

# "Musica ficta': Theories of Accidental Inflections in Vocal Polyphony from Marchetto de Padova to Gioseffo Zarlino" By Karol Berger

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## Reviews of Books

Karol Berger: *"Musica ficta": Theories of Accidental Inflections in Vocal Polyphony from Marchetto da Padova to Gioseffo Zarlino*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. xvii, 266p. ISBN 0-521-32871-3

To what extent is a book on *musica ficta* relevant to music performance? The question might seem trivial to the initiates for whom the connection between theories of *ficta* and conventions of practice is so obvious that it need not be clarified. I ask the question only because I was specifically requested to review the present book for "its implications for music performance." To remove any uncertainty on this score, it might be advisable to spell out the connection at the outset, if for no other reason than one of protocol. *Musica ficta*, as conceived by Karol Berger, is concerned with accidentals added, in performance, to the voices of late medieval and Renaissance works in accordance with what seems to have been a well-established practice. It follows that *ficta* is so fundamental to performance that without its knowledge the very form and substance of the works to be reproduced is at stake. Said otherwise, *ficta* reaches to the basic intervallic structure of melodies considered alone or in relation to their counterpoints. Berger emphasized that "a successful performance of the task [of supplying all conventionally implied accidental inflections] depends on our knowledge and understanding of the conventions involved" (xi). He defined the "main purpose" of his book as providing help to performers by elucidating "the meaning and use of the conventions." Any such elucidation must proceed by way of the theorists, whose study is "a prerequisite for an examination of practical sources" (xiii). And it is with this theoretical evidence for *musica ficta* that the book is concerned.

*"Musica ficta": Theories of Accidental Inflections* treats two hundred and fifty years of musical development as reflected in music theory "from Marchetto da Padua to Gioseffo Zarlino" (c. 1300 - c. 1550). The discussion is delimited to vocal polyphony and to a conception of *musica ficta* not in the broad sense of all pitches standing outside the almost totally diatonic Guidonian gamut ("almost," for it allowed B-flat at two points in its tonal succession), hence both specified and unspecified chromatic alterations, but in the narrower one of "conventionally implied

inflections," hence only those added in performance. Berger divides the exposition into three parts, of different lengths. The first (53p.) deals with *musica ficta* in relation to the Guidonian hand, whose pitches constitute *musica vera*. The second, or major part of the book (101p., of which the last four pages were missing from my copy), deals with the various contexts in which *musica ficta* occurs. Of these, four are discerned: horizontal, vertical, cadential, and canonic/imitative. In the third part (26p.), there is an attempt to classify accidental inflections by type, whereby the author offers certain guidelines, of use to editors and by proxy to informed musicians, for reading and defining them in the sources. The main discussion is followed by an ample section of backnotes (56p.), as well as a useful bibliography of primary and secondary sources (16p.). It is illustrated by forty-one musical examples, some of them rather lengthy, and seven figures.

The author sets out to provide a "generally accepted musicological theory of *musica ficta*" (xii), while distinguishing the central ideas of the theory from its transitory or idiosyncratic ones, of more limited applicability. He proceeds by examining a large number of treatises known to have addressed the topic, quoting extensively from them in translation (and with the original, in most cases, in the section of backnotes). The book is unique in attempting to deal with the whole of the topic, rather than, as has hitherto been the custom, with its smaller parts. (Still, the author's claim to have perused the "entire surviving theoretical evidence concerning *musica ficta*" [xiii] is rather overbold.) There are new explanations for some of the core problems of *ficta* theory. Conflicting signatures (e.g., a flat in the signature of one voice, but not in that of another), for one: the author disassociates them from cadential formations, tracing them instead to the operations for avoiding *mi-contra-fa* clashes (66-69). Melodic tritones, for another: the author demonstrates how the rule for their correction was subject to numerous infractions. Most interesting is the conclusion, applicable both to melodically and harmonically prohibited intervals, that flats rather than sharps were conventionally chosen for their emendation (80-84, 115-18), though with one notable exception: before 1470, both flats and sharps seem indiscriminately to have been used for this purpose. The author deals with the problem of how to proceed when one has to choose between upper or lower leading tones (as in cadences on A), arguing for modal considerations as a guide (138-59). As to the pet notion among editors that one must not tamper with the tenor part, he shows that it cannot be theoretically sustained. He denies wider application of Edward Lowinsky's by-now classic theory of "secret chromaticism" beyond the small core of examples in which it is illustrated; the evidence

of the sources, he emphasizes, "speaks against 'secret modulation' as a feature of regular practice" (91).

An important point that emerges from a reading of the sources is that the theorists did not concur on how to treat the various *mi-contra-fa* and other clashes. Pietro Aaron raised his hands, leaving the solution to the problem of an indirect tritone, for example, to the discretion of the singers, who may either correct it or leave it intact (75). Berger himself noted that the musicians tended to make their decisions contextually, giving heed to melodic, contrapuntal, and modal considerations (77). The uncertainties of singers seem to have been just as acute in older times as they are to their present-day descendants, facing the same difficulties in resolving non-harmonic relations and looking, for assistance, to theoretical and musical evidence.

