

MUSICOLOGICAL STUDIES AND DOCUMENTS

5

JOHANNES TINCTORIS

(c. 1435-1511)

THE ART OF
COUNTERPOINT

(LIBER DE ARTE CONTRAPUNCTI)

*Translated and edited
with an Introduction*

by

ALBERT SEAY



1961

AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF MUSICOLOGY

AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF MUSICOLOGY

ARMEN CARAPETYAN, Ph. D.

Director

MUSICOLOGICAL STUDIES
AND DOCUMENTS

5

JOHANNES TINCTORIS
THE ART OF COUNTERPOINT

ALBERT SEAY

© 1961 by Armen Carapetyan

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
PROLOGUE	13
THE FIRST BOOK : Consonance in Simple Counterpoint . .	17
THE SECOND BOOK : Discords	85
THE THIRD BOOK : Eight rules of all Counterpoint	133

INTRODUCTION

The *Liber de arte contrapuncti* of Johannes Tinctoris (c. 1435-1511), here published in integral English translation, is one of our most important sources for an understanding of certain general theoretical assumptions held by composers and performers of the last half of the fifteenth century. Together with the *Proportionale Musices*¹, the *Liber de arte contrapuncti* stands as the final point of a series which begins with the *Diffinitorium musicae* and includes studies of the Guidonian hand, problems found in plainchant and the rules of mensural notation². This group of purely practical discussions is augmented by two late works, the *Complexus effectuum musices* and the *De inventione et usu musicae*, this last only a fragment. Both are directed more to esthetic and philosophic goals than to the purely utilitarian. In all, Tinctoris has left us some twelve treatises, the *Liber de arte contrapuncti* appearing as the ninth in the series³.

Written in 1477 at Naples⁴, the *Liber de arte contrapuncti* shows Tinctoris a man of broad background and training, not only as a

¹ This work is available in English translation by the author; see Albert Seay, "The *Proportionale Musices* of Johannes Tinctoris," in *Journal of Music Theory*, I (1957), pp. 22-75. The preface has been published in English by Oliver Strunk in his *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: 1950), pp. 197 *seq.*

² Summaries of the contents of these works are given by Gustave Reese, *Music in the Renaissance* (New York: 1954), pp. 139-146.

³ All these treatises, with the exception of the *De inventione . . .*, have long been available in the monumental edition by C. E. H. de Coussemaker, *Scriptorum de mediæ aevi nova series* (Paris: 1876), IV, pp. 1-200. The *De inventione . . .* is available in Karl Weinmann, *Johannes Tinctoris und sein unbekannter Traktat "De inventione et usu musicae"* (Regensburg: 1917). The *Liber de arte contrapuncti* is the eighth in Coussemaker's collection, included in pp. 71-153. The number used above is that given by Reese, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-140, for he considers the *Diffinitorium* as a prologue to the entire series of treatises, rather than as a closing work.

⁴ The *explicit* of the work gives the exact date, October 11, 1477, as that of completion of the treatise. The full *explicit* reads: "The third and final book concerning the art of counterpoint finishes felicitously. This complete whole Johannes Tinctoris, as he has been named above, Jurisconsult and Musician

HERE BEGINS THE FIRST BOOK:

Chapter I

COUNTERPOINT: WHAT IT IS, WHY IT IS SO CALLED, AND FROM WHAT IT IS COMPOSED

Having begun a study of counterpoint, it is first important to know what it is and from whence it comes. Counterpoint, therefore, is a moderate and reasonable concord made by placement of one pitch against another, and it is called counterpoint from "contra" and "punctus", for the reason that it is composed of one note placed against another, thus, one point against another. Hence, all counterpoint is made from a mixture of pitches. This mixture may sound either sweetly to the ears, and this is a concord, or it may sound dissonantly, and this is a discord. But, since concords are the principal elements employed in counterpoint, with discords permitted from time to time, we have decided to treat of the former first and the latter afterwards.

Chapter II

CONCERNING THE GENERAL DEFINITION OF CONCORDS, THEIR ORIGIN, NUMBER, PROPORTIONS, NAMES AND MANIFOLD DIVISION

A concord, therefore, is the mixture of two pitches, sounding sweetly to our ears by its natural virtue; I think that the word, "concord", is derived metaphorically from "con" and "cor", for just as a sweet friendship is brought about from the coming together of two hearts that are in mutual agreement, so is a smooth concord made from a mixture of two pitches that are mutually agreeable.

And, although a concord is called now a consonance, now a sounding together, now euphony, now symphony, now a type, by various writers, since my term is by far the most common, I have decided to use it in preference to the others.

How a third.

A fifth below most frequently takes a third above and below the tenor after itself, when the tenor descends two steps, or three or four. When the tenor remains in the same place, or ascends one step or two, or descends one, only a third below that tenor will be correctly placed after that fifth below, as is proven here:



How another fifth.

A fifth follows another fifth below, though rarely, when the tenor is not moved; but, if this tenor descends four steps, this fifth below takes another fifth after itself above that tenor, as is shown here:



How a sixth.

A fifth below sometimes can have a sixth after itself below the tenor, when that tenor is not moved, or when it ascends one step, two, three or four, or descends one or two, as is proven here:



How an octave.

An octave is most often placed below the tenor after a fifth below, that tenor remaining in the same place, or ascending one step or two or three, or descending one, as is seen here:



How a tenth.

A fifth below sometimes most suavely requires a tenth below after itself below the tenor, when that tenor ascends one step or two, three or four, as is proven here:

