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Musica Ficta Concerns in Palestrina's Motets
(an editorial comparison)

The application of accidentals in the music of the 15th and 16th centuries is a topic of controversy and confusion among theorists today. Fortunately, detailed work by Lowinsky, Apel, Berger and others have helped to establish general guidelines which seem to match those of the composer's and his contemporaries. Inconsistencies in existing editions, however, force the modern musician with a concern for performance practice issues to delve further than these general guidelines in search of a more mature understanding of musica ficta. For whom to search but the archetype of counterpoint himself, Palestrina? For where to examine but (as was discovered by my own wandering research) the most musica ficta problem causing pieces, the motets? Upon comparing editions published by various music houses such as the German Breitkopf and Hartel or the Italian Scalera, these dilemmas in choosing tones versus semitones (and the reasons for these choices) become apparent. Evidently, (as one may have guessed) the more recent editions of this music tend to show more frequent and homogenous usages of musica ficta, benefiting from the increased academic research in this area. More, though, does not necessarily mean better, for the historical accuracy of increased chromaticism is questionable considering that it is one of the main destroyers of the modes' individuality.

Many scholars have attempted various attacks at many angles on solving the dilemmas of musica ficta. Some academics find salvation in the scholarship of the time, some consolation in the music itself, and yet others by analyzing a third contemporary source: organ and lute tablatures of the sixteenth-century. Since organ music and lute music of the period was notated by fingerings instead of notes, all accidentals in a piece of music had to be pre-planned before publication began; no thought was required on the part of the performer, as was required of the singers during this era. Unfortunately, as perfect as this correlation may sound, its viability within the academic community is tenuous. Lewis Lockwood the opposition's position: "There is no reason to assume that the practices followed by instrumentalists were carried over into the vocal literature,

where the tradition of solmization and *musica ficta* particularly applies"⁵. While analyzing lute and organ tablature may give us some indication of the general practices of the era, it is far outweighed by the concrete theoretical evidence of the period and specific musical examples which are used to outline these theories. If one were to find tablatures of Palestrina's motets, then one might have a case (although it can always be argued that changes were made in the transfer). Therefore, all conclusions drawn hereafter are based solely from logic drawn from the scholarship of the time and the source materials themselves.

Before delving into an in-depth comparison of editions, however, it seems as if I should outline some of the basic reasons (according to contemporary theorists of Palestrina) for the use of "false music". *Musica ficta*'s first purpose is to correct horizontal tritones. Presumably, the reason for fixing this melodic tritone was related to the vocal nature of pieces with which *musica ficta* is involved: tritones are generally hard to sing. These tritones naturally occur in an untransposed modal system between the notes B and F. During Palestrina's time, the sharpening of the F or the flattening of the B were both acceptable solutions to this problem. However, most theorists advised in the latter solution over the former. Perhaps the main reason for their choice was that the Bb during this period was considered *musica recta* (within the mode) whereas the F# was always considered *musica ficta*. Therefore, in an effort not to destroy the character of the modes, Bb was the preferable choice in fixing horizontal tritones. (It should also be mentioned that in a transposed system {one flat signature}, since the Bb was already in the "key signature" and thus created tritones between E and Bb, it was considered acceptable to avoid this fault through the addition of an Eb. But in an untransposed system, however, the tritones created by a *musica ficta* Bb were never solved through the addition of another ficta note {namely Eb} {unless of course one is discussing the Chromatic Art of the Netherlands, which is a different approach to the function and purpose of *musica ficta*} because the identity of the mode would be too far distorted).

The second main function of ficta was to correct vertical tritones (again occurring between B and F in an untransposed system), commonly referred to as fixing a "mi-against-fa" discord. As with horizontal discords, the ficta of choice was overwhelmingly Bb in an effort to best preserve the mode. Other vertical dissonances were also prohibited, the diminished octave or augmented octave in particular. Of course, such a dissonance never arises through a *musica recta* use of the modes; imperfect octaves occur in the modal system only through the application of *musica*

⁵65 New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, pp. 804

ficta. This rule, therefore, simply meant that any accidentals applied to a certain note had to be applied to all other notes of that pitch class which occurred in simultaneity with the original fixed note (although the English music of the same period, characterized in the music of Thomas Tallis, has a particular penchant for these dissonant octaves--but I digress, as is my own particular penchant). The last problem concerning vertical tritones is thrown under the heading "cross relations"; the basic premise of this rule is that tritones (or imperfect octaves) in close proximity to one another (the space of one or two "beats") between two voices are to be avoided, if possible, through musica ficta. Conversely, musica ficta should always try to avoid itself these cross relations.

