. If there is any validity in Coclico's description of private teaching, these two methodologies served different needs and are likely to have co-existed during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In the preamble of this article I promised to propose some possible significance of Renaissance counterpoint theory for composition pedagogy in our time. For brevity, one resolute example will suffice in these matters. We have already seen that the principles of fifteenth-century counterpoint appear to have been based on certain observations in practical music making. It must be said that the modern notion of cadence is indisputably in conflict with the nature of voice-leading in presuming that a cadence results from a leap between the fifth and first scalar degree in the lowermost part (ex. III a). This is, of course, symptomatic rather than determinative as regards the cadence proper, which attains its characteristic by two parts reaching a perfect consonance from an imperfect consonance by means of contrary motion, just as described in fifteenth-century theory (see ex. III c and d). The leap of the fifth has in itself no voice-leading effect whatsoever and can easily be accommodated in a variety of situations without affecting the polyphonic impetus (see. ex. III b).



A conception in modern pedagogy which was probably originally intended as an enlightening simplification has turned away from what any individual familiar with western modality and tonality by impulse would recognise as a cadence. Whatever instruction composers of the Josquin generation received it must have been closer to some collective understanding of counterpoint than we could ever hope for as long as theory is separated from practice in this way.

It seems decidedly less than plausible that any single composer unaided could achieve proficiency in a style so stylistically uniform as that of the '*recentiores*' (a term used by Gafurius to describe the generation of composers born in the middle of the fifteenth century²² Fol. E 2 r.) and in this regard, if in no other, the tractates under discussion clearly had an impact on the compositional methods of their time. We have

established that early counterpoint pedagogy was effective in the dissemination of ideas that originally arose among Flemish composers. Such an amalgamation of descriptive and instructive purposes probably helped to enhance the reputation of the Flemings in provincial areas of Europe. From a productive interrelationship between theory and craft arose ontological principles which survived the idiom of Renaissance polyphony, pervaded all processes of composition well into the eighteenth century and which have remained, albeit in altered form, in the musical curriculum for more than five hundred years.

References

¹ “Item Praeceptor meus Josquinus de Pratis nullam unquam praelegit aut scripsit Musicam, breui tamen tempore absolutos Musicos fecit, quia suos discipulos non in longis et friuolis praeceptionibus detinebat, sed simul canendo praecepta per exercitium et practicam paucis uerbis docebat.

Cum autem uideret suos utcumque in canendo firmos, belle pronunciare, ornatè canere, et textum suo loco applicare, docuit eos species perfectas et imperfectas, modumque canendi contra punctum super Choralem, cum his speciebus. Quos autem animaduertit acuti ingenij esse et animi laeti his tradidit paucis uerbis regulam componendi trium uocum, postea quatuor, quinque, sex et caetera, appositis semper exemplis, quae illi imitentur.” Coclico [1552], 1954, secunda pars fol. F 2 v. (‘My instructor Josquin never lectured on music nor wrote a musical treatise and yet he could form complete musicians in a short time, as he did withhold his pupils with long and pointless instructions but taught them the very rules in a few words, through the practical application of singing. And when he saw that his pupils were well grounded in singing, had a good enunciation and knew how to embellish melodies and fit text underlay to music, he taught them the perfect and imperfect intervals and different m

ethods of writing counterpoint against plainchant. But if he discovered pupils with superior acumen and promising disposition he would in a few words teach them first the rules of three-part and later of four-, five-, and six-part part writing, always providing examples which they could imitate.’).

² Similarly expressed in Tinctoris definition: “Contrapunctus itaque est moderatus ac rationabilis concentus per positionem unius uocis contra aliam effectus”. (‘And thus counterpoint is the restrained and premeditated polyphonic composition created by placing one pitch sound against another.’), 1963, pp. 77-78.

³ “Igitur uolens cantilenam componere primo necessum est quod uiderit multa. hoc est cantiones uel cantus infinitos lectitasse.” [1487], 1969fol. E 6 v.

⁴ Foliation refers to Tractatus Secundus.

⁵ Foliation refers to Liber tertius, caput tertium.

⁶ Pagination refers to Liber tertius.

⁷ [1412], 1984, p. 32

⁸ [1477], 1963, p. 129

¹⁰ Fol. E 4 r.

¹¹ “Quod quum quintuplum seu quintam partem concordem quattuor ipsis uolueris apponere: ipsam diuersis speciebus secundum regulas ac mandata contrapuncti alternatim ac mutuuum applicare procures.” [1496], 1979, fol. E 1 v.

