

An Exploration of Modes of Polyphonic Composition in the 16th Century

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Abstract:

In the Renaissance era theorists wrote about a musical system known as “modes” for creating their literature. This system theoretically focuses on single melodic lines, as opposed to the composition as a whole. Therefore, there has been much debate about this system and its functionality in polyphonic compositions. My research will deduce whether or not modal theory is relevant or applicable in polyphonic compositions. By approaching the music with a strictly historical mindset, a theorist can fully understand and apply the modal system to polyphonic musical literature. My research will include reading treatises by modern theorists and theorists from the Renaissance era. This will be done to understand how modes were historically employed, and how the concept of modal theory has been interpreted. This research will be paired with my own observations acquired from analyzing a six-voice polyphonic composition from an historical perspective.

I. Significance

The study of Renaissance music presents a variety of analytical challenges. Composers of this era employed a strikingly different syntax than in any other time in history. It is my belief that well-informed analysis of this repertoire must confront the music from the perspective of Renaissance thought. Theorists of the time wrote of a system of modality as the principal means of composition. The modes are a series of twelve scales with a primary pitch of emphasis called a *final*. Modes are different from musical keys in a number of ways. Modes have limited ranges, whereas keys have no such limitation. In a musical key, every pitch of the scale has a functional relationship to the tonic; however, in a mode, only the *final* can be said to have a

significant function. Additionally, modes have specific rules regarding melodic composition—something that musical keys do not necessarily have.

The dilemma of modal analysis comes with the study of polyphonic composition. This is the primary focus of my study. Unlike tonality, which uses the same key for *all* of the voices in a work, the concept of mode focuses only upon single melodic lines. Each voice is unique to itself and equally important in the composition. Stylistically, composers want the voices to blend together they achieve this with rather limited vocal ranges and a lack of dynamic contrast.

If each voice might be written in a different mode, what is the relevance of mode within a unified composition? Does the conception of mode allow room for the idea of a complex, multi-voice, colorful piece of music, as musical keys allow us to do? Peter Schubert writes that “(I)t is possible to consider a polyphonic texture to be a collection of modal melodies sounding simultaneously” (Schubert 17). In contrast, Harold Powers challenges the relevance of modality in polyphonic settings altogether (Powers, “Is Mode Real”). In my paper, I wish to pursue the relevance of mode both in the treatises of the time, as well as through the analysis of selected works.

It is important to study this era of music because it is very underrepresented in music-theoretical literature. The more common styles for research include tonal and post-tonal repertoires, and there is a need to look at the unique and complex system of pre-tonal, sixteenth-century, style in order to see where the music that is studied so thoroughly originated. It is important for society because the concept of exploring the music from a sixteenth-century mindset will not only give valuable insight into the music of the time period, but also the history of how and why music was conceived in that culture. In essence, this can teach our society more about life in the sixteenth century. Also, it is significant to society because this can help people

understand how this music was different, but even more, help them understand that although it is different, it operates within a strikingly beautiful and elegant system of modality.

Although this music has not been studied as thoroughly as other eras, what has been done is powerful material. Harold Powers is one more recent theorist who has strongly questioned the use of the modal system in polyphonic compositions and whether it even makes sense or would work. This is the major concept I want to research and either prove or disprove. I feel that my work would compliment recent efforts to study the history of theory and apply it to analysis. It seems inappropriate to press our tonal thoughts onto pre-tonal music as so many others have previously done.

II. Statement of Central Objective

"An Exploration of Modes in Polyphonic Compositions of the Sixteenth Century" consists of two central parts. First, I will explore pre-tonal (Sixteenth Century) music through the examination of theoretical writings of the time, as well as contemporary scholarship that questions the usefulness of modal theory of the time period. Then, I will undertake a historically-informed analysis of the *Pope Marcellus Mass* by Palestrina, which will relate back to the ideas and concepts studied in the articles and journals.

III. Methods

In order to achieve my planned goals during the Butler Summer Institute, I will study journals, books and essays about pre-tonal (Renaissance) music. This will include in depth looks at articles such as "Is Mode Real?" by Harold Powers. I will determine whether his skepticism about the modal system is well-founded despite historical writings that contradict him, or if he is in fact wrong to doubt this system for composition. During this time I will utilize the twelve-mode system espoused by Zarlino to help analyze pre-tonal music. I will begin by practicing the

analytical techniques on *Beatus Homo* and *Justi Tulerunt* from the *Cantiones duarum yocum* by Orlando de Lassus. This will be useful because of the brevity of these pieces; they have two voices in comparison to the *Pope Marcellus Mass* which is written for six voices. Since they are comparable, but more simplistic, I feel these would be good starting points for my analytical research. With the help of my mentor Dr. Jones, I will continue to address all the significant aspects of the piece in order to understand the role of mode within it and to determine the effectiveness of modes for a polyphonic composition.

