

MUSICOLOGICAL STUDIES & DOCUMENTS

27

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MANUSCRIPT ACCIDENTALS: FICTA IN FOCUS

1350-1450



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by

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PREFACE

If an "occupational disease of system-building... is a compulsion to push the logic of the system to extremes"* then in pursuing the theory of chromaticism in the Middle Ages I have probably pushed farther than necessary for most purposes. Indeed it may be doubted whether the system is consistent enough to be thus extended: certainly theorists of the time met with difficulty. Nevertheless, the many impasses and conflicts noted by modern authorities in handling medieval chromaticism suggest that our view of the topic may be too narrow, a condition perhaps resulting from our search for definitive, consistent and immutable meanings. We rigidly define an accidental. That the medieval theorist defined it differently should have warned us that our own interpretation would not suffice.

Pushing towards the horizon tended to illuminate more clearly the middle ground and enabled me to offer new suggestions for some features hitherto inexplicable or controversial. Clarification in these areas has inevitably raised other difficulties which remain in the distant shadows, where the logic of the system tends to become obscure. But we can proceed only step by step.

If I have explored any new territory it is because others have dared to tread the foreground. My greatest debt is probably to Dr Margaret Bent, who first emphasised the crucial difference between *musica recta* and *musica ficta*, as well as the position of B_♭ in, and the theoretical preference for, the former. These discoveries surveyed the middle ground, and my own work is largely mapping in more detail. The valuable contributions of earlier authorities, whose investigation of numerous topics represented the most difficult and dangerous steps towards a solution, had, I believe, reached a barrier beyond which we seemed unable to progress.

This may have been because of their attempts to relate *ficta* to modal theory, in which a scale may have either B_♮ or B_♭ but not both, equally and without discrimination. In our joint examination of chromaticism, Mrs Bent and I did not find it necessary even to refer to modes: I take it therefore that they are irrelevant.

Mrs Bent and I had intended to publish our work together, under the title *Musica Recta, Musica Ficta and the Old Hall Manuscript*†. Even-

* Dwight McDonald, in "McLuhan, Pro and Con", ed. R. Rosenthal, Pelican, 1969, p.34.

† As announced in *Early English Church Music* 8, London 1968, p.xiv, n.1 and in *Musica Disciplina* XXIII, 1969, p.22, n.12.

INTRODUCTION

1. Performing copies from the Middle Ages rarely seem to be marked with the complete range of accidentals needed to make the music conform with what the theorists say about *musica ficta*. The idea that the treatises were referring only to a speculative technique of no relevance to performance must be rejected because, quite plainly, even apart from the requirements of theorists, the manuscripts themselves rarely have all the accidentals needed for a satisfactory result. Extra chromaticism must usually be added. The problem of *what* and *where* accidentals must be added has received much attention in the items listed in the bibliography, but some related problems have not been studied. It is surely of importance to know, or at least to ask, *when* accidentals were added: at performance, extempore — before the first reading of a piece, so that the score for rehearsals is the final one — at the first reading, extempore, but with adjustments at later rehearsals?

2. Related to this question is one which asks *who* was responsible: the performers, independently — or in collaboration — or some other agent such as the precentor? In this respect we must consider the style of the music and ask whether extempore addition by the performer (the solution favoured nowadays) would be practical: if the individual parts are clearly for soloists such a procedure may be feasible, but it is hardly so for complex choral polyphony. Unless controlled by absolutely strict rules, which in a sense negate the practice, extemporisation is possible only with a single performer to a part.

A third question concerns *how* accidentals were added. Having discovered what accidentals to add and where to add them, how did the performers maintain them through rehearsals and performance?

For us, searching for definitive, consistent solutions, the answers would be obvious: the precentor marks every copy as necessary before the first rehearsal. This is the modern editor's function when dealing with early music, and we have to recognise clearly that it represents the imposition of a contemporary attitude onto an art in which consistency mattered little. Had this been the medieval method, surely one fully 'corrected' performance edition would have been preserved? No single answer can exist. But we can reasonably eliminate some of the possibilities.

3. 'Correction' of the score before first rehearsal, allowing the precentor to act individually, or as a spokesman for the performers

CAPITULUM XXXIV

¹ *De ficta musica*

² Omnium vocum in suis consonantiis et dissonantiis demonstratione ostensa, quia contrapunctus cantus plani ordinem sequitur, et aliquando in sequendo et in notas recte et vere pronuntiando perfectae non possunt fieri consonantiae, sed imperfectae quae recto non conveniunt contrapuncto.

³ Idcirco ut quae sunt consonantiae imperfectae perficiantur, inventa est a philosophis musicis musica quaedam, quae ficta vocabulo nuncupatur.

⁴ Dicitur enim ficta, eo quod talis musica in eo loco ponitur ubi per se non est, sed fingitur in ipso esse, ut consonantiarum et dissonantiarum imperfectio compleatur, ut dictum est.

⁵ Imperfectiones autem consonantiarum quam plurimis reperiuntur in locis in quibus talis musicae fictio permaxime necessaria est, et est ibi talis fictio necessaria ubi alicuius consonantiae imperfectio reperiatur.

⁶ Reperitur enim primo diapente imperfectio a \flat primo quadro ad F primum, est enim eorum quinta imperfecta, quae si debet ex contrapuncto perfici musica ficta mediante perficitur.