The third and final musical problem which ficta attempts to resolve is that of the cadence. Basically, at cadence points, there should exist a leading tone as the penultimate note of the phrase. More technically speaking, all octaves which are points of rest should be preceded by an expanding major sixth and all unisons preceded by a minor third. As with the problem of vertical and horizontal tritones, both lowered leading tones (the addition of a flat) or raised leading tones (the addition of a sharp). Conversely, however, the musica ficta of choice in these circumstances was the use of the sharp. Sometimes, though, in order to avoid creating new horizontal or vertical tritones with the addition of a sharp, the flat was the preferred leading tone. I feel as though I have left much of the scholarship on musica ficta undiscussed (the actual rules are much finer and more open-ended); jumping into the music itself, though, is probably the only way to truly this knowledge.

Let us turn to the first editorial discrepancy involving a mere comparison of two editions: Breitkopf and Hartel's Palestrina. Werke. published in 1896 (for the volume in question) at Leipzig and Scalera's Palestrina. Opere Complete published in 1956 at Rome. The motet is the five voice setting of "Quam pulchri sunt" and can be found on page 94, V15 of the German edition and on page 126, V7 of the Roman edition. The first main point of difference in the two scores (banaly marked "POD" by our banal author) occurs in bars 18-20. Let us turn our attention to the inflected G breve of the altus in bar 20 of the Roman edition. The reason for this addition of a sharp is simple: to produce a cadence to the A of which it is a neighbor. Zarlino spells it out for us: "every progression from imperfect to perfect consonance should include in at least one part the step of a large semitone" ¹. Moreover, "it shall not be lawful to pass from the major

¹ Zarlino The Art of Counterpoint as cited in Berger, Karol. Musica Ficta: Theories of Accidental Inflection. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. pg. 127. P.S. I have read the original translations of Zarlino (including On the Modes) and have found

sixth to the fifth, nor from the minor sixth to the octave. For neither progression is natural to the consonances involved".² Therefore the Roman edition's purposes are obvious: to produce an expanding major sixth between the altus and the quintus. Considering that both parts rest after this point, we can logically conclude that this passage is a cadence point and is therefore worthy of such inflection. (this next section will probably be a long footnote instead of a feature of the body). The idea of "cadence" is actually quite important in determining whether a sixth moving to an octave needs to be inflected or not. A simpleton (such as myself) may look at the soprano part in bar 21 and notice how it is moving to a perfect consonance (on D) from an imperfect consonance with the tenor part. At a cadence, this C would normally be inflected to a C# (or the E to an Eb, although this is more rare and also would in this case conflict with the altus's A) to produce a major sixth. However, since this motive tends to reappear (earlier and later in the bass part) in a minor mode, such a change would only confuse the modality. "The primary rule for applying accidentals is that *musica recta* should be used rather than *musica ficta* where possible."³

Related to the idea of destroying tonality is the discrepancy which creeps in at bar 18. The Roman edition has introduced an F# (*deisis*) to the altus part, apparently to avoid the tritone which naturally occurs between it and the cantus. Admittedly, this addition is in parentheses, but it is evident nonetheless. The earlier German edition omits this inflection for good reason. The change is obviously not made for cadential purposes (as it occurs in the middle of a phrase and on the shortest note possible) and no horizontal tritones are being avoided. But although here the vertical tritone is foregone, just one bar later in the same voice (altus), a passing tritone is produced between it and the quintus. An argument may be made for the distinction of a "neighbor tritone" and a "passing tritone", but this distinction seems ungrounded in any of the *musica ficta* literature I have come across. The main reason against this inflection is that it only serves to confuse the modality surrounding for a non-structural purpose. (actually, to the ear, this one little note probably does not matter much and only facilitates the ease of singing a quick neighbor note).

The second major point of difference occurs between bars 31-32. Here the Roman edition has chosen to alter the bassus part with a G# and the altus part with a

that the translations which Berger uses are not his own and are therefore reputable. Also, I have never found any discrepancies between any translations which I have encountered.

² Zarlino in Berger, pg. 128.

³ Margaret Bent as cited in Berger, pg. 83.

comparable G# in the following bar. The purpose of the altus part is cadential (producing a major sixth with the bassus), while the bassus G# (while creating a more "congruent" modality) has the main function of creating a minor sixth with the quintus (resolving to the perfect consonance of a fifth on beat later). The German approach is much simpler: A mere flat to the bassus's B creates the cadential major sixth with one less inflection. Also, the disuse of the bassus G# avoids creating a melodic tritone as the Roman edition does. The German edition appears to have won this one! However, the German edition has lost the motivic continuity between the bassus in bar 31 and the altus in bars 30 and 32. Also, a few unfortunate, sticky rules crop up in the literature. "[Petrus frater dictus Palma ociosa (an early fourteenth-century theorist)] suggests again the automatic choice of a sharp rather than a flat for a cadential leading tone"⁴ Well what about that melodic tritone? Glarean says that the diminished fifth "is not allowed as a leap in a song, but as continuous movement either in ascent or in descent."⁵ The indirect melodic tritone, therefore, is acceptable. In this light, the Roman edition again may have won the fight.