IV. Progression

Pre-BSI: Before the institute begins, I will gather the sources that I wish to use in my research. I will begin reading through these sources to make sure I have a clear understanding of what is being addressed in each, as well as what they are saying about modes. I will have weekly meetings with my mentor to ensure that we are in agreement on how to approach the analysis, and the usefulness of each article to my research. Finally, I will begin studying the short works by Lassus. This will be done in order to prepare for the analysis of the more complex composition of the *Pope Marcellus Mass* during the Butler Summer Institute.

Weeks One - Two: I will finish analyzing the pieces by Orlando de Lassus as well as continue reading treatises and articles regarding mode and modal theory. During this time I will also begin establishing guidelines for approaching a larger composition.

Weeks Three - Four: Still I will continue reading relevant treatises. This is also when I will begin analyzing the *Pope Marcellus Mass* based on the pre-tonal theories I found in my reading and the analyses I have done on the two pieces by Lassus. During this time I will begin formulating an outline for my paper.

Week Five: I will continue analyzing the *Pope Marcellus Mass*. I will also make the first draft of the section of my paper on the historical aspects of modal theory. This is when I will finalize my paper outline as well.

Week Six: I will now have fully analyzed the *Pope Marcellus Mass* and will begin writing the analytical portion of my paper. I will also begin editing the historical section based on my mentor's feedback.

Week Seven: I will finish the first draft of the analytical section of my paper and continue the editing process. During this time I will also begin preparing my presentation.

Week Eight: This week I will completely finish editing and perfecting my paper to make sure it is clear, easy to follow, and thought provoking.

Week Nine: During this final week I will also create the audio examples for my final presentation and prepare the Power Point. These will be from both the pieces by Lassus as well as the *Pope Marcellus Mass* that I feel are clear examples of the concepts I am addressing within my paper.

Post-BSI: At the conclusion of the Butler Summer Institute I will give my presentation on everything I have learned about modal music as well as the *Pope Marcellus Mass*. In the following Spring, I will present at the 2012 Undergraduate Research Conference. I then hope to write my Honors Thesis paper on a similar topic by using the research I did over the summer, and expand on what I have done at the Butler Summer Institute into something larger and more in detailed over the course of my junior and senior years.

V. Feasibility

For this project I will require the score to the *Pope Marcellus Mass*. As well as the other smaller pieces I will be analyzing prior to the start of BSI. I already have the compositions by Lassus that I intend to use. The *Pope Marcellus Mass* is a well known piece and I am confident I

can acquire the score before BSI begins. Besides those scores I will also gather appropriate journals and articles to better educate myself on modes, counterpoint, and pre-tonal music. I am also convinced that I can acquire every reading that I will need before the beginning of the Butler Summer Institute.

VI. Working on Campus

This project requires a lot of reading and analyzing. There is a very early copy of the Morley book, which can be seen in my bibliography, at the Lilly Library at IU-Bloomington. Going to see this book would be the only off campus work that I would be doing. Other than a trip down to see that book, all of my research can, and will be done on the Butler University campus.

VII. Personal

I am personally very interested in this topic because I feel it is a ripe area for analysis and it will significantly benefit my future goals in music. I aspire to be a music theorist, and to attend graduate school in music theory, by doing this project I will have a head start in understanding what is expected from a music theorist and how music theory research is done. This project would be a much larger version of an analysis project done in a music theory course at Butler. I feel that doing that project has prepared me for the type of work I will be working on during the BSI. I recognize that this is something that few undergraduate students are given the opportunity of doing and it would show my dedication and love of music theory to my future institutions and employers.

VIII. Presentation

There are two conferences where I could share my research. They are the National Conference of Undergraduate Research and the 2011 College Music Society National

Conference. I believe that both of these would be appropriate for this work because they both accept many diverse fields of research. The College Music Society also has a publication that I believe would be an acceptable place to publish my paper. It is the College Music Symposium.

IX. Approvals

This project does not require any use of human subjects or animals.

Selected References

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