⁷ Ut verbi gratia, si tenor incipiens in primo A in re tonum intendat ad \flat in mi, superior cum A et re in A secundo conveniat in la, quae eius re octava est, et cum mi conveniat in F primo, in fa quae eius mi quinta est, tunc inter mi et fa maxima ex quintae imperfectione oritur discordia, ex defectu enim semitonii maioris quod apotome nominatur.

⁸ Haec quinta redditur imperfecta, ob hanc enim considerationem et causam hac in parte musica ficta inventa est, cuius initium, id est, ut in D primo est locatum et fa in G primo positum.

⁹ Cuius mi in F, mi in \flat inferiori in diapente perfecto dicitur respondere, ut patet inferius.

¹⁰ Merito igitur talis ficta musica est necessaria, quae potest tali descriptione declarari. ¹¹ Musica ficta est alicuius vocis in loco ubi per se non est ad consonantiae perfectionem [*Seay*: perfectionum] necessaria positio.

¹² Ex hac enim descriptione primo intelligimus quod musica ficta ubi ponitur, ibi per se penitus non invenitur; secundo, quod musica ficta permittitur ut imperfectae consonantiae perficiantur; tertio, intelligimus quod musica ficta nisi necessitate cogente penitus non utamur.

¹³ Secundo haec ficta necessaria ponitur a \flat quadro secundo ad F secundum, ibi enim diapente imperfectio reperitur quod musicae fictae virtute perficitur, ut si tenor in prima A cum re tonum intendat ad \flat , re mi, superior in tertio A cum la diphtonum remittat ad F, la fa, tunc fa cum mi diapente sonat imperfectionem, et ideo fictae musicae necessaria est

comparable dimensions: thus, at the beginning of a piece at least, the new line is likely to occur within a few notes of the exemplar's change of line. Signatures incorrectly transferred would appear near the beginnings and ends of lines in the copy rather than at the correct place. There are one or two Old Hall pieces in which just such a placing of accidentals may be observed. Consider the top voice of No. 145 (Bittering). There are certain points here where the hypothesis breaks down, as in stave iii, but quite consistently a B_b appears near the beginning or end of staves, and where it does not appear one could make out a case for deliberate omission as the music approaches a cadence on C (as at the word *indolis*, OH I, 416, bars 30-31), requiring B_♮. However, in this composition the B_{bs} are all immediately before or very near the note B and may thus be true accidentals. But there remains no doubt that the voice would have been simpler (for the modern editor at least) if a B_b signature had been used.

In No. 8 (Aleyn), on the first two staves of the lowest part, there is no signature. A B_b appears nine notes after the beginning of stave iii, at a new section: another appears nine notes into stave iv, a third eleven notes into stave v, a fourth at the beginning of stave vi. None of these is immediately before the note B. We may be right in suspecting a hidden key-signature, and this possibility has to be remembered when applying editorial accidentals, although of course no definite conclusion can be stated without a great deal more evidence. I discuss this piece in detail in Appendix I.

Position of Accidentals

40. It is our convention to place accidentals immediately before the note they affect: such was not always the case in music of early times. Apart from slight vertical misplacing of the symbols too high or low, a feature which is occasionally to be found in Old Hall (e.g., No. 75, anon., *in celum* — B_b too low, perhaps an A_b too high), there are three horizontal positions which have to be mentioned: a) immediately before the note affected or before the ligature of which that note forms a part, b) directly above or below a note, c) preplaced and followed by intervening notes or symbols.

Of these, a) needs no further discussion. Occasionally the accidental is difficult to handle or even inexplicable, but these features cannot be related to its position. We may deal with b) briefly. It may be a chance result of placing the notes so close together that the symbol falls directly above or below another note

and not dependent on the hexachord system, could have no use for preplaced accidentals whose function was to show points of mutation or transposition. If they are present it may be for one of the other reasons mentioned, or else the function of the voice itself has to be questioned.

Here are some examples in which the contratenor has written-in accidentals for purely harmonic reasons, and which are undesirable, or at least unnecessary, in the melodic sense:

Ex. 26

No. 16 (fos. 12v - 13): I, 21 Roy Henry

No. 35 (fos. 29v - 30): I, 116 Pycard

In the contratenor accidentals tend to be added to a quite varied set of melodic situations, in the total range of which they are more or less evenly distributed. Unusual melodic settings are relatively frequent.

The other voices have more accidentals in fewer melodic contexts, and they tend to be concentrated in motives such as ABA, EFG, while others are represented by only the isolated accidental. Unusual melodic contexts occur mostly in pieces like Nos. 36 (Cooke) and 35 (Pycard).

Since melody seems to be of less importance to its purpose, the contratenor should be examined last when the problem of adding or analysing accidentals arises: more important in any investigation of this music are of course the fundamental voices.

Fundamental voices

67. In simple chanson style there is no question: tenor and the upper voice or voices have to be taken first, and their movement has to be corrected. The theorists' neglect of more than two parts when discussing *musica ficta* may well be because the third part, the contratenor, was regarded as inessential and had to be treated differently. Once tenor and upper voices agree with what the theorists describe, the contratenor may be adjusted, firstly in relation to