Because of the dense writing, the book will not be easy going for those users hoping to find a clear set of guidelines for applying *ficta* in performance. Weighty nuggets of "practical advice" are sometimes embedded in the general exposition, and only by a close reading can they be ferreted out for a broader consideration. An example is the problem of how long an accidental sign remains valid: for its note only? or beyond its note as well? Where Prosdocimus de Beldemandis opted for the former, Johannes Tinctoris suggested the validity of B-flat for the duration of its appropriate hexachord. Yet Berger, after reviewing the evidence, concluded that not Tinctoris's, but Prosdocimus's view was the accepted one (19-20). The point is of no little import, although it is nearly lost in the flow of the discourse. Another example has to do with transposing music from one to another pitch level: Berger notes that the theorists recognized transposition for, among other reasons, keeping the parts within a comfortable singing range (62). A third one is that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the modal orientation of the writing seems to have been recognized as a guide for the application of *ficta* in pre-Renaissance music (as clear from a remark to this effect by Jacques de Liège; 70). Still other points, enmeshed in the argumentation, are that melodic tritones do not offend if they are properly resolved (71); or that they may be left intact if preceding a cadence on A (74); or that in passages where melodic corrections lead to harmonic discords (tritones, etc.), harmonic factors overrule melodic ones ("when one must choose between two non-harmonic relations, one melodic and the other vertical, one should correct the latter"; 119); or that in places where upper or lower leading tones are equally feasible (namely, in cadences on A), the inclination of the theorists seems to have been to sharpen the seventh degree (147).



Despite the density of the material, one of the most useful features of the book is its inclusion of summaries at the ends of sections. Thus in discussing the evidence for handling melodic tritones, the author sums up with a cogent résumé (76). Yet precisely because the book is of the kind one wants to consult for clarifying a variety of theoretical and practical questions, certain aids might have been incorporated to make the material more manageable. To judge the range and content of the theorists's observations on *musica ficta*, it would have been helpful to have an appendix of all relevant passages in their writings, classified according to subject and arranged chronologically (rather than their being tucked away, in fine print, within the backnotes). And, for cross-reference, to have a summary listing of the same passages arranged by author and treatise. Or to have a glossary of the various terms, in Latin and Italian, pertaining to the Guidonian gamut, to hexachords, to solmization, etc., with reference to their appearance in the larger appendix of theoretical passages. More musical examples might have been added (though we are grateful for the forty-one!), especially when the reader is confronted with longish descriptions of melodic progressions by reference to their location in the gamut: there a musical quotation might have proved both economical and expedient. As for the examples already present, it would have been useful to have captions for them, thus making them easier to spot and compare; or as an alternative, to have them listed, alphabetically, at the beginning or the end of the volume.

In the concluding pages (171-88), the author offers some "practical" advice to editors, namely: (1) it is imperative to write out all implied accidentals, doing this in the customary way of signing them above their notes; (2) a distinction should be maintained between indispensable and optional implied accidentals, the latter being left to the discretion of the editor or singer (they might be indicated by being enclosed in parentheses); (3) such cases as are open to two solutions (e.g., upper or lower leading tones in A cadences) should have both of them written out, with indication of the editor's preferred reading. Berger develops an interesting hypothesis about two kinds of signed accidentals in the sources: those which are "unconventional," or inexplicable by *musica ficta* theory, ought to be differentiated from conventional ones, whose rationale can indeed be traced to the workings of *ficta*. The first kind, in the author's view, might be considered "authorial," for its very presence seems to depend on the will of the composer or the early editor; the second kind derives from the conventions of *ficta*, hence need not have been indicated in the source, for chances are it would have been supplied in performance. On the basis of such a distinction Berger suggests that

in collating sources, the present-day editor should classify their accidentals by the degree of their centrality or incidentality. The difference between the two kinds is as that between examples of genuine "chromaticism" (in its infancy) and normative *musica ficta*.

Berger wrote one book, and a wide-ranging one at that. Yet in his one book he implies two more that have yet to be written, and whose importance he himself would probably have been among the first to acknowledge. A second book, complementing the first, would treat the uses of accidentals in the practical musical sources. Berger restricted his presentation to the theorists's writings, and though we all recognize the relevance of theory to practice, still the one cannot be unconditionally substituted for the other, for each follows its own historical and substantive logic. And a third book, occupying a culminating position: it would treat the correlation of the evidence found in the musical sources with that found in the treatises, whereby the two kinds are reconciled or reinterpreted on the basis of their similarities and their differences. With such a book, one might envision a truly comprehensive theory of *musica ficta*. Though it remains an undertaking for the future, it is, all the same, that much closer at hand now that Berger, in his own study, has provided a powerful impulse to its realization.

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