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Lasso, Meier, Powers

The Reality of the Modes under Scrutiny

ABSTRACT

In 1974, Bernhard Meier published his comprehensive study on the modes of classical vocal polyphony (Meier 1974). Since then, the modes' function in 16th-century music has been discussed. Do they constitute an a priori compositional system (Meier's viewpoint) or an a posteriori classification method (an idea advocated by Harold Powers; see Powers 1992)?

This paper explores the modes' status in 16th-century polyphony through two collections by Orlando di Lasso: the *Penitential psalms* (1584) and the *Lagrima di San Pietro* (1595). Its first part deals with some aspects of Meier's and Powers' ideas; the second part concentrates on Lasso's music.

As a working hypothesis, mode is seen here as a way of hierarchizing the diatonic continuum by assigning some steps a preeminent role, both from a melodic and harmonic viewpoint. More specifically, mode is the way such a hierarchy is explained by 16th-century theorists, and possibly also how it is translated into musical composition.

1. Meier vs. Powers

1.1 Modes: a priori, not universal

When Meier published *Die Tonarten der klassischen Vokalpolyphonie*, he offered an innovative view on vocal polyphony, illustrated by hundreds of examples from the repertoire. He was convinced that the modes were fundamentally linked to counterpoint and played an essential role in polyphony's internal coherence. This viewpoint arguably resulted from an anachronistic application of principles proper to harmonic tonality in the 18th and 19th century.

In response to Meier, Harold Powers developed his theory of the tonal types, a concept that brings together the final of a piece, its signature, and cleffing. Modes, according to Powers, should not be considered as a priori data in musical composition. They are usually mere labels for the a posteriori classification of polyphonic pieces. Tonal types, on the other hand, are necessarily given a priori in any composition.

Powers' rejection of the modes as a priori framework in Renaissance polyphony has been much debated, as a significant portion of 16th-century music seems to embed explicit modal constraints, both from a melodic and cadential viewpoint. Powers' tonal types do not explain how diatonic steps are organized into a hierarchy.

In order to overcome the opposition between Meier and Powers, this paper defends the idea that the modes seen as a priori reference in musical composition does not imply that these modes constitute a system, in the sense that they are a 'regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming

a unified whole' (Merriam & Webster), and even less, an all embracing one.

1.2 Tonal types: an etic concept?

According to Powers, the tonal types are 'etic' analytical tools, in contrast to the modes, that are 'emic' concepts. Powers claims that his etic approach to 16th-century polyphony is more objective than Meier's emic analyses. This statement is misleading. Whereas Meier's analyses sometimes seem to be lacking in rigor, this does not imply that Powers' analyses are more objective, and certainly not on the grounds that they are etic.

1. Finals, signatures and cleffing are easy to identify in a strictly objective way, but Powers himself insists that they are only 'minimal markers' of the tonal types. They do not explain the internal working of the music. Powers himself also publishes melodic analyses that explore the temporal unfolding of vocal parts within a given tonal type. In doing so, he cannot completely avoid being subjective himself.

2. One might wonder whether Powers' methodology is truly etic. The three factors that define a tonal type are all relevant from an emic, i.e. historical viewpoint. The final, the opposition between *cantus durus* and *cantus mollis*, and cleffing were considered as true modal characteristics in the 16th century.

2. Lasso's modal cycles

Lasso's *Penitential Psalms* and *Lagrima di San Pietro* are used as an investigation field for the a priori or a posteriori nature of the modes. The aim of this analysis is to take literally Powers' rejection of the modes as prerequisites of musical composition and to see if a *reductio ad absurdum* is possible. Both collections are modal cycles for which it is ascertained that the modal organization is due to the composer himself, and not, for example, to his printer. They are set on texts whose order is pre-established, and a mode is attributed to the pieces according to their place in the literary collection.

2.1 *Penitential Psalms*

This set consists of a polyphonic version of the seven penitential psalms, to which Lasso appends a motet, *Laudate Dominum de caelis*, also based on psalm verses. Each work corresponds to one of the eight modes.

