

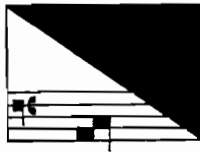
MUSICOLOGICAL STUDIES & DOCUMENTS

34

MURRAY C. BRADSHAW

THE FALSOBORDONE

*A Study
in
Renaissance and Baroque Music*



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THE FALSOBORDONE

By

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PREFACE

A few introductory remarks need to be made. First, the order of this volume is chronological, not because the evolution of the falsobordone was an inevitable one, but because it was at least a logical sequence of events. To understand the early Baroque falsobordone, one needs to know the Renaissance style.

Second, the chosen spelling of the word “falsobordone” is contemporary. It was not favored by Renaissance and Baroque musicians, who generally chose the Italian *falso bordone* and less often *falso bordon*, *falso bordonio*, *falsi bordones* (Latin), and *falsa bordoni*. Occasionally they took up more descriptive titles such as *polytoni* (“the many tones”), *isobatum* (“in the same step”), and *consonante bordone* or *falsi bordoni in consonantia*.

Third, the chronological limits of the four major sections of this volume — 1470-1500, 1500-1600, 1600-1650, 1650-1750 — are approximations, not rigid limits. Nor is the cut-off date of 1750 an arbitrary one. At this time the falsobordone had become a tradition on the Continent, whereas in England it was receiving new life.

Fourth, no *apologia* need be given for a book on the falsobordone. It was an important genre in its own day, it assumed many different forms and styles, and some of the best musicians of the past thought it worthy of their efforts. It has even lasted down to our own days and in this decade of the 1970s is celebrating its 500th birthday.

Finally, an expression of thanks to many people is in order — to my wife who typed all the early drafts; to Professor Edward E. Lowinsky, Ferdinand Schevill Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Music at the University of Chicago, who first suggested the topic, who guided the initial work through its difficult days as a doctoral dissertation, and whose advice, criticism, and encouragement were of a never failing inspiration to the author; to Robert L. Tusler and Gilbert Reaney of the University of California at Los Angeles who kindly read through the final typescript and offered valuable suggestions; to many American and European librarians — from Italy,

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I

SOURCES

In studying any kind of music certain questions are always asked. Where and when did it originate? What purpose did it serve in the sacred or secular life of the time? And how did it reflect or influence contemporary musical styles? With the falsobordone, many of these questions can be answered.

The first compositions appear in seven late 15th-century manuscripts. One piece, a setting of two verses of psalm 113, the *In exitu*, appears in MS Monte Cassino 871N (1),¹ a manuscript written no later than 1480 and originating in Naples, at that time under the control of the King of Aragon. Another setting of the same psalm as a falsobordone is located in MS Seville 7-I-28, dating from 1470-1495, and most likely copied at Seville (2).

Several falsobordone pieces, along with simple three-part settings and fauxbourdon arrangements, are found in a group of Vesper psalms — psalms 109, 110, 111, and 112 — from an Italian manuscript of about 1490, MS Verona, Biblioteca Capitolare, Cod. 759 (3).

A Portuguese manuscript, Coimbra M. M. 12 (4), written at the end of the 15th or the beginning of the 16th century, most likely at the monastery of Santa Cruz in Coimbra, includes four falsobordoni — a setting of verse 1 of the canticle *Nunc dimittis*, two of the first verse of psalm 109, and one of the *In exitu*.

A manuscript written about the same time as the Coimbra volume, MS Barcelona 454 (5), presents the falsobordoni in an entirely new kind of way, namely without text and arranged tonally, starting with tone I and going through tone VIII. Such will be the usual arrangement of these compositions in 16th- and 17th-century collections. Three more pieces in MS Barcelona 454, settings of verses from psalm 109, complement these eight textless pieces.

Another falsobordone setting of the first verse of *Dixit Dominus*, psalm 109, is found in a Madrid manuscript, 2-I-5 (6). This collection, the *Cancionero musical de palacio*, has been dated by Anglés as

¹ Throughout this work any initial reference to a manuscript or printed volume is often followed by an Arabic number. This refers to the Appendix, a chronological list of volumes that contain falsobordoni, the Arabic number giving the exact number in that appendix.

