



Renaissance Improvisation and Musicology

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ABSTRACT: Understanding the role of improvisation in Renaissance polyphony has transformed the author's musicology in five areas: compositional process; analysis of Renaissance music; style change; pedagogy; and Renaissance culture.

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[1] Musicologists like me, who study Renaissance music, have usually studied surviving musical scores and documents. We knew that there were unwritten musical traditions, but since we thought we had no access to them, we made little attempt to recover them. Several developments in musicology and music theory have changed all that.

[2] First, Rob Wegman published an article (1996) stating that the role of the composer first emerged at the end of the fifteenth century; before that all musicians were “makers” or improvisers. But he did not explain how or what they improvised.

[3] Then Jessie Ann Owens (1997) showed that composers did not use scores when they composed Renaissance music. Her evidence—treatises and some of the few surviving autograph manuscripts from the Renaissance—was compelling. But it was hard for most of us to imagine how they actually did it.

[4] Peter Schubert pointed out that the term “counterpoint” in Renaissance treatises did not mean written composition: instead it meant improvised polyphony for singers (2002, 503).⁽¹⁾ He started to figure out what musicians could improvise, and how they did it: he taught himself to do it, and taught others, including me.

[5] The idea of counterpoint as improvised polyphony is in stark contrast to the standard view of counterpoint, as in *Gradus ad Parnassum* (*Ascent to Parnassus*) by Johann Joseph Fux (1966), where counterpoint is presented as the least instinctive, most controlled form of written composition. Centuries of counterpoint students have agonized over every first-species exercise; canons are considered the most difficult, arcane form of composition, which only the most accomplished composers could write.

[6] But it turns out that counterpoint is something that any musician (not just geniuses like Josquin and Bach) can do on the spot. Every choirboy in the Renaissance could improvise, and did so every day (Canguilhem 2011, 45–46). Renaissance improvisation is highly constrained: in order to produce correct improvised counterpoint there is a limited set of choices for every new note. It is this very limitation of choice that makes it relatively easy to improvise in real time. You can even learn to do it from Peter Schubert’s YouTube videos (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n01J393WpKk>).

[7] Realizing that improvisation was a basic skill practiced by every choirboy has transformed my research and my teaching on Renaissance music in at least five different areas: compositional process, analysis of Renaissance music, style change, pedagogy, and Renaissance culture. Each of these areas is the subject of a brief discussion here.

[8] **Compositional process.** When I realized that Renaissance composers could improvise polyphony in two, three, or more parts—and that I could even do it myself—it became much easier to imagine how they could look at one part and sing or hear or write down another, even if the parts were not aligned in a score.

[9] Here is an example of how composers might have worked. It is possible to improvise a canon after one time unit in first species (dubbed “stretto fuga” by John Milsom, 2005). All you have to do is to sing the correct intervals in the lead voice. The choice of melodic intervals depends on the time and pitch intervals of imitation; see **Table 1**.

[10] To improvise a canon after one time unit at the fifth below (shaded in yellow in Table 1), you make up a melody that includes only thirds and fifths down, seconds and fourths up, and unisons. The sixteenth-century Spanish music theorist Francisco de Montanos includes an example of such a canon (**Example 1**; Schubert 2002, 518).

[11] His simple melody (using a unison, two ascending seconds, two descending thirds and an ascending fourth) results in a very simple—but contrapuntally correct—duo. He then goes on in (b) to embellish the bare first species structure with repeated notes and passing tones. In (c) he includes more advanced embellishments: ties, escape tones, and anticipations. The bare-bones first-species duo has become a Renaissance canon in which the horizontal melodies have an interesting rhythmic profile and all sense of homorhythm has disappeared.

[12] It is relatively easy to improvise a two-voice canon; but Gioseffo Zarlino says that you should also be able to improvise a third voice to any duo. He provides two sample added voices for a duo by Josquin Desprez that begins with a canon after one semibreve at the fifth above (**Example 2**; Schubert 2002, 214). Any group of Renaissance church musicians would have been able to improvise a three-voice piece of this kind; a musician could also have used these techniques in order to compose without a score.

