Adrian Petit Coclico

Compendium Musices

(1552)

De Elegantia et Ornatu

aut

Pronuntiatione in Canendi

Translated by Sion M. Honea
Translator’s Preface

In Coclico’s Compendium Musices (1552) appears the first printed description of the vocal diminution technique that would come to be so closely associated with the Italian renaissance. The technique was not, however, restricted to Italian lands, for Coclico is Flemish and is addressing his remarks to German boys. The entire discussion covers almost one and a half pages, of which only two paragraphs totaling thirteen lines are devoted to the technique itself. Of this very brief discussion the most interesting comments are, perhaps, his remark on how long and hard a boy must work to achieve the technique and the cryptic reference to lack of tongue movement in one who masters it. Four years later Hermann Finck would cover the same subject more extensively and allude to two types of articulation, tongue and throat. This may be what Coclico refers to in a censuring way, whereas Finck apparently considers it acceptable for some circumstances.

Of the remainder of the text the most interesting comment is that which implicitly connects no less than Josquin and Pierre de La Rue to the technique. Coclico specifically says that his own first example is the same as Josquin first gave. To modern sensibilities it is rather disturbing to think of the beautiful polyphonic sonorities of Josquin’s motets being “prettified” with continual vocal diminishations, if such was the case. Coclico’s chauvinistic remarks about national superiority in singing—Germans being the least adept—are possibly what stimulated Finck’s defensive response a few years later.

Of a practical concern, Coclico’s book is neither paginated nor foliated. I have referred the reader to the page on which his discussion starts by means of the signature. If the reader is unfamiliar with this term, an extensive explanation can be found in the preface to the Finck extract in this same translation series.

Ideally, it would have been desirable to produce musical transcriptions for this and other translations, but modern music writing programs are not suited to reproducing early music in anything other than distorted modern versions. I soon reached the point of diminishing returns in my attempts and decided that the texts in translation were far the more important part that could be accomplished reasonably.

The reader may also be interested to know that it is on page A2v and again on B1v that Coclico’s claim to have been a student of Josquin appears. A third instance appears on F1v along with the author’s famous description of Josquin’s pedagogical technique. In brief, he says that Josquin did not care for the memorization of precepts but taught by actual experience in singing and gave occasional rules only when needed. Whenever he found those of particular talent, he taught them more thoroughly.

Though this is the first of the early printed sources on the diminution technique, which I consider to run through Cerone, it is the last that I have completed in revision. Thus, I feel that I cannot close these opening remarks without thanks to Carol MacClintock’s translations. As an example, Coclico’s text is not particularly difficult, though not yet entirely settled into the classically inspired humanist style. In working on this translation I must have puzzled over one clause two dozen times trying to make sense of it. Finally giving up I consulted MacClintock and was amazed to find a translation that I could not justify from the text, until, that is, I went back to it and found that for each of those two dozen or so times I had misread “nactus est” as “natus est,” no doubt under the influence of too many chant texts! On some few occasions in
the translation series that includes this one, I have differed from MacClintock’s reading, but I have only done so with respect and gratitude.
[HIIIv] To teach the art of singing well and elegantly to a boy, I advise first that he choose a teacher who sings pleasantly and sweetly with a natural talent and produces pleasant music with charming clausulas far removed from the rasplings, noises and other unsuitable things that bring the noblest music into the contempt of men. For each one who obtains such a teacher in youth becomes such a singer, which one can see among the Belgians, the people of Hainaut and the Gauls, who possess a singular gift in singing before all peoples. Most of the chief musicians have lived among them: Josquin Des Prez, Petrus de La Rue, Jacob Scampion and others who are to be admired and have made use of the sweetest elegances of clausulas. The surviving scent of these men is preserved up to the present in the schools of those regions and is imbied by those desirous of music so long as students faithfully imitate teachers. Let the German boy take care thus to imitate a learned teacher while his voice is unbroken, because after the young voice breaks it is difficult or rare to attain the art of singing well, but acquired in youth it never passes into oblivion.

Since indeed there are very few in these regions who have experienced the sweet song of these outstanding older musicians, I made the decision to write out several examples, such as can be applied to all clausulas. So long as the syllables or words that are set to the notes remain silent.

But at first it is difficult to perform this with the throat, except the boy sweats and labors and even makes the effort for himself by any means, and continually daily repeats with himself up to the point that he has produced a familiarity and practice in this art, so that he does not even move his tongue, but performs correctly and ornately from the throat. Here is the first clausula that Josquin taught his students.

Musical Examples

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1 The Latin word is “lenociiniis,” which in classical Latin is negative, implying something false or superficial. Clearly Coclico means it positively.
2 The Latin is “clausularum” from clausula which means “cadence.” Coclico seems to use it both in this restricted sense and also in a more general sense of “phrase” or “passage.”
3 That is, he becomes a good singer like his teacher.
4 Coclico is Flemish.
5 Here he seems clearly to use the term more generally.
6 Specific words and syllables could prove impediments to the application of the diminution technique. Proper text underlay is discussed by some of the later authors.
7 Finck in his Practica Musica (1556), only four years later, refers to two types of articulation, with the tongue and with the throat. It could be that Coclico refers to the former here. Maffei (1562, page 30) also seems to allude to this type of articulation in the mouth.
8 Maffei (1562, page 31) asserts that some do not possess the physiological attributes necessary ever to be able to execute throat articulation, but he seems to limit this to those with some pathological impairment.
9 Here Coclico first gives a very few examples of diminutions both on what he must consider characteristic interval and melodic patterns from three to many notes. These are followed by brief examples of diminutions on cadential patterns. Thus Coclico, the first printed source on the vocal technique, already recognizes the distinction in practice between internal and cadential points for diminutions, though Maffei (1562, page 58) rejects diminutions on any but cadences. In each case he labels the diminution variation as “elegans.” Somewhat more valuable are the following individual vocal parts (disсantus and bassus) that are presented in diminished form. Their value is decreased by the fact that the original forms are not given. Most interesting is the example of a four-voice compositions (fuga) to be derived from a single part. He presents it in both original and diminished versions. After this fuga Coclico makes some remarks specific to the piece and not relevant to the technique, which I omit on that grounds.