One of the parameters through which Lasso translates textual content into music are the cadences, which several 16th-century theorists compare to punctuation marks. Historical treatises also give lots of details about the hierarchy of cadential degrees within each mode. In this research, all cadences of the *Peni-*

Penitential Psalms have been classified according to two criteria: their place within the text (final cadence; end of a verse; end of a half verse; other), and their contrapuntal type (*clausula formalis*, *clausula simplex*, plagal cadence; other).

This analysis shows a clear hierarchy among the cadential degrees, different for each psalm. In this respect, Lasso's counterpoint reflects the theoretical recommendations of his time. For this reason, there is no reason to deny that the *Penitential Psalms* were a priori modally conceived. This, however, does not imply that the same holds true for all works by Lasso and his contemporaries, nor does it mean that the modes constitute the very foundation of counterpoint.

2.2 *Lagrime di San Pietro*

The *Lagrime di San Pietro* is a collection of spiritual madrigals to which Lasso adds a Latin motet, *Vide homo*. It is an incomplete modal cycle, mode 8 being absent and replaced by an undetermined mode ending on A.

As in the *Penitential Psalms*, cadential analysis again shows a clear modal hierarchy. The *Lagrime* however are more complex from a modal viewpoint than the *Penitential Psalms*. Each mode within the cycle is expressed through two different tonal types, which means that several madrigals do not finish on the proper final of their mode. These madrigals nearly all provoke a shift of the cadential gravity center towards the irregular final.

Especially interesting is the fact that both modes 1 and 3 use the same irregular tonal type $\natural - c_1 - A$. Whereas Powers is right to insist upon the fact that a tonal type is always given a priori in musical composition, in this case, mode is also given a priori, since the cadential profile of $\natural - c_1 - A$ is very different in mode 1 and 3. In mode 1, D and A are the most important cadential degrees, while in mode 3, most cadences are on A and C.

The motet *Vide homo* that closes the *Lagrime* cycle is most problematic. Its tonal type is $\natural - g_2 - A$ and its cadential plan does not resemble any familiar hierarchy from 16th-century treatises on the modes. Various modal ascriptions have been suggested for this piece, but the true question is whether we should attribute it to a well-defined mode. *Vide homo* proves that counterpoint can go against 16th-century modal recommendations, which implies that modes may be given a priori, but are not universal.

3.3 Modes and musical rhetoric

The idea that modes may be given a priori without being universal can also be demonstrated in musical rhetoric. Meier has devoted many pages to the modal aspects of word expression. Modal anomalies used for rhetorical purposes are obviously not compositional faults, but licenses used to enhance the expressive force of music. These licenses, however, can be understood only if an explicitly modal way of thinking is shared by the composer and his listeners.

This observation does not contradict the fact that modes do not constitute the basis of contrapuntal writing. In order to better appreciate this situation, we can compare it to the emergence of the *seconda pratica*. At the end of the 16th century, Monteverdi circulated his famous *Cruda Amarilli* in private circles, and attracted the rage of Giovanni Maria Artusi, be-

cause he had broken the codes of counterpoint. History has proven Monteverdi right, but his problems with Artusi show that he had confronted himself with the very foundations of musical writing of his time.

Nothing similar happened with modal rhetoric. Nobody would have accused Lasso and his contemporaries of composing bad music because of their anomalous cadences and irregular melodic turns, as the modes do not lie at the core of polyphony.

3. Conclusion

According to the general definition of mode seen as a way of introducing a hierarchy into the diatonic continuum, 16th-century polyphony is more or less always modal, as it usually shows some kind of hierarchy among the diatonic degrees. From a more specific viewpoint, that of 16th-century music theory, modal thinking is demonstrably present in a large repertoire too. To state it with Harold Powers' words, "mode is real". But it is neither universal nor necessary to counterpoint, and this explains why some works are so difficult to analyze from a 16th-century modal viewpoint.

Aims and repertoire studied

A study of the modes' status in 16th-century polyphony.

Methods

A statistical analysis of cadential profiles in two modal cycles.

Implications

The modes turn out to be a priori but not universal categories in the corpus under consideration.

Keywords

Modes, counterpoint, cadences, Orlando di Lasso, Bernhard Meier, Harold Powers, Frans Wiering, rhetoric.

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