IV

LITERATURE: HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL

“At the end of the Office I was not pleased. The singers sang the *Miserere mei* psalm as a falsobordone, which is what the Pope wanted.” So wrote Paride de Grassis about one of the Tenebrae services of 1518. A few years earlier, in 1516, the same master of ceremonies for Pope Leo X noted that at Tenebrae on Holy Thursday “the singers today began to sing the *Miserere mei Deus* psalm partly in figured music [“cum cantu figurato et simphonio”], the other psalms being sung in other ways.” Even earlier, the same *magister* noted that this text received special treatment. “The Office of Tenebrae. Wednesday, 1514. At the end the singers sang the *Miserere* psalm in a new manner; the first verse they sang together [“symphonizando”] and then alternately; it was done well and devoutly.”¹

It seems likely that Paride de Grassis was speaking of a falsobordone performance of this liturgically important psalm but we cannot be absolutely certain. In 1558, for instance, Zarlino wrote that the fauxbourdon technique, “and such a procedure,” he says, “is called falsobordone,” is “in truth still in great demand and only with great difficulty can one prohibit it; this I say is not praiseworthy.”² Zarlino gives an example of a fauxbourdon, not of a falsobordone, and it is clear that the two terms, fauxbourdon and falsobordone, were becoming blurred. Certainly just a short time before Paride made his observations, several authors wrote about fauxbourdon — Guilielmus, Adam von Fulda, Tinctoris, Gafurius — but the older style was also used well into the 16th century, as Zarlino’s comments and those of other authors such as Luscinus, Lanfranco, Galliculus, Coclicus, Vicentino, and Praetorius well prove.

Not only that, but other kinds of “faburdens,” to use the English term, were current. Hugh Miller, for instance, noting that a collection

¹ I thank Professor Richard Sherr for the first two quotations. The first reads as follows: “Tenebrae, 1518. In fine officii mihi non placavit, quod cantores cantassent psalmum miserere mei falsum bordonum, et Papa sic voluit.” And the second: “Tenebrae in Coena Domini, 1516. Tenebrae fecerunt in coena Domini in omnibus et per omnia sicut in ordinario et omnia bene. Cantores hodie inceperunt cantare psalmum Miserere mei Deus partim cum cantu figurato et simphonio alia ut alias.” The last quotation is found in Baini, *Memorie storico-critiche della Vita e dell’Opere di Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina*, II (Rome, 1828), p. 194, n. 577.

² *Le Istituzioni harmoniche*, facsimile edition MMLM II/1 (New York, 1965), 247.



volume of 1578 has a mediant and final cadence of IV-I-V-I on A and D respectively. But he preceded the cadence on A with a G minor triad and the one on D with a C major triad. Neither of them has much of a tonal relationship to the final chords. In short, modality still dominates in these brief works, even though composers had for the most part given up the ancient plainsong tones. But its reign is not as absolute as it once was.

One intriguing question is why they waited so long to give up the *cantus firmus*. A main reason for this might be connected with the performance practices of the day. Most falsobordoni seem to call for an *alternatim* performance, one verse of a psalm being sung in plain-song, the next “in falso bordon.” With such a close tie to Gregorian chant, composers would only reluctantly give up such an obvious unifying device. Only now and then, as in Rhaw’s didactic *Vesperarum precum officia* of 1540, are all verses of a psalm written out; in some collections every other verse was set and in others just the second verse. Usually no text was provided, but the *alternatim* performance may well have been too self-evident to need notation.⁵ It is probably this close liturgical bond with the Gregorian psalm tones that caused composers to keep the same melodies in their falsobordoni.

⁵ Kassel Landesbibliothek Mus. 4 (20) and Macé’s *In exitu* have all their verses set as falsobordoni. Falsobordoni settings of odd-numbered verses occur, for a few examples, in Rodio and Isnardi (37). Even numbered verses occur in Munich MS 2747, Macé, and MS Vat. lat. 10776 (56). In Jena choirbook 34 every other verse is set in polyphony but they may be the odd or even numbered ones. Munich MS 52 (folios 1v-9r) contains eight settings of the second verse of Psalm 112. No text at all is the rule, as in the settings of Munich MS 89, the Ruffo MS (except for a few *Miserere* indications), Asola-Ruffo (the first words of the second verse of Psalm 109 are given only for the very first composition), Ruffo (33), Vespa (42), Bona, Zachariis, Viadana (48), Munich MS 52, and Boyleau.

THE TRADITION: Rome and Leipzig

Theorists and historians continued to discuss the falsobordone throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. In 1619 Michael Praetorius wrote that “falsobordone” means among other things “the final clausulae of each tone,” and added that these endings are usually incomplete because they do not end on the final of the mode.¹ Although falsobordoni had become greatly circumscribed at this time with regard to the final chord and often did end on the final of the mode, they were as Praetorius pointed out gradually becoming mere cadential figurations.

