Vincentio Lusitano

*Introdutione Facilissima & novissima di Canto Fermo*

(1553)

On Improvised Vocal Counterpoint

Translated by

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Preface

The watershed text for a renewed understanding of the importance of improvisation in Medieval and Renaissance times is that of Ernst Ferand.\(^1\) He addressed in particular the longevity of the practice of vocal counterpoint extending from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and into the early Baroque,\(^2\) and then followed up with an investigation of Tinctoris’s terms *res facta* and *cantare super librum.*\(^3\) In the latter he came to a rather complicated conclusion that need not be repeated here. Margaret Bent argued against Ferand’s conclusions,\(^4\) and Bonnie Blackburn seems to have put the matter finally to rest with substantial but qualified support for Ferand’s initial position that *res facta* referred to written composition and *cantare super librum* to improvised counterpoint. Blackburn, however, introduced an important new dimension to the study with her consideration of the practice within the larger context of successive versus simultaneous composition with the argument that a new approach to “harmonic composition” that could be either successive or simultaneous was involved in Tinctoris’s original distinction.\(^5\) This subject, though interesting and important for the early Renaissance, goes well beyond the present purpose. For this present purpose, her conclusions largely reinforce Ferand’s understanding of *cantare super librum* as a longstanding tradition of improvised vocal counterpoint. In an earlier article on the subject, Ferand had already brought the practice down into the early Baroque, connecting it with the term *sortisatio* and its derivatives,\(^6\) whose use he documented as extending from Wollick’s *Opus Aureum* (1501) till the mid-seventeenth century.\(^7\) More recently, Victor Coelho and Keith Polk have asserted the importance of improvised ensemble counterpoint on a *canus firmus tenor* for instrumental music.\(^8\) Though the great importance of both instrumental and vocal improvised counterpoint is now a well-established scholarly fact, mention of it in standard history texts, especially college texts, has still not penetrated far beyond the point when Ferand called it “almost unnoticed by music historians.”\(^9\)

Lusitano’s contribution to the discussion is particularly interesting in that it not only gives rules for improvised counterpoint but does so for up to four-part ensemble.\(^10\) This is quite unusual, for, as Blackburn\(^11\) and others discuss, four-part composition—much less improvisation—was for practical

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1. Ernst Ferand, *Die Improvisation in der Musik* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1938), along with several articles in the 1950’s.
6. *Sortisatio* is derived from the Latin *sortior*, to cast lots, hence a matter of chance; thus, John Cage was not so entirely innovative about 450 years later!
8. Victor Coelho and Keith Polk, *Instrumentalists and Renaissance Culture, 1420-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2016); Keith Polk, *German Instrumental Music of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992), and other publications.
10. This is also the understanding of Anne Smith, *The Performance of 16th-Century Music* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011), 137
11. Though Blackburn makes this observation in connection with the technique of pervading imitation, it is easy to see from her larger discussion how the same would hold true for adding a fourth part in any contrapuntal or
reasons much more difficult than three-part. The issue is involved with the change in the fifteenth century both of three-part to four-part texture and of the introduction of pervasive imitation as the basic compositional technique, which facilitated composition and the introduction of the fourth voice but required much greater care in the composition of vertical sonorities. A final interesting aspect of Lusitano’s rules is the fact that they were intended as unfinished “skeletons” on which to elaborate variations in performance, as Ferand points out. The examples allude to this rather abruptly when Lusitano switches from speaking of semibreves against semibreves to a more florid style involving what he calls passage, indicated in the present translation by an editorial remark.

The best way to place Lusitano’s rules in historical context is to refer back to Tinctoris’s comments on cantare super librum in his Liber de Arte Contrapuncti, Book 2, chapter 20, especially as Blackburn has explained it. Cantare super librum is a form of improvised counterpoint considering only two voices at a time, one part against a tenor. Additional parts can be added, but each additional one is still considered as a second part against the tenor. This is the “successive” approach to composition typical of the Middle Ages that results in fortuitous dissonances at times, especially as additional voices are added. Today, long after the concept of Tinctoris’s res facta composition with its careful concern for controlled dissonance had prevailed, we find this unusual; contemporaries, however, found that such fortuitous “flaws” were what gave improvised counterpoint its charm and distinctive character. A modern analogy might be drawn between this music and the native American tradition of composition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, represented most conspicuously by William Billings. Occasional remarks in Lusitano’s rules give some inkling of the difficulties involved with more than two parts.

Lusitano’s text at only forty-six pages may seem unprepossessing of which the rules constitute only eight, but it should not be discounted for that reason. Lusitano was a person of considerable stature in his time who defeated in a controversy Nicola Vicentino, far better known to us today. His rules on improvised counterpoint should, then, be viewed seriously as describing a significant feature of Renaissance music-making in the mid-sixteenth century as well as one active and important both long before and significantly afterward.