There exists a final *musica ficta* concern which is not solved by either edition but seems to warrant an analysis. This point occurs at bars 60 and 61; notice the tritone, resolved incorrectly, at the end of bar 60 in the quintus and altus lines. It seems appropriate at this phase of the discussion to turn the focus to another aspect of *musica ficta*. One anonymous noted scholar points that a main use of chromaticism for the madrigalists was to affect a type of word painting. This word painting consisted mainly of the use of non-modal tones to parallel in the music the expressions of pain, happiness, sorrow, etc. in the text. Since many of the madrigalists were compositionally active during the period when Palestrina was writing his motets, it seems possible that he employed some of these word painting sensibilities in some of his motets, at least ones of a more secular nature. This motet, "Quam pulchri sunt", is a particularly vulgar text; it comes from the Song of Songs and concerns itself with describing the beauty of a woman, presumably told by a lover who yearns for her (the most "descriptive" parts are abridged from Palestrina's lyrics). At the point in which this tritone appears, the words "how beautiful is" (rough translation by someone who does not know Latin but knows how to use a dictionary) are being repeated, sort of like a refrain. Perhaps Palestrina had decided at this point in the music to make one of the repetitions particularly poignant and opted for this strange tritone as his personal method of italicization. This spot in the music is actually quite hard to fix; adding a B-flat to the altus line creates a

⁴ Berger, pg. 142-143.

⁵ as cited in Berger, pg. 80

plethora of cross relations, and the addition of an F# in the quintus line creates a melodic tritone. But is this melodic tritone so evil? "The tritone caused by manuscript alteration of the second note of an ascending interval is also fairly common if the movement continues upward."⁶ Well, admittedly, this source is describing the musical practices of the 1350-1450 period, not the time when Palestrina was working. But the strength of Hughes argument continues: "Almost no evidence of the period supports the conventional modern claim that melodic tritones were prohibited in early music: if anything, there are more hints suggesting the opposite conclusion in certain circumstances."⁷ Fascinating. Perhaps, though, since Hughes is not talking about our period, we could adopt another solution: raising the second F in the quintus part, thus leaving a melodic fourth to precede our chromatic movement. "Horizontal rules prescribing only diatonic progressions and perfect intervals are certainly too narrow....Manuscript practice itself confirms the use of other intervals. In Old Hall, most common is the chromatic progression."⁸ Oh, whoops, this is from the same unreliable source. Perhaps one should just leave the vertical tritone unfixed. In a textual context, though, it seems more appropriate to outline the longing and desire expressed by the narrator through the use of these "exotic" intervals and chromatic movements by inserting an appropriate F#, as well as to avoid the vertical tritone which was always considered more heinous than the melodic one.

Well, truthfully, all this talk of text and word painting has left me panting. Let us move to another one of Palestrina's motets, "Tu es Petrus", where the harmony and voice leading will hopefully be as solid as a "rock". For this editorial comparison, we are luckier than we were for the first, for not only do we have the Breitkopf and Hartel version from 1881 and the Scalera version from 1940, but we also have the updated Breitkopf and Hartel version from 1959. Therefore, those notes fixed by the 1959 German edition and the 1940 Italian version but left unfixed by the older German version can be seen as oversights in this 1881 publication. However, those notes left unfixed in both German editions are points of contention between the two companies' thoughts on ficta. (As one may have guessed, it turns out that no notes are fixed by both the old German edition and the Italian edition but not by the newer German edition). As will be probably evident in the following paragraphs, I feel that the Italian

⁶ Hughes, Andrew. Manuscript Accidentals: Ficta in Focus 1350-1450. American Institute of Musicology, 1972. pg. 84.

⁷ Hughes, pg. 85.

⁸ Hughes, pg. 83.

edition makes too many uses of ficta, the older one too few, and the 1959 Breitkopf and Hartel edition is just right (so Goldilocks ate it).

Let us first tear the old German edition to shreds, shall we? (I'm sorry my language is getting so colloquial; it's that time of night). Before we start, I should mention that the 1959 edition has been transposed down a whole step; presumably, this transposition was incurred for considerations of soprano range, which goes up to high G's in the original edition. Since the key signature of two flats was common in the days of Palestrina, this change in the music is not one which completely assaults the senses. The editor, anyway, has conveniently provided the original notation in the margin at the beginning of the piece. Points of difference between the German editions occur in the following four places: Prima Pars bars 55 and 69; Secunda Pars bars 98 and 134. All four of these examples boil down to one simple problem, that of cadence. In each situation, a minor sixth is expanding to an octave at a point which is markedly the end of a line of text (and therefore deserves to be treated as a definitive cadence). The addition of the deisis in the 1959 version (and Italian version) is made to simply rectify this basic problem. I find the need for a cadence here so obvious that I wonder why it was left out of the early German edition. The argument that this cadence lies outside of the mode is completely invalid since both the first (bar 6) and last (bar finale) cadence of the piece make this exact use of musica ficta to cadence on G. Even in the old German edition this ficta is observed. My faith in this old edition, therefore, has become rather tenuous.

Can Breitkopf and Hartel mend their ways? Did they mend their ways in the 1959 publication? Three large discrepancies still exist between it and the 1940 Scalera version. The first of these dilemmas appears in bar 4 and similarly in bar 10 of the prima pars. The Italian version has added a C# (admittedly in parentheses) to the rising lines in each section. The obvious reason for this ficta is to produce major sixths between the octaves which follow it. The German edition leaves these C#'s out, probably because this section of the melodic line is not cadencing, nor is the text at a point of rest. Although, truthfully, these two passages are not cadences, there is yet another reason for fixing those C's: cross relations with the ficta F#'s which occurred a mere two beats earlier in the lower part. I doubt any sixteenth-century theorist would truly berate this cross-relation (seeing as it is displaced by one harmonic change), but I do not see any harm in adding this C#. Truthfully, as much as I have searched for this topic in the writings of Zarlino and Franchinus Gaffurius, the question of "cadence" when applied to ficta is never fully addressed. It is more often addressed by modern theorist who champion it as a method to preserve the identity of the modes. Therefore,

I see no harm in Italian version's choice of ficta, especially since they judiciously put the notation in parentheses.

The second point of difference in "Tu es Petrus" occurs in bars 46 and 50. The Italian edition, as is its penchant for adding ficta "willy nilly", has decided to raise the F to F# in the altus line. Ironically, instead of avoiding vertical tritones, they have created them; notice the C natural in the superius. They have also created a melodic tritone; notice the high point of the melodic line in the altus one bar before. Truthfully, the piece is set in the mode of G and therefore the altus has a right to cadence on G at this point. But is G really the harmonic goal and is this point really a cadence? No; the cadence to C comes at the beginning of bars 47 and 51 in the lower parts. The addition of this deisis confuses the modality of this section; it makes this area more "tonal" by creating a secondary dominant and a major sixth expanding to an octave. William Apel, as described in his Accidentals and Tonality, would certainly chastise the Romans for this error, for he sees the beauty of modal counterpoint as most forcefully coming at these moments when the leading tones are missing. I suppose the Scalera edition cannot win them all.

The final difference, where the Italian edition gains back its lost ground, occurs in the highly motivic area of bars 65-71 (prima pars). The unadorned version of this motive is seen in the quintus part at bar 70 (labeled "cell" by yours truly). Here, the musica recta B natural (A natural in the 1959 edition) leads by a semitone to the cadence on the first beat of the next bar. To keep the identity of this motive continuous throughout this section, the Italian editors have used musica ficta in the previous two appearances of the cell. This practice makes good voice leading sense, too, since it produces a major sixth-octave cadence at the beginning of every two bars (a little like a circle of fifths progression). By not using musica ficta, the German editions have failed to both recognize the cadence which is occurring in all the parts, but also failed to recognize the motivic cohesion of the voices.

As I hope I have at least made clear, musica ficta concerns are a very confusing topic in performance practice today. Even when one is completely familiar with the scholarship of the sixteenth century on the use of accidentals, it is often not quite clear what the composer intended for the music to sound like. Many stories appeared in the texts of modern books on ficta about singers of the period arguing heatedly over whether a note should be fixed or not, showing how that even during the time of these pieces' composition, debates still arose on this controversial topic. In looking at the motets of Palestrina, we can make educated guesses as to the original intent of the composer, but they are guesses nonetheless. Some editions, such as the Breitkopf and

Hartel complete works publication from around 1860-1902, show a lack of ficta which probably represents the original manuscripts more closely but leaves the modern singer without a training in modal counterpoint at a loss for the correct treatment of implied accidentals. Later, more modern editions, take the ignorance of the modern singer for granted and add the accidentals which were most probably added in the original performances. The revised Breitkopf and Hartel 1959 publication makes steps in this direction. Still, however, in these modern editions, certain key ficta are often left out. And sometimes, as in the Scalera publication of Palestrina's complete works starting in the 1930's and continuing to the present day, editors overcompensate the lack of ficta in the manuscripts by adding too many, coming maybe dangerously close to destroying the modality of these pre-tonal pieces which gives them their "ancient" musical character. Of course, "ancient" implies primitive; who knows, compared with the Bach, Beethoven, or Brahms, how much more closely Palestrina approximated "the keys of the kingdom of heaven"?