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Development of Renaissance Era Counterpoint: Senseless Stipulations or Scientific Study

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The Development of Renaissance Part-writing

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Music History I Dr. Sandra Yang
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Music has been greatly appreciated and admired by every society in western culture for a variety of reasons.¹ Music has serenaded and provoked, inspired and astounded, and led and taught people for millennia. Music exists solely among humans, for man has been created *imago Dei* (in the image of God). God has given mankind the creativity to study, shape and develop music to see the beauty and intricacy that ultimately is a reflection of His character. In the words of Martin Luther,

But when [musical] learning is added to all this and artistic music, which corrects, develops, and refines the natural music, then at last it is possible to taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God's absolute and perfect wisdom in His wondrous work of music. Here it is most remarkable that one single voice continues to sing the tenor, while at the same time many other voices play around it, exulting and adorning it in exuberant strains and, as it were, leading it forth in a divine roundelay, so that those who are the least bit moved know nothing more amazing in this world. But any who remain unaffected are unmusical indeed and deserve to hear a certain filthy poet or the music of the pigs.²

By studying the complexities and subtleties of music, one is able to better understand God's creativity.

Music is extremely different today from what it was a thousand years ago as both music and society have evolved and grown. The first music was probably a cappella, yet today composers write symphonies and ballads, and musicians perform on a plethora of instruments, both acoustic and electronic. Musicians have rules that they must follow to create aesthetically pleasing pieces. In the Middle Ages, pieces were strictly monophonic and later harmonized using parallel fifths as

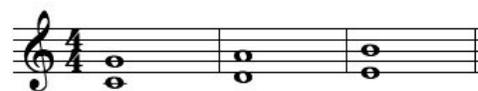


Figure 1: Parallel fifths

¹ Michael L. Mark, ed, *Music Education: Source Readings from Ancient Greece to Today*. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 33.

seen in Figure 1. Today, these same parallel fifths are unacceptable and are considered examples of poor voice-leading or vocal harmonization. In this paper, I focus on the Renaissance and discuss how rules of polyphonic voice-leading developed into what was eventually coined as counterpoint. I will also discuss the great music theorists, Franchino Gaffurio, Gioseffo Zarlino and Johann Joseph Fux, who are largely responsible for the development of counterpoint. Finally, I explain how the development of counterpoint relates to today's music. Part-writing in the Renaissance developed from a rudimentary knowledge of harmony to a highly regimented school of thought that still affects music today.

Before one analyzes the music of the Renaissance, one should first have a working knowledge of what the Renaissance is. The word "renaissance" literally means "rebirth," usually with spiritual overtones,³ but the rebirth that happened during these centuries extends far beyond the realm of religion. The Renaissance influenced political and social philosophy, history, math, sciences, art and music. These areas flourished as people rediscovered mathematical laws that had been lost over the decades. Renaissance thinkers looked to ancient Roman and Greek teachings and philosophers to better understand the context they were living in, but they did not accept their teachings blindly as fact. Rather, they analyzed their work and judged for themselves whether these teachings were merited. Soon, education as a whole started to look toward human achievements, reason, and the natural world rather than trusting in the supernatural.⁴

³ "Renaissance," in Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=renaissance&searchmode=none>.

⁴ "Chapter Summary: Chapter 13: The Italian Renaissance," Cengage Learning, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://college.cengage.com/humanities/perry/humanities/1e/students/summaries/ch13.html>.

Music during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reflected some of the thinking of the Renaissance just like Medieval music was influenced by that era's philosophy. At the start of Medieval times, music was monophonic or had no harmonies. Soon, basic harmony was developed. Perfect intervals such as octaves, fourths and fifths were used to harmonize above and below an existing chant. These perfect intervals were used due to their ties to the "holy" ratios of 2:1 (the octave) which together make three, the number of the holy trinity. The perfect 5th (3:2) has a three in it and the perfect fourth has a ratio of 4:3, which together make seven, another holy number. Medieval composers would write in triple meter like 3/4 and 9/8 for its ties to the trinity. While there was nothing wrong with perfect intervals or triple meter, other consonances and meters were pleasing to the ear and became more standard.⁵