[13] **Analysis of Renaissance music.** Once I had a pretty good grasp of the various improvisable contrapuntal techniques and textures (see Schubert 2008, forthcoming [2013]), I could go through a piece and identify the contrapuntal techniques used in almost every phrase. This new set of names allowed me to see things in the music that I hadn’t seen before, and to recognize when a composer was using the same technique in different places (Cumming 2011, 2013). The focus of analysis can then move back and forth between the techniques used in a single phrase and issues of disposition: Why did the composer use these techniques in this order? And what impact do those choices have on the shape or form of the work?

[14] When Peter Schubert and I figured out that you can improvise a canon based on any chant (and practiced doing it every day for two months), we suddenly understood why canonic chant melodies were rhythmicized or paraphrased in particular ways (Cumming and Schubert 2011–2012). In **Example 3** Josquin took a chant fragment (shown in the red box) and turned it into a chant-paraphrase canon at the fifth below. He made the time interval a breve, and embellished the tune very lightly.

[15] One interval in this chant does not conform to the melodic intervals required for correct canon at the fifth below: the descending second over “dul” of *dulcis* (shown with a red slur in the chant). Josquin solved this problem by making the descending second a submetric passing tone (B \flat –A within one breve, shown with a red slur in the polyphony).⁽²⁾ He also added a third voice like Zarlino’s (Example 2). Josquin’s third voice seems to take its inspiration from the descending line with the submetric passing tone, since it is constructed with three descending phrases that begin with the dotted semibreve-minim rhythm (see blue slurs). This piece is highly constrained, with a strict canon based on a pre-existent

melody; it is also beautiful and expressive.

[16] **Style change.** One focus of my research for many years has been the development of imitative texture in the late fifteenth century, and in 2003–2004 I worked with a team of students to collect data on the time and pitch intervals of imitation at the beginnings of the motets printed by Petrucci between 1502 and 1508. (Some of my findings are in [Cumming 2012](#).) Once I had learned from Peter Schubert that improvisable canon in four voices was possible, we searched my data for these canonic patterns—and found, to my surprise, that they were the most common patterns for four-voice points of imitation. This has provided a whole new view of how imitation developed ([Cumming and Schubert forthcoming \[2014\]](#)).

[17] **Pedagogy.** Teaching vocal ensemble improvisation in the context of a music history or theory course is transformative. For classical musicians who spend much of their time learning to play what is on the page, the experience of making up music—and music that sounds like the Renaissance music they have been studying—is tremendously exciting. Ensemble improvisation also requires in-the-moment concentration that draws on multiple modes of engagement: singing, listening to the other voices and checking for mistakes, following rules, and making musical choices. Finding the same patterns in the Renaissance music they are studying provides a visceral connection to the music. I know of no musicological literature and very little theoretical literature on having students do Renaissance improvisation in the classroom, although Peter Schubert has used it with great success ([Schubert 2008](#), which includes improvisation exercises, and [Schubert 2011](#)). This could be a fertile area for further research.

[18] **Improvisation and composition in Renaissance culture.** Improvised polyphony was everywhere in the Renaissance. It wasn't just the "improvvisatori" and "cantastorie" singing in the piazza described by Pirota (1984) and Haar (1986). In a recent article describing the incredible feats of improvisation required of Spanish choir masters, Philippe Canguilhem (2011, 99) estimates that "the vast majority" of the polyphony heard in Philip II's chapel in sixteenth-century Spain was improvised. In earlier centuries the amount might have been even higher. The composed polyphony that comes down to us was a small fraction of the musical landscape. This realization transforms our sense of the past.

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Footnotes

1. German-language publications, such as [Sachs 1983](#) and [Jans 1986](#), had made similar points, but they had relatively little impact on English-language scholarship.

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2. It is interesting to note that the melodic intervals in this canon by Josquin are the same as those in the Montanos canon, Example 1. The only difference is one of mode; here there is a major third above the first note, while in the Montanos canon it is minor.

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