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12 Ferand, “Improvised,” 147.
15 Blackburn, “Compositional Process,” 266.
17 The two were discoursing in the same academy when Vicentino asserted that music of the day was in all three of the ancient genera—diatonic, chromatic, and enharmonic—whereas Lusitano maintained that it was only diatonic. The two wagered on it and submitted the issue to judges. Ultimately, Vicentino lost and apparently did not take the outcome too well. John Hawkins, A General History of the Science and Practice of Music, 2 vols. ed. Charles Cudworth (New York: Dover, 1963), 1, 392-393.
Come si può fugare’l canto fermo

How a Cantus firmus can be Set in Canon\(^{18}\)

[Cii'] If the cantus firmus ascends by a second or fourth and the counterpoint wants to be in canon at the fifth above, it ought to go half a tactus\(^{19}\) ahead, and in descending a half tactus behind. [See the example to make this clear.] But, if the canon is below, it will go to the contrary [i.e., the canon begins on the fifth below and a half-tactus behind].\(^{20}\)

One that ascends by fourths can be set in canon at the octave above when it ascends and delayed by half a tactus or an entire one. Descending is the contrary to what it was ascending, with either one or another rest. At the octave below, when ascending it will go a half or a whole tactus ahead, but in descending the contrary.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{18}\) “Canon” seems to be the best (or least bad) translation of “fugare” here. The word Fuga was widely used to mean our concept of a canon, and Lusitano uses the word contraponto to mean counterpoint.

\(^{19}\) The tactus here is clearly the semibreve and the half-tactus the minim.

\(^{20}\) The example is a little confusing. “Canto fermo” belongs with the line below, illustrating the movement in 4\(^{th}\)’s.

\(^{21}\) Lusitano does not give an example of the octave.
On what ascends by fourths, canon at the fifth.

This cantus firmus can be set to canon at the lower octave with a half- or whole tactus, when ascending it goes ahead and descending goes behind.

If the cantus firmus ascends by a third or a fifth, a canon at the fifth delays half a tactus, and descending it goes ahead another half. But, if it will be at the lower fifth, it will go the opposite, that is [opposite] to ascending in advance, and by descending behind.

The one that ascends by fifth, a canon can be made at the fifth by half a tactus, ascending behind and descending ahead. But, if at the octave to such a cantus firmus, both in ascending and descending it will go ahead one or one half-tactus.
Canon [Fuga] means the same steps or half-steps or voces. Imitation means such other notes, as if one says la sol fa mi and the other would answer sol fa mi re.

Note

So that all the notes may be seen that are sung above the cantus firmus in the improvisation, the five lines of the canto make four spaces; therefore, the first upper line is the octave of the first lower space, and the reverse, also the others will be known in this way. Therefore, if the cantus firmus moves to the highest line, the eye will come immediately to its lower octave, which is the first space below, and so will be able to ascend and descend by the five lines and four spaces as much as it wants. I present this as something recommended because from this there arises the great facility and skill of some contrapuntists, that is, of seeing all the notes and not wandering blind.

Nota

When the counterpoint cannot be seen for lack of lines, ether high or low, when it is high we use this device: I know the octave is a unison, seventh low is a second high, sixth low is a third high, fifth low is a fourth high, fourth low is a fifth high, third low is a sixth high, second low is a seventh high, the unison is the octave.

[Lusitano now discusses a more florid style.]

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22 The Guidonian syllables, usually plus the letter name of the note, but Lusitano does not use the latter here.
23 This is a very interesting early distinction between real and tonal answers in counterpoint. Here Fuga/canon [as I translate it] is a “real” answer because it preserves the precise interval sequence (T T S), whereas imitatione/imitation is a tonal answer because it alters the interval sequence (T S T). See Harvard Dictionary, s.v. “Tonal and real.”
24 The importance of this designation cannot be overemphasized. Lusitano makes completely clear that this section is talking about improvised vocal counterpoint, cantare super librum, and not “composed” or written counterpoint. In the following section, Regole Generali, he discontinues allusions to improvisation.
25 The assumption here must be that Lusitano uses the term canto, normally melody or song, to mean staff.
26 Just as in the treble clef the upper line and first space are both F.
27 This is very confusing. Lusitano often uses the single word canto as an abbreviation of canto firmo, which he apparently does here, immediately after he has apparently used canto to mean staff. I see no possible way to take the canto in the first sentence as the abbreviated canto firmo; to say “the five lines of the cantus firmus make four spaces,” makes no sense. The only forced possibility is “in that the canto firmo covers five lines it also covers four spaces.”
28 In this connection he apparently means “contrapuntist” to refer to one who is improvising counterpoint, not a composer of written music.
If the counterpoint goes below the cantus firmus, all of the above that has been said is reversed; that is, an octave high is a unison, a seventh high is a second low, a sixth high is a third low, a fifth high is a fourth low, a fourth high is a fifth low, a third high is a sixth low, a second high is a seventh low, a unison high is an octave low.