During the Medieval Era harmonies breathed new life into vocal music, but these harmonies were rather basic, incorporating parallel octaves, fifths and fourths.⁶ By the time of the Renaissance, two-part harmony flourished among other techniques. There were many different types of voice-leading with four or more parts, but there was no standard as to how to write these polyphonic textures. This led to the development of counterpoint which originated from musical notation of note against note or *punctus contra punctum* (point against point) during the Medieval era from which we get the word counterpoint.⁷ These were primarily composed by taking an existing *cantus* or melody (sometimes derived from chant) and writing

⁵ Raymond H. Hagg, *History of Music Theory Polyphonic Theory from the Ninth to the Sixteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), ix.

⁶ Mark, *Music Education: Source Readings*, 25.

⁷ Johann Joseph Fux, *The Study of Counterpoint: From Johann Joseph Fux's Gradus Ad Parnassum*, trans. and ed. Alfred Mann (New York: Norton, 1965), 22-23.

another complimentary part above or below it. Generally, the more basic counterpoint lines would move at the same rhythmic value (shown in Figure 11) while complex lines would move at much faster values (shown in Figure 58).⁸

Figure 11. p 34. Fux

Figure 58. p 54. Fux

All throughout the Renaissance, composers sought after the common goal of writing pieces with beautiful consonance, whether perfect (unisons, fifths or octaves) or imperfect (thirds, sixths and tenths). They avoided dissonant intervals of any second, fourth, seventh or ninth. At the beginning of the era, composers almost exclusively used perfect and imperfect consonances, though at the time only perfect intervals were considered consonant. Soon, imperfect intervals of thirds, sixths and their various inversions were later accepted as consonant.

⁸ Thomas Street Christiansen, *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 509.

While phrases would generally begin and end with a perfect consonance, they were not permitted to ascend or descend with that same consonance, thus setting a precedent for avoiding parallel fourths, fifths and octaves.

Sequential perfect consonances were not completely prohibited if they were approached by contrary motion. For example, an octave could close to a perfect fifth if the octave was both higher and lower than the fifth (Figure 2). If composers wanted to use parallel intervals, they were allowed to use thirds or sixths (Figure 3). Perfect consonances could move from imperfect intervals in parallel, contrary, or oblique motion (Figures 4-6). Imperfect to imperfect intervals could do the same. Imperfect intervals could move to perfect consonances in contrary or oblique motion. Theorists

discouraged using vertical half steps in the counterpoint and harmony line although the individual parts were encouraged to move up and down in stepwise motion. At the end of a phrase when the parts would move to a consonance from an imperfect interval, the composers were supposed to move to the closest perfect consonance. Although some of these rules seem



Figure 2: acceptable sequential perfect consonance



Figure 3: acceptable parallel imperfect intervals

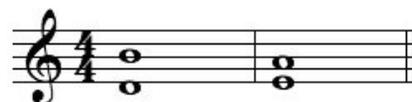


Figure 4: acceptable imperfect to perfect with contrary motion

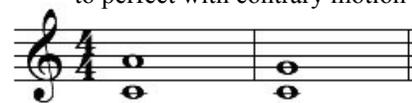


Figure 5: acceptable imperfect to perfect with oblique motion

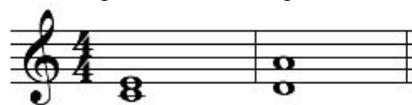


Figure 6: acceptable imperfect to perfect with parallel motion



Figure 7: acceptable perfect to imperfect with contrary motion

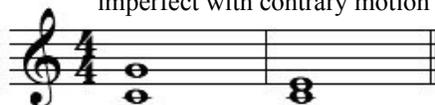


Figure 8: acceptable perfect to imperfect with oblique motion

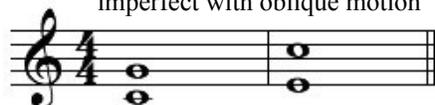


Figure 9: acceptable perfect to imperfect with parallel motion

rather strange now, many of them are quite familiar. The banning of parallel octaves, fifths and fourths still applies to classical part-writing today.⁹

