

## ***Con la Mente e con le Mani*** **Teaching and Learning the Art of Counterpoint on the Keyboard (1585-1671)**

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### **Music Theory at the Keyboard**

As an organist particularly involved in early music, as well a musicologist dealing with the late Renaissance and early Baroque, I have had to confront my forebears' competence many times. Opening the treatises by Diruta and Banchieri, browsing the works of Trabaci, Frescobaldi, Pasquini, and reading the lines by Zarlino, one gets fascinated by a cultural world in which composing and playing the keyboard were two intimately related activities. This link has faded in our time, to the point that in our schools music theory and counterpoint are only tenuously connected to the practical act of singing or playing the music. That chasm not only creates an artificial separation in the way of learning, but it also limits the overall understanding of a musical culture.

But historically informed improvisation, especially for keyboard instrumentalists, has re-entered the curricula in several places in Europe and North America. Excellent musicians are trained in recreating the same finesse of their predecessors. As it was in the past, this revival too is pretty much based on 'secret knowledge' transmitted from teacher to student during classes. This learning method is indispensable to success: improvising according to strict stylistic rules is like learning a second language, grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and so on. It requires a lot of time and a lot of practical and mental exercise. Nevertheless the risk is that this art may be understood as a mere practical technique, belonging only to the realm of performance practice. The aim of my post-doctoral research project at Pavia University (2008-10) has been precisely to investigate the intimate relationship between music theory and performance, through improvisation. My efforts, supported by evidence collected among distinguished colleagues from several countries, have been to cast a bridge over that chasm, to let musicologists, music theorists and performers interested in approaching improvisation find research materials ready to be used and investigated. The large scope of the field suggested looking for a team of specialists who could bring their different competence

into the discussion. I am greatly indebted to my supervisor, prof. Gianmario Borio, for suggesting and supporting the idea of an international conference, the proceedings of which are collected in this special issue of *Philomusica*.

### **A critical overview of this issue**

In collecting the papers, as they were revised by the authors after a stimulating session led by our selected discussants, I have chosen to rearrange their order, to let the reader who wants to use the whole issue as an introductory textbook in historical improvisation find a path, from a general introduction, to some very specific cases, dealing with a composer's method or a particular form.

The results of the final round table, therefore, are presented in my own summary here as an introduction to the teaching of historical counterpoint through improvisation. The panelists brought their different experiences and confronted a series of problems rising from both the general curricula in the frame of which they are working, and the goals of modern students in comparison with those of their predecessors.

Peter Schubert discusses some improvisable techniques in vocal music, namely *contrappunto fugato* and *stretto fuga*. He presents his method of teaching them to counterpoint students at McGill, and suggests some possible connections between vocal and instrumental improvisation.

Michael Dodds provides in his contribution a vivid and informed picture of the liturgical context in which the improvising organist had to work. The understanding of the dynamics of the Roman Catholic liturgy is essential for a better grasp of the organization of the music in several aspects.

Edoardo Bellotti, a brilliant improviser and a distinguished teacher, offers an overview of the link between counterpoint and improvisation in Italian sources, from Gabrieli to Pasquini. He discusses some of them, exploring the didactic resources and their characteristics, which lead to a *fil rouge* in the way of teaching through all Europe in the Seicento.

My own paper explores Girolamo Diruta's *Breve regola* from *Il Transilvano*, and tries to contextualize the short counterpoint instructions in the rest of the keyboard tuition sketched by Diruta. My point is that the learner absorbed the competence useful for making counterpoint, already as part of basic keyboard technique, or in dealing with other requirements of his profession, such as intabulating vocal music.

Armando Carideo discusses the didactic works of Bernardo Pasquini, in particular the *Saggi di Contrappunto*. A critical overview of the manuscripts is followed by a stimulating reflection on the persistence of the modal system in the teaching and in the works of the composer.

Nicola Cumer focuses on the passacagli, elaborating a teaching method modeled upon Spiridionis a Monte Carmelo. Starting from the analysis of repertoire pieces he collects a series of preliminary exercises, the basis for learning the improvisation patterns that will then be found in Frescobaldi's *Cento partite*.

Angela Romagnoli has collected the voices of the participants in the round table about improvisation in performance practice, especially continuo, framing the discussion between Agostino Agazzari (1607) and Francesco Gasparini's opus 1 (1695).

### **Acknowledgments**

Many people were involved in this project, and to all of them goes my gratitude for sharing with me not only their research, but also an 'infectious' passion. Edoardo Bellotti, one of my former teachers, agreed enthusiastically to help me in organizing the event in Smarano, offering also a memorable concert.

I wish to thank also the other members of the scientific committee, Gianmario Borio, Cosimo Colazzo, and Angela Romagnoli, who turned out to be also 'my third hand'. The conference and these proceedings could not have been so successful without the authors. A special thanks to the discussants, Michele Chiaramida and Andreas Schiltknecht. The commitment of all the participants to the project and the wonderful atmosphere of cooperation among us were also inspired by the warm hospitality of the *Fondazione Smarano Academy* and its president, Giacomo Corrà. The last day was made possible thanks to the collaboration with the *Bonporti* Conservatory in Trento.

I would like to acknowledge Giancarlo Prato, chair of our faculty, and Elena Ferrari Barassi and Claudio Vela, chairs of the musicology department, for the support given to the research project.

I am greatly indebted to the *European Network for Musicological Research* and to the *Amici della Musica* of Albenga for financing the conference. Dale C. Carr did an excellent job of transforming my Italianate constructions into a more pleasant English.<sup>1</sup> Finally I wish to thank Maria Caraci Vela for agreeing to publish in this journal the results of our work.

### **Further developments**

As a result of the conference, a website has been created to share materials about historical improvisation: <[www.mentemani.org](http://www.mentemani.org)>.<sup>2</sup>

I am also pleased to announce a second conference, which will be held in Venice in October 2013. More details will be available soon on the website.

DOCENDO DISCITUR<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mine are also the translations of the articles by Bellotti, Carideo, Cumer, and Romagnoli.

<sup>2</sup> This website is made possible thanks the generous support of the *Banting Postdoctoral Fellowships Program*, administered by the Federal Government of Canada.

<sup>3</sup> This is the motto on the Fratti's organ in Smarano, a good wish also for who is approaching historical improvisation.