A generation later Athanasius Kircher wrote that “falsobordoni are nothing else than cadences of a certain number of notes, the first of which is expressed by a long or *maxima*, the remaining notes leading into the final cadence.”² Kircher knew the genre well, for he added that it is used mostly with psalms, that it is divided into two parts, and that its two cadences should differ from each other.³ His single example, although restricted to a bass line, shows the typical features of the classical style *circa* 1630: cadences two measures long, simple harmonic rhythm, and an emphasis on homophony.

In 1703 Sébastien de Brossard said that falsobordoni are used for the psalms and canticles of the Divine Office and defined the genre vaguely as “a simple note-against-note music.”⁴ James Grassineau in his *Musical Dictionary* of 1740 wrote that “falso bordone is said of the burden or ground bass of a song, when it is not exact to the rules of harmony, i. e. when the notes move all the same way, as is often the case in the Psalms and other parts of the divine office.” He seems

¹ *Syntagma Musicum*, III (Wolfenbüttel, 1619), facsimile edition DM, XV (Kassel, 1958), 4, 9-11.

² “Sunt autem falsi Bordones nihil aliud quam clausulae quaedam certarum notarum, quarum prima nota per longam aut maximam exprimitur, reliquae vero sequentes in clausulam abeant finalem;” *Musurgia Universalis* (1650), II, 154. It is Kircher who refers to the falsobordone as “isobatum.”

³ “Est autem huiusmodi psallendi ratio maxime vsitata in psalmis, quorum versus cum bimembres plerumque sint, hinc fit vt omnes falsi Bordones bimembres, id est binas clausulas quoque habeant, prima pars respondet primae parti versus alicuius sint *homoiopsotoi* id est similiter desinentes; sed semper prima aliam terminationem sortiatur, ac secunda;” *Musurgia Universalis*, 154. Eggebrecht noted that the Bohemian theorist Thomas Balthasar Janowka quotes Kircher in his *Clavis ad thesaurum magnae artis musicae* of 1701; see *Studien*, p. 126, n. 2.

⁴ “FALSO-Bordone. veut dire communément FAUXBOURDON; ou Musique *simple* de *Notte* contre *Notte* sur laquelle on chante souvent les *Pseaumes* & les *Cantiques* de l’Office Divin.”

APPENDIX

LIST OF SOURCES

Every care has been taken to insure that the following catalogue of sources is as complete as possible, but it is rash to assume this is the case. Aside from human frailty, other things militate against completeness — many sources, for instance, no longer seem to be extant,¹ and the titles of some volumes make absolutely no mention that falsobordoni are among their contents.² It was necessary, then, to rely on the descriptions of other authors, on the help of friends, and on sheer good fortune in locating some of these pieces. Any information on sources not listed below would be welcomed by the author.

An asterisk in the following chronological list means the author has seen the source or modern edition so labeled. A few abbreviations have been used:

a4, *a3*, etc. = written for four voices, three voices, etc.

Eitner QL = Robert Eitner, *Quellen-Lexicon*.

HdB = Konrad Ameln and others, eds., *Handbuch der deutschen evangelischen Kirchenmusik*. 1/2.

Other abbreviations may be found at the beginning of this volume.

- 1* 1460-1480 — Montecassino, Biblioteca Abbaz. MS 87IN.
fol. 4 *In exitu* by Oriola; two settings, *a4*, the first with verse one of psalm 113, the second without text.
- 2* Late fifteenth century — Seville, Biblioteca Colombina, 7-I-28.
fol. 86bis *Tonus peregrinus*, *a4*, with the text of psalm 113, verse 1.
- 3* Late fifteenth century — Verona, Biblioteca Capitolare, Cod. 759.
fols. 79v-91 Four settings
1. Tone I — falsobordone, “faulx bordon,” and *a3* verses of *Dixit Dominus*.
 2. Tone II — falsobordone, faulx bordon, and *a3* verses of *Confitebor*.
 3. Tone III — falsobordone and *a3* verses of *Beatus vir*.
 4. Tone IV — falsobordone, faulx bordon, and *a3* verses of *Laudate pueri*.

Every other verse of these four psalms is set as a falsobordone. Nine other psalms, set *a3*, faulx bordon, or *a2*, follow these four works.

- 4* Late fifteenth century — Coimbra, Biblioteca Geral da Universidade, M. M. 12.

¹ See n. 10 below.

² For an example, see No. 105 of this Appendix.