¹² “Dum tamen contra regulas aliquid facere caveant, quoniam, etsi minime probantur, a ueritate tamen non discedunt.”, [1482], 1901, p. 71

¹⁴ “Sed ab hac regula eximuntur qui magis contrapuncto dulciori ac uenustiori student quam propinquiori.” [1477], 1963, p. 149.

¹⁵ For example “Sexta ternam cupit, si supra notam intendit.” (‘A Sixth desires a third if it ascends one note’) and “Sexta uult octavam, infra si tendit ad unam.” (‘A sixth seeks an octave if it descends one note’), [c.1440], 1960, p. 34.

¹⁶ “Has ego raro concederem admittendas: est enim nota ipsarum discordia quanquam uelociter gradiens dimidium tantum semibreuis obtinet.” fol. D 3 v.

¹⁷ “Tarditas enim plus temporis naturaliter sibi uendicauit quam celeritas. hinc potest in grauioribus sonis amplius discordari: consequenterque discordantia percipi magis nota... Iccirco in grauibis ipsis sonis quartae huiusmodi discordiam contapunctus non sustinet.”, fol. D 4 v.

¹⁸ Ex I: from Josquin des Prés Complete edition (Smijers), Bundel III. Ex. II: from Pierre de la Rue Opera Omnia IX, American Institute of Musicology, Hänssler-Verlag, 1996.

¹⁹ “..iccirco latet nullam auribus afferens lesionem.” [1496], 1979, fol. D 3 r.

²⁰ See for example Gioseffo Zarlino’s *Le istituzioni harmoniche*, [1558], 1965.

²¹ Glareanus [1547], 1967, p. 441-456. An interpretation of ‘raritas’ as ‘sparseness’, then an allusion to Obrecht’s dense polyphonic texture, is possible but the reading ‘oddity’ or ‘rare peculiarity’ is more credible in the context given.

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Summary

With the treatises on counterpoint by, among others, Tinctoris, Burtius, and Gaffurius, composers were exposed to pedagogy in a way that had previously been reserved for choristers and liturgists. To a certain degree, composers born during the second half of the fifteenth century shared a stylistically uniform counterpoint technique and explored many facets of polyphony before these had been discussed by theorists – yet the progressive elements seem related to points on which Tinctoris had already criticised composers of the previous generation. Were the treatises primarily testimonies of established practice or breakthrough principles of composition? What instruction did original works and counterpoint pedagogy, respectively, bestow on composers *in spe* c.1500? Such chronological scrutiny is made complicated by the meagre information available as regards musical *curricula* of the period and the fact that distinction between composition proper and *ex tempore* practice cannot always be readily made. We shall ultimately evaluate the relevance of early counterpoint methodology in respect of our own times; are the cultural mores and the factors of music making in the fifteenth century and today incompatible to the point that we cannot understand the first stirrings of counterpoint pedagogy, the roots of our notion of polyphony?

Balsovados principų XV a. kontrapunkto taisyklėse tyrimas

Santrauka

Tinctorio, Burtijaus, Gaffurijaus ir kitų autorių kontrapunktui skirti traktatai mokė kompozitorius, kurio pedagogika anksčiau buvo palikta choristams ir apeigininkams. XV a. antroje pusėje gimę kompozitoriai tam tikru laipsniu naudojo stilistiškai vieningą kontrapunkto techniką ir tyrinėjo daugybę polifonijos aspektų iki to, kai jais susidomėjo teoretikai, nors progresyvūs elementai yra tartum susiję su dalykais, už kuriuos Tinctoris kritikavo ankstesnės kartos kompozitorius. Kažin ar traktatai pirmiausia liudijo nusistovėjusią praktiką ar kompozicijos principų proveržį? Kokią instrukciją savo ruožtu pateikdavo kompozitoriams *in spe* XV a. originalūs darbai ir kontrapunkto pedagogika? Tokio pobūdžio chronologinę įžvalgą komplikuoja menka informacija apie muzikinį laikmečio *curricula* ir tai, kad iš karto sunku atskirti kompoziciją ir *ex tempore* praktiką. Mes galop įvertinsime ankstyvos kontrapunkto metodologijos reikšmę mūsų laikų atžvilgiu. Ar kultūrinės konvencijos ir muzikavimo faktoriai XV a. ir dabar yra tiek nesuderinami, kad mes negalime suprasti pirmųjų kontrapunkto pedagogikos virpesių, mūsų polifonijos sampratos šaknų?