As two-part voice-leading further developed (WHEN?), a new style emerged called florid counterpoint. The fundamental difference between florid counterpoint and normal counterpoint is the actual counterpoint voice. “In florid counterpoint, the added line contains a variety of shorter rhythmic values against a *cantus firmus* sounding in equal values.”¹⁰ There are varying species of embellishment caused by the rhythmic differences between the *cantus firmus* and the descant. These are called manners or diminutions. The first specie of counterpoint was the first manner. In this technique, the descant would keep a relatively constant rhythmic pulse of the breve over the breves of the existing *cantus firmus* (Figure 11). This was the most basic form of counterpoint which allowed only consonant intervals. The second manner used semi breves, which introduced passing tones where one consonance goes to another consonance via a dissonant interval in stepwise motion (Figure 44). The third manner or specie (incidentally, also the first diminution)

The image contains three musical staves. The first two staves are labeled 'cpt.' and 'c.f.' respectively. The first staff shows a counterpoint line with a rhythmic pulse of the breve over the breves of the existing cantus firmus. The second staff shows a cantus firmus line with a rhythmic pulse of the breve over the breves of the existing cantus firmus. The third staff is labeled 'c.f.' and shows a cantus firmus line with a rhythmic pulse of the breve over the breves of the existing cantus firmus. The fourth staff is labeled 'cpt.' and shows a counterpoint line with a rhythmic pulse of the breve over the breves of the existing cantus firmus.

Figure 44 p 48. Fux

Figure 58. p 54. Fux

⁹ Christiansen, *The Cambridge History of Western*, 561.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 509.

Figure 75. p 61. Fux

Figure 88. p 66. Fux

used minims (Figure 58). This allowed for neighboring tones and passing tones. The second diminution or fourth specie used semiminims,¹¹ which allowed for notes of the counterpoint to overlap with the notes in the *cantus firmus* which made suspensions possible. Most counterpoint did not deal exclusively with one specie or manner. Species were mixed to fit the *cantus firmus* in an aesthetically pleasing way which came to be known as fifth species counterpoint (Figure 88). The more complex manners and diminutions were not extraneous embellishment; they actually functioned to fix voice-leading errors. If the *cantus firmus* and counterpoint moved from one measure to the next with parallel perfect fifths, the addition of some decorative notes of faster rhythmic value in the next specie helped remove these errors. There are a myriad of rules concerning each specie, which will be further explained later.

As one might expect, these highly decorative parts became increasingly difficult and the level of musicianship required to perform these elaborate runs was quite demanding. Singers were trained to sing these complex diminutions and even encouraged to improvise virtuosic

¹¹ Christiansen, *The Cambridge History of Western*, 509.

descants over the *cantus firmus*.¹² Many performers would improvise by learning specific patterns that went with certain note combinations. These patterns could be repeated, but this was looked down upon by music theorists like Johannes Tinctoris, the Flemish theorist who wrote the first musical dictionary. Gioseffo Zarlino, a contemporary of Palestrina,¹³ on the other hand, allowed this practice if the embellishment started on a different pitch creating a sequence. He would also allow it if there were different rhythms used. Sometimes these patterns were used at the *cantus firmus* level so the embellishment could be like the original in cut time.¹⁴

Three-part-writing was not significantly different than two-part-writing, in that there was a *cantus firmus* with two counterpoints of varying complexity that embellished the tune (Figure 157). With the development of three-part texture, theorists began to study chordal structure and



voicing. The voices needed to form a triad with the melody whenever possible as long as the upper voices were consonant with the bass.¹⁵ While the relationship of the bass to the other

¹² Imogene Horsley, "Improvise Embellishment in the Performance of Renaissance Polyphonic Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 4, no. 1 (1951): 3, accessed September 25, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/830116>.

¹³ Fux, *The Study of Counterpoint*, viii-ix.

¹⁴ Christiansen, *The Cambridge History of Western*, 511.