By observing these examples of improvisation, when the counterpoint goes in the upper part, the cantus firmus will be observed in the lower octave, and when [the counterpoint is] low, the cantus firmus is in the upper octave.

The melody [aria] of singing the counterpoint is to pick out a passage; once a turn or two is made, immediately one makes a tirata, a broad passage, either ascending or descending, according to what seems good to you.

29 A tirata is a scale passage, as the example shows.
30 Passage clearly refers to the practice of diminution, whereby to the long note of the cantus firmus is set a series (passaggio) of several smaller notes, also demonstrated in the example.
Cantus firmus and Alto counterpoint on the cantus firmus

Soprano counterpoint on the cantus firmus

Tenor counterpoint on the cantus firmus
Bass counterpoint on the cantus firmus

On the cantus firmus, which goes in the soprano voice,\textsuperscript{31} will be sung the procedure (ordine) that I have given to the basses.\textsuperscript{32}

The Alto on the cantus firmus in the Soprano voice

On counterpoint in ensemble on the Bass.

In ensemble it can easily be sung when the soprano always makes a tenth, which means by moving from one note to another and the third part as pleases, except two thirds or sixthths on different lines or spaces, unless the sixth conforms to the tenth of the soprano if minor to minor or major to major.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} In order to complete a counterpoint for all four voices he must reposition the cantus firmus an octave higher.

\textsuperscript{32} The examples are first the cantus firmus in bass clef and in semibreves, then the individual counterpoints for alto, soprano, tenor, and bass voices. Unfortunately the word alto/a serves for both the adjective “high” and the “alto” vocal part, which may cause a little confusion.

\textsuperscript{33} This appears to mean a minor sixth to a minor tenth, etc.
If the Bass makes a counterpoint, it will observe the cadences of the mode in which it sings and will be able to make those kinds that it likes, as a rule (massime): thirds, fifths, and octaves, provided that they be lengthy and not much shortened. But, if the third part is the Soprano, it proceeds upon the bass in octaves and tenths, except when the Bass makes two thirds or sixths beneath the cantus firmus on different lines or spaces, [then] it will not make tenths but will make a tenth and an octave.

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34 I take this as an adverbial form of massima (principle, precept) a noun and so massime, as a principle/rule.
Bass upon the cantus firmus, Soprano upon the cantus firmus and Bass

The Alto will have something like the procedure that the Soprano had. The Tenor is set with the Bass, it will keep with the cantus firmus thirds and fourths, and they will be consonant if the Bass will be what was recommended for it.

Tenor set with the Bass and cantus firmus

When the Bass will be at the sixth lower or unison, or will be on the cantus firmus, the Tenor will be able to make some fifths, but they will be very rare. The procedure for singing cannot be set in four

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35 The example may well be confusing. The bass voice in F clef begins on the top line. The soprano begins in the second line in C clef at the alla breve sign and concludes on the third line.
parts together because the fourth part itself is improvised with difficulty; but something can be done by keeping an eye on the Bass.\footnote{This is a very interesting comment, for it now seems perfectly clear that Lusitano is giving a method for improvising more than one part simultaneously. Here it seems to indicate a four-part texture. Bonnie Blackburn’s excellent article is the perfect entry point into the issues involved and how the advent of pervasive imitation at the end of the 15$\text{th}$ century changed composition. Tintorius had considered only one improvised part on a cantus firmus tenor. Bonnie Blackburn, “Compositional Process,” 256.}

On counterpoint set with a high voice

The Soprano set with the Alto or Tenor will keep with what the Tenor maintains upon the Bass because the Alto or Tenor is going to be close to what the Bass is in that place. It will even be able to make cadences in unison with the cantus firmus by not going so high.

In the Soprano voice. The Soprano set with the Tenor, or Alto, and cantus firmus

Alto or Tenor set with cantus firmus and Soprano
If the Soprano and the Bass make ensemble, they will keep the same procedure that they had above, that is, in octaves and tenths, and they will make canon as the aforesaid. But, if two Altos or Tenors and Alto are set together, they will maintain the procedure that was given for the Soprano with the Bass, that is, that they go in tenths and octaves with the Bass and then in thirds and unisons with the lower part, some turns made in canon as they think good, either in unison or at a fifth.

Alto set upon the Tenor or Alto set upon the Soprano

Translator’s note: Lusitano appears to conclude improvisatory counterpoint at this point and turns to a major new heading “Regole Generali per far’ fughe sopra’l canto fermo.” This is emphasized by the fact that he no longer refers to improvisation. This new section seems fairly clearly to address written composition. Lusitano does not use the term improvise at any time in the section’s thirteen pages. His use of the word compostio, Ferand denies as a reference to written composition, but he does say that the term compositio, which Lusitano uses on E4 does refer to written composition. The section headed as “De la compositione” concerns text setting—componere is an alternative form of composizione—and also supports the interpretation of the new section as concerned with written composition as opposed to improvisation.

37 Ferand, “Improvised,” 142.