Lampadius

Compendium Musices

(1539)

On Composition

Translated by
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Preface

Lampadius’s *Compendium Musices* 1537 has earned a far larger importance in music theory than its slender bulk might lead to believe. It is not, however, as a pedagogical text that it has earned that reputation, for in comparison with such works as Listenius’s *Musica* (1537) and Faber’s *Compendiolium* (1548) it is a decidedly inferior work, having received only five editions as compared to dozens each for the former. Rather, its importance resides in the portion of the book that arguably has little or no relevance as a beginner’s text; that is, in its coverage of the practice of composition.

Owens and Ruhnke in their *Grove* article on Lampadius⁴ identify in the book three areas of main significance: the author’s discussion of Josquin and his music, his rules and discussion of the practice of composition, and his example of a music score, nearly the earliest. It is this third contribution that Owens and Ruhnke consider the most important, for it comes at a critical time in the history of composition when the “simultaneous” approach and pervasive imitation prevail and suggests that by this time composers, or at least some, composed in score, as Lowinsky argued. This famous score sample appears at the end of the present translation.

This translation does not address the intriguing issue of composition by score but rather addresses Lampadius’s two sections of rules for composition, including his nearly as famous example of composing on a ten-line staff and the “resolution” of that to individual parts. The argument here is that these rules and examples provide their own important insights into compositional practice at the time, and one that is perhaps more effective at the level of college music students moving from a linear contrapuntal conception of the “successive” sort toward an understanding of the new “simultaneous” and harmonic approach.

Further Reading


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Compendium on the Composition of Song

[Chapter 1] On the Number of Consonants

How many are the harmonies? Four, obviously: unison, 3rd, 5th, and 6th.

How many kinds? Two: perfect and imperfect.

How many are they? Perfect: Two as unison and 5th. Imperfect? Two, clearly 3rd and 6th.²

In what way are the rest compounded from those said?

From the unison is compounded the octave and double-octave, which are perfect.

From the 5th is compounded the octave-and-5th and the 5th-and-double-octave, which also are perfect.

From the 3rd are constructed the Major 3rd-and-octave, the Major 3rd-and-double-octave.

From the 6th, indeed, are expanded the Major 6th-and-octave and the Major 6th-and-double-octave, all of which produce an imperfect sound.

What is the difference of the consonances? No one is easily able to determine and consider what the distinction differs among the consonances, unless he be by a composer’s nature well instructed in art and much practice, and if anyone will have practiced this distinction in error, he will compose with difficulty a sweet song without faults. We see in our time not a few composers who, for the composition of songs—the skill understood too little—making certain novel phrases but ones contrary to the inherent property of the modes. Others construct so varied and graceless, that barely can the sweetness of the melodies be discerned. In this way, he does not compose who never has heard, read, nor learned the precepts of composition precisely. But, let me return to my purpose: so that I may be able, then, as plainly and clearly as possible to benefit you and all those practicing well in this art, I will place examples before your eyes that are most conducive to this subject, from which you may easily understand this distinction. Anything obviously needed in this subject, or anything Josquin practiced as proper and genuine in this art, should you seek understanding, you will quickly find. Further, whatever I may be going to transmit will be the judgment of musicians; for I do not permit judgment in this art to the unlearnéd singers, who commonly want to be called the imitators of Josquin, when they have seen no song composed by him, who brag that their inept songs are much more polished and more fitting than those of Josquin. So far are they from imitating Josquin as the heaven is from the earth, because the songs of Josquin have many, varied, and most melodious phrases, having been adorned with suitable imitations [fugis] and canons,³ full of sweetness, and for the art of composition entirely above

² For the sake of modern readers I have chosen to use numerical designations for simple intervals and modern equivalents of Lampadius’s Greek terms for the compound interval.
³ These words raise a problem in terminology. The original meaning of canon was “rule,” and transferred to that strict imitative composition because in order to perform it there had to be a “rule” as to how it should be
all advisable, for which reason I would like for the songs of Josquin to be as familiar as possible to composers.\(^4\)

Which consonances are the harder ones? Some of the harmonies are stronger in sound, as the 5th and 3rd, others are softer, as the unison and 6th.

How many are the imperfect harmonies? Double. In what way? Surely, certain ones are hard, like the Major 3\(^{rd}\) (ditone) and the Major 6\(^{th}\), certain are soft, like the minor 3\(^{rd}\) (semitone) and minor 6\(^{th}\).

In which way are they placed in songs? Do they have certain characteristic positions? Where and in what way they ought to be placed will be shown below most fully.

In what way may I understand this? If the will to compose is apt and clever, evaluate and consider the genera of pitches (voces) and numbers, which exist in certain precepts, pay attention that the following rules may be as familiar as possible to you.