¹⁵ Fux, *The Study of Counterpoint*, 71.

voices was most important, composers were encouraged to keep consonances between all voices, especially on the downbeats.¹⁶ They were, however, allowed to break some rules of two-part-writing as long as that line and the bass line worked and the inner voices did not have parallel unisons, octaves, fifths, etc. The composers were encouraged to make a triad with each voice.¹⁷ At this time a triad only consisted of the root in the bass and a third and fifth in the upper voices. An inversion of a triad was not considered a triad.¹⁸ It is impossible to write something with only triads in root position without breaking other rules of counterpoint, so inversions were used throughout a composition. At most down beats and at the end of phrases, the voices would open up to a root position triad.¹⁹ The issue was not creating three-part textures, but rather explaining why some voicing for the same chord sounded better than others.²⁰

With three voices, there were many more opportunities to experiment with new techniques. One such development was canonic duo where “the added lines [must] imitate each other strictly at a given time and pitch interval, [and] they must [also] each work with respect to the *cantus firmus*.”²¹ These may seem rather intelligent or complex by today’s standards, but with training, Renaissance musicians improvised them.²²

¹⁶ Fux, *The Study of Counterpoint*, 76-77.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁰ Crocker, "Discant, Counterpoint, and Harmony," 1-21.

²¹ Christiansen, *The Cambridge History of Western*, 513.

²² *Ibid.*, 503-504.



Figure 204. pg 137. Fux

Soon, four-part textures developed, and with these new textures came new rules, additional techniques and more complex music (Figure 204). The earliest form of four-part-writing consisted of pairs of two-part-writing,²³ but toward the sixteenth century, composers started to write in four parts as one cohesive texture.²⁴ They would write in triads using the bass, third and either fifth or sixth above, with one of the parts doubled.²⁵ Composers did not often write triads in the second inversion where there would be a fourth and a sixth up from the bass because the fourth was not consonant with the bass.²⁶

The desire to find good voicing in four-part textures carried over from three-part-writing, but different theorists had different opinions as to how one should do so. Gioseffo Zarlino made lists of consonances in the tenor and soprano lines and showed possibilities for the alto and bass. Four years later, Sancta Maria approached four-part sonority as it is thought of today—by the

²³ Christiansen, *The Cambridge History of Western*, 521.

²⁴ Kevin N. Moll, "Paradigms of Four-Voice Composition in the Machaut Era," *Journal of Musicological Research*, 349, accessed November 15, 2014, DOI:10.1080/01411890390248677.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 535.

²⁶ Fux, *The Study of Counterpoint*, 71.

distance between bass and soprano, be that an octave, tenth, twelfth, thirteenth or more. He then worked at figuring out what the best voicing for inner parts would be. He recommended only doubling only one note, but not doubling the soprano, while avoiding unisons if possible.²⁷

Giovanni Pierluigi Palestrina had more general rules about voice-leading, some of which are still followed to this day. He argued that “music is [the] vehicle to reinforce the meaning of the text, which is of primary importance.”²⁸ He also said that each voice line should be smooth and fluid without awkward breaks and pauses and without reaching into the extremes of one’s voice.²⁹

Other rules were more specific as to which intervals or modes were available at specific points and how rhythms should work together. Palestrina identified which intervals were allowed with varying types of horizontal motion. Stepwise motion, all thirds, perfect fourths, fifths and octaves were allowed, both ascending and descending. Minor sixths were only allowed descending while major sixths and tritones were avoided.³⁰ Johannes de Garlandia had similar views, but he allowed for unisons and sixths. He also had many other rules like encouraging contrary motion whenever possible; he even dictated how many steps the counterpoint could move if the *cantus* moved by a fifth, seventh or octave.³¹

As one can see, the rules of counterpoint were quite involved and there were varying

²⁷ Christiansen, *The Cambridge History of Western*, 525.

²⁸ Lloyd Ultan. *Music Theory: Problems and Practices in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 209.

²⁹ Christiansen, *The Cambridge History of Western*, 525.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 525.

