

BOOK REVIEW

Peter Urquhart. *Sound and Sense in Franco-Flemish Music of the Renaissance: Sharps, Flats and the Problem of Musica Ficta*

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Reviewed by Tim Daly

Renaissance vocal music has an editorial problem. Performers and editors of pre-Baroque repertoire are unable simply to realise the music on the page but instead must decide whether the notation means what it says it means: manuscripts require interpretation. This obligation arises from the widely accepted idea that the surviving compositions were not chromatically precise and that certain types of inflection—what today we would call accidentals—were omitted in writing but applied in performance. There are several well-known ‘rules’ that govern the creation of these inflections,¹ but this is where the consensus ends. Every scholar’s particular application of these rules is slightly different, and consequently, no two recordings of a Josquin mass or a Mouton motet sound identical. As Peter Urquhart observes in his weighty contribution to the topic, even the term used to describe these problems, *musica ficta*, is ambiguous. Formally, this term refers to pitches outside the Guidonian gamut (approximately the white notes on the keyboard plus most B-flats), while more colloquially, the term refers to the practice of adding editorial or performing accidentals to written music. This double usage is itself a source of confusion: a B-flat is usually *musica recta*, even when created by the application of *musica ficta* to avoid an imperfect fifth with a notated F.

The three traditional rules for inflections relate to the avoidance of linear tritones, the inflection of pre-cadential notes to produce an approach to perfect consonance from the nearest imperfect consonance (creating, in effect, leading notes in modern parlance), and the *mi-contra-fa* rule against imperfect vertical fifths and octaves. Two of these rules concentrate on the linear aspect of melody, while only the last is a harmonic principle, and Urquhart notes the tendency of modern editors to favour harmonic perfection over linear purity. His response

¹ For a useful introduction to these rules, see Nicholas Routley, “A Practical Guide to ‘Musica Ficta,’” *Early Music*, 13.1 (1985): 59–71.

is to pare the discussion back to first principles. He firstly makes a firm distinction between *musica ficta* and ‘performers accidentals’, and then, rather than discarding the inherited rules, he interrogates them on the basis of period teaching and performance practice. Following a thorough exploration of contemporary methods of solmisation, he explores each rule through an examination of surviving composition. A distinguishing feature is Urquhart’s data-driven approach, which employs a database of over 1000 motets. While this database cannot do the analysis itself, it makes for an easy comparison of cases through its ability, for example, to find all cases where a piece concludes with a cadence on A, both with and without a flat signature.

The grounding in solmisation is demonstrated first in the analysis of melodic material with an expectation of predictable behaviour: the *cantus firmi* of Josquin’s masses. Special emphasis is given to the *soggetto* of the *Miss Hercules Dux Ferrarie*, where the melodic stability of the tenor might be expected not simply from its role as a repeated structural motto but also as a result of its derivation from the solmisation syllables Re-Ut-Re-Ut-Re-Fa-Mi-Re. The resistance that these prefabricated musical structures exhibit to reinterpretation introduces a problem that will recur throughout: linear purity creates harmonic difficulty. This is the case even in circumstances that might make added inflection attractive, and is even more the case when considering cadential inflection, where a leading F-sharp in one voice may sit uncomfortably close to an F-natural in another. Urquhart makes a persuasive case that cadential inflection was the norm in most circumstances, and that the harmonic difficulties that result may simply be an element of the style of northern composers such as Gombert and Clemens non Papa. Gombert, in particular, was noted for his habit of writing deliberately imperfect octaves at significant pre-cadential points, and Urquhart suggests that spicy false relations, typically treated as an English hallmark, may have their origin in a Franco-Flemish style that has been edited out of existence. In Urquhart’s analysis, this pungent northern style is set in opposition to a smoother manner prevalent in Italy, the end result of which is Palestrina. Where Italian music sought to avoid *ficta* problems, northern style played with them.

With the effect of the two linear principles reinforced, Urquhart is then able to tackle the consequent difficulties with vertical intervals, concentrating on diminished fifths. Urquhart’s determination to explore inflection from a linear rather than a harmonic perspective immediately creates a tension with modern editorial practice, where attention has tended to focus on the elimination of vertical imperfect fifths whenever possible. His conclusion strikes an appropriately jarring note against the recent tendency to bring composition and performance practice closer together: in effect, he argues that the prohibition against imperfect fifths and octaves is a rule of composition rather than of performance or interpretation. Evidence from counterpoint theory, supported by examples from repertoire, shows that at least some written diminished fifths were performed as written, though there remain many cases that may require inflection. One contributing difficulty here may be problems with the changing transmission of pieces, particularly a tendency to make uniform the signatures of all voices in a piece. Where once a bass might have had a flat signature in contrast to the soprano’s lack of signature, compilers and scribes as early as Petrucci have tended to remove these partial signatures as understandings changed, with the result that the problem of the B in the bass against the F in the soprano is editorial in origin. Urquhart’s reinforcement of the effect of this changing signature practice makes powerful use of canonic technique as an example.

One possible weakness of Urquhart's analysis is its presumption of how singers used sources. Since manuscripts and printed sources were rarely arranged in score, Urquhart assumes both that singers sight-read directly from their own parts and did so without the ability to refer to other parts for coordination. A singer reading a new piece must therefore determine inflections solely from information encoded in a single part, without reference to the musical environment. The further musical practice moves away from sight-reading towards a performance practice based on memorisation and learning, the weaker this assumption becomes; indeed, Jessie Ann Owens has identified cases where skilled performers were able to play motets from parts on keyboard instruments. Yet if the reading element is perhaps overemphasised, this does not undermine Urquhart's analysis as a whole. One consequence is the delightful suggestion of the semiotic value of certain patterns of notation: standard syncopations may have acted as a warning sign to the singer that a leading tone was in the offing.

Urquhart's contention, then, is not that any of the traditional *ficta* rules is invalid, but rather that the weighting between them requires adjustment. In particular, he argues that the preference for vertical perfection over linear principles is a product of an urge to produce a comfortable sonority that does not disturb the modern listener. The longer this preference is indulged, the harder it is to dislodge from editorial practice, and Urquhart makes a compelling case that we may need to recalibrate our ears to accept a more pungent sounding polyphony, at least from northern composers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The tendency throughout is towards simplification; while the source evidence on inflection is treacherous, we are encouraged to accept the evidence of vertical imperfection when there is no compelling linear reason to resolve it. In particular, Urquhart rejects complex 'cycling' techniques of continuous inflection that deliver a measure of harmonic comfort at the cost of linear coherence.

Renaissance composers cherished musical riddles and puzzles, and so it is hard to avoid the feeling that they would have been amused by our perplexity in reproducing their music. This perplexity is unlikely to disappear entirely, since Urquhart happily admits that some problems defy solution on the available evidence. His book, however, provides a valuable framework for engaging with these problems. While many will perhaps be satisfied by reading only the useful concluding chapter of summary and recommendations, the step-by-step method built through the first four chapters will be important to practitioners in this repertoire. The question of performer's accidentals provides many differing, long-held answers; with the number of acknowledged difficulties that remain, it is unlikely that this book will persuade all readers or end all debate. It does, however, define a fresh starting point for that debate.

About the Author

Tim Daly is a Melbourne-based musicologist, lecturer, and performer. His research focuses on counterpoint and compositional process in fifteenth-century music.