#1. Two perfect consonances ought not immediately follow each other.

\[\text{DISCANT.}\]

\[\text{TENOR.}\]

performed. In the 16\(^{th}\)-century German tradition, at least, a canon was called a fuga. Lampadius elsewhere uses canon to mean rule, but apparently here he means “canon” and fuga is simply imitation.\(^4\) The words here are *compositio* (composition) and *componista* (composer). This is an important point because music theory is only beginning to formulate the specific concept of a composer as distinct from a (general) practitioner. This is, in fact, a reason why Lampadius’s otherwise rather slight book is important to music history, along with his description of the new method of “simultaneous” composition, as exemplified in the following chart. The recognition of a distinct classification of “composer” is usually attributed to Nicolaus Listernius in his *Musica* (1537) in connection with his recognition of the field of *musica poetica*, but Ernest Ferand calls attention to the fact that Listernius was anticipated by a generation in recognition of the concept of composition by Nicolaus Wollick in both his *Opus Aureum* (1501), in which he collaborated with Schanppecher, and his *Enchiridion Musices* (1512), “‘Sodaine and Unexpected’ Music in the Renaissance,” MQ 37, no.1 (1951): 12-13. Among the Germans it was, however, the term *poetica* that stuck. The general subject of the transformation of the concept of composition is excellently studied by Bonnie Blackburn, “On Compositional Process in the Fifteenth Century,” JAMS 40, no. 2 (1987): 210-284.
#2. Two or more imperfect harmonies can follow each other immediately.

#3. An octave and a 5\textsuperscript{th} immediately follow each other, but in dissimilar motion. Imitation (fuga) in unison.

#4. If perfect harmonies follow each other closely in unison, it will not be a fault because that is entirely like Josquin.

#5. In smaller kinds of notes it is customary in frequent practice to happen that a discord should follow a harmony and the reverse. But, if thus it happens, beware that more than one not follow.
#6. Breves and Semibreves never suffer discord, since they injure greatly and vitiate the consonances, if discords are discovered in imperfect\(^5\) song, but they are admitted where dupla or quadrupla proportion happens.

#7. All parts of songs have terminations in perfect harmonies, according to custom of the ancients, unless the song is fourth mode, which is accustomed to work out an end for itself, one way or another.

#8. The closer harmonies that are contained within the double-octave are heard much more pleasantly than those that stand too far apart.

\(^5\) From context, “imperfect” here must refer to mensurations, owing to the contrast with the subsequent reference to the proportions of dupla and quadrupla.
#9. You will observe also that you not too often make harmonies beyond a double-octave. For they are a kind of dissonance and repugnant. Those who are careful exceed this interval rarely.

[Chapter 2] Here Follow Rules for the Disposition and Order of the Four Parts

How many are the parts of songs? Four, namely Discant, Altus, Tenor, and Bassus. When, however, a song has five parts, then the fifth part is called Vagus [wandering]. Further still, songs of six voices are found composed by the learned, of which the sixth part is called the sub-Bass. If there are more than six voices, we say “first Discant,” “second Discant,” and thus for the others.

#1. When the Discant is ordered in octave with the Tenor and the Bass in double-octave below, then the Altus occupies a 5th or a 3rd above the Tenor.

#2. If the Discant makes a 3rd above the Tenor, the Bass holds an octave below the Tenor, and the Altus a 5th above or a 4th, or will hold a 3rd below it.

#3. As often as the Discant holds a fourth above the Tenor, so many times does the Bass have a 5th and the Altus a 3rd below.

#4. The Discant rarely forms a 5th above the Tenor, and if it happens thus, the Bass is an octave below and the Altus seeks a Major 3rd or minor 3rd for itself.

#5. If the Discant occupies a 6th above the Tenor, which is what the Discant is accustomed for its own, then the Bass is lowered to the 5th and the Altus is raised to the 4th.

#6. When the Bass is a 3rd below the Tenor, the Discant is an octave above and the Altus takes a 3rd or a 6th above.

#7. When the Bass occupies a 10th below the Tenor, then the Discant ascends to the 6th. But the Altus holds a 3rd above or below, but that is at discretion of the composer.

#8. When the Bass is taken at an octave-and-5th below the Tenor, which is very rarely done, the Discant demands a 3rd below, or a 6th or octave, and then the Altus needs to be arranged according to the demands of the consonances. Here follows an example declaring the propriety and conception of any rule whatever.

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6 Probably because its range can vary in relation to the other voices.
This is a simple composition of the harmonies according to the foregoing rules, it could be constructed more subtly and rapidly [i.e., in smaller note values], in this way. [Refers to image below]

Here follows the resolution [into individual parts].

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7 Jessie Ann Owens discusses these examples and points out that the upper image is a statement of rules segregated by lines that are not barlines of a musical composition, and that the lower example is not related to the upper chart. The lower image is a draft of a composition, expanded into individual parts that follow, though the draft and the parts are not quite identical. The vertical lines do divide the music into mensural units. Owens, *Composers at Work*, 26-29.
Practice, the master of arts, will easily teach this method with rules well understood.
What is that order of distributing the voices? It is what the ancients, and even from Josquin himself, has been preserved and transmitted, which also certain most learned musicians in our time transmit to their own students.

Here follows the order of distributing the parts or voices of songs, which those former ones made use of in place of tables.