³¹ Raymond H. Hagg, *History of Music Theory Polyphonic Theory from the Ninth to the Sixteenth Century*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962 [210-211].

schools of thought throughout the Renaissance, but many of these rules remain rather static. As Alan Gosman, a published music historian, says, “Many rules of canon writing stem from the restriction that, ignoring the possibility of suspensions, there should never be a second, [a] seventh, or a tritone written vertically between voices on accented beats.”³² It was not until Johann Joseph Fux wrote *Gradus ad Parnassum* in 1725 that the teaching of counterpoint became more unified.³³ Fux is one of many influential music theorists who greatly impacted the music scene by writing books and treatises of music theory. He explained the theory principles through dialogue between a student and his “venerable master.”³⁴ These theorists and their works greatly impacted music of the Renaissance and still influence contemporary theory.

Fux’s *Gradus ad Parnassum* became the standard for understanding counterpoint from 1725 until today. Fux was an acclaimed Austrian composer and music theorist born in 1660. He held the venerable positions of being the court composer, the Kapellmeister at St. Stephen’s cathedral, and eventually the Kapellmeister of the court.³⁵ He was universally revered as a musician, conductor, composer and theorist so that he became known as the “emperor of

³² Alan Gosman. “Stacked Canon and Renaissance Compositional Procedure.” *Journal of Music Theory* 41, no. 2 (1997): 291. Accessed October 4, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/843961>.

³³ Johann Joseph FUX, *The Study of Counterpoint: From Johann Joseph Fux's Gradus Ad Parnassum*, trans. and ed. Alfred MANN (New York (NY): Norton, 1965), back cover.

³⁴ C. C. Judd, "Music in Dialogue: Conversational, Literary, and Didactic Discourse about Music in the Renaissance," *Journal of Music Theory* 52, no. 1 (2009): 41, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.cedarville.edu/stable/40607029>.

³⁵ Fux, *The Study of Counterpoint*, Introduction.

music.”³⁶ He served as court composer and conductor for many years that spanned three Hapsburg emperors until he died in Vienna in 1741.

Gradus ad Parnassum became the standard for mastering counterpoint, and many Baroque era composers drew heavily from the material. Personal copies of Haydn’s, Mozart’s and Brahms’s *Gradus ad Parnassum* have been found, and Beethoven and Bach were taught by teachers who based their work off of Fux’s writings.³⁷ The book was originally published in Latin to be widely disseminated in Europe, but it was soon translated into the main languages in Europe at the time. The German translation was published “under the very eyes of Bach.”³⁸ This book is still being used in classrooms to explain the rules of counterpoint, so it is hard to imagine how different composition would be today if Fux had not written the book. As the modern day theorist Paul Hindemith says, “Perhaps the craft of composition would really have fallen into decline if Fux’s *Gradus* had not set up the standard.”³⁹

Fux, however, wrote this book at the beginning of the Baroque Era. It still relates to the Renaissance Era as he is basically compiling work from the entire era and putting it into one cohesive text to explain counterpoint to the reader. He undoubtedly drew from texts and treatises written during the Renaissance like Franchino Gaffurio’s *Theorica musicae* (1492), *Practica musicae* (1496) and *De harmonia musicorum instrumentorum opus* (1518) and Zarlino’s *Le istutioni harmoniche*, first written in 1558.

³⁶ Fux, *The Study of Counterpoint*, xi.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xii.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xv.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, back cover.

Franchino Gaffurio was a composer that worked in Naples in the sacred world and in Spain in the secular world in the court of Ferdinand I of Aragon. One of the most important facts to note about Gaffurio is how he pioneered the literature of music theory treatises. Previously, there was no culture of music theorists who would take the present concepts of music theory and put the concepts into a written format. Everything had been passed down or learned by rote. Gaffurio's texts provide a background by which society understands music theory. Considering that these were the first of their kind, they were quite intuitive. There were musical examples to look at, but not in the actual text next to the sections explaining a specific idea. There were, however, blanks or blank staves for the reader to fill in notes to practice and provide his own musical examples. The accompanying examples are actually some of the first examples of polyphonic writing.⁴⁰ While in today's music theory books there are now many examples of theory elements, there are still blanks for the students to fill out their own examples to give them actual practice and application of what they learned.

Another Renaissance theorist, Gioseffo Zarlino, was born in 1517 in Italy and became an ordained priest while working as a singer and organist at Chioggia Cathedral. He left for Venice in 1541 and four years later was given the job of *maestro di cappella* at San Marco's cathedral. He first began publishing music in 1549 and throughout his career published anthologies with many madrigals and motets, but perhaps his most influential work was his book *Le istutioni harmoniche*.⁴¹ Previously music theorists wrote music theory treatises or papers that explained

⁴⁰ Judd, *Reading Renaissance Music Theory: Hearing with the Eyes*, 17-19.

⁴¹ Cristle Collins Judd. *Reading Renaissance Music Theory: Hearing with the Eyes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 184.

their thoughts on music theory. However, Zarlino wrote an entire book that delves into many different facets of music theory. One of the most innovative aspects of this book was the inclusion of newly composed musical examples to explain some abstract concepts. This, coupled with his venerable teacher Adriano Willaert who Zarlino was keen to mention, helped add credibility to the book. *Le istutioni harmoniche* became “one of the most influential theory treatises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It marks the culmination of the art of presenting musical examples in printed treatises within an intellectual culture in which musical theory had achieved its own place.”⁴²

While at first glance it might seem that Renaissance voice-leading and counterpoint have no effect on music today, a second glance is merited. Had these music theory treatises and books not been written in the Renaissance, then would the great composers of the Baroque Era have become so famous? Would the music of Mozart, Brahms, Bach and Haydn have been as beautiful and poignant? These rules of voice-leading were the building blocks that later composers were able to use to create symphonies, fugues, inventions, cantatas and so many more musical compositions. Take away voice-leading and one takes away polyphony and an understanding of how voices can work together to create some of the most harmonious and beautiful music. “Even today, competent teachers devote the greatest attention to voice leading. “Good voicing” places the priority on attending to the upper voice and the bass, but it is also concerned with the elegance of the inner voices.”⁴³

⁴² Judd, *Reading Renaissance Music Theory*, 180.

⁴³ Benedicte Poulin-Charronnat, Emmanuel Bigand, and Francois Madurell, "The Influence of Voice Leading on Harmonic Priming," *Music Perception* 22, no. 4 (2005): 613, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mp.2005.22.4.613>.

In conclusion, one thing Zarlino mentioned in his treatise was the importance of not just reading books about theory, but actually putting it into practice. He says the following:

The musician cannot perfect himself solely by reading and rereading books; ultimately to understand the things I have been demonstrating..., he must consult with a person skilled in counterpoint... Theory without practice, as I have said before, is of small value, since music does not consist only of theory and is imperfect without practice... Yet some theorists... without having a good command of the actual practice, have spoken much nonsense and committed a thousand errors. On the other hand, some who have relied only on practice without knowing the reasons behind it have unwittingly perpetrated thousands upon thousands of idiocies in their compositions.⁴⁴

This is a crucial concept to realize. To be a truly good musician, one must understand the concepts of music theory, and so much more. If he does not put into practice what he has learned and apply it to his craft, then that knowledge serves little purpose. But on the opposite side of the spectrum, a musician might be a virtuosic performer, but if he does not know the theory behind what he plays, he will not be able to fully appreciate what he plays nor be able to fully express his musical compositions without committing many musical errors.

How, though, does this apply to today? Studying music theory has a lot of value, but it is not the quintessential goal of musicianship. Just because one might be a fantastic performer does not mean that understanding counterpoint does not apply to him. To fully appreciate what one plays or sings, he should appreciate how different lines of music work together to become a beautiful intertwining weave of music that makes up a masterwork. However, one could understand every rule of counterpoint, but if he does not apply the principles in writing counterpoint and apply the concepts of musical lines working together, then this knowledge does not serve much purpose.

⁴⁴ Judd, *Reading Renaissance Music Theory*, 179.

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