

Performance Practice Review

Volume 6
Number 2 *Fall*

Article 9

1993

"Aural Images of Lost Traditions: Sharps and Flats in the Sixteenth Century." By Robert Toft

Stanley Boorman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boorman, Stanley (1993) ""Aural Images of Lost Traditions: Sharps and Flats in the Sixteenth Century." By Robert Toft," *Performance Practice Review*. Vol. 6: No. 2, Article 9. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199306.02.09
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol6/iss2/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Current Journals at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Reviews of Books

Robert Toft. *Aural Images of Lost Traditions: Sharps and Flats in the Sixteenth Century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992. viii, 199p.

This valuable book demonstrates, convincingly, the range of possibilities open to the performer of music of the Josquin generation. Drawing on various strands of evidence, it shows that a richer palette of chromatic and harmonic colors was available, and argues that this palette was applied in ways which make sense, and which can be seen as compatible with the theoretical literature.

"Performers and scholars . . . have long been plagued by the ambiguities of pitch notation in the sources of vocal music" of the Renaissance. This is the starting point, a reference to the problems of chromatic alteration (not of stemmatic transmission). It is a statement with which every performer of Josquin's music will whole-heartedly agree. Toft adds, equally sensibly, that theorists present explanations that are "far too cursory to allow us to reconstruct fully the oral traditions." From this point of view, it would seem nearly impossible to know how much, or how little, we can adjust the Renaissance text through the addition of accidentals, *musica ficta*, or *musica recta*. Fortunately for Toft, help is at hand, in the form of the intabulation, since it represents a notation that precisely indicates the sounds made by the instruments.

This is his central argument (although not the only important one): that intabulations offer exact solutions to specific instances. I immediately have two reservations here: one is that we cannot know that instruments did indeed present versions that would have been sung—given the diverse nature of the sounds generated. Toft's point is that the intabulations do represent some form of performance, though they occurred (in any case) later. My other concern is that I am skeptical that a competent instrumental musician could not have changed his reading in performance as easily as did a singer. After all, while tablature did present a specific fingering, any experienced musician would have known the alternatives.

However, the other, more generally held objections, that tablatures record specific performances, and that they add too many accidentals, are well and

thoughtfully addressed by Toft. Immediately he recognizes that different solutions were favored by different musicians, that such solutions were not necessarily compatible, and that they also varied from one part of Europe to another.

Indeed, these are the great virtues of the book: that it offers a range of solutions (by stating that no one version is solely correct), and that it seeks to support the practical evidence with readings from the theorists, a procedure that brings to light a wide range of possibilities that we have hitherto tended to suppress.

A significant opening chapter addresses the theoretical premises behind the addition of accidentals. A number of recent studies have begun to argue for false relations, for immediate chromatic alterations of pitches, and for a greater concern with linear (rather than vertical) interpretation of the rules of *musica ficta*. Toft follows up on all this by showing that theorists recognized occasions on which the vertical tritone, and even the diminished (or augmented) octave were justified in performance. Similarly, he lists the cases in which melodic tritones were permitted, drawing on writers from Tinctoris to Praetorius. Much of this is not really new, but the virtue of this chapter is that it collects together the evidence for adapting—that is, breaking—the standard rules familiar to us all. This chapter assumes a basic knowledge of the role of hexachords, of the modal system, and of the theoretical language of the time. At the same time, it is (like the rest of the book) copiously illustrated with examples, and it is organized around topics of central concern to the modern executant.

It is, in any case, really only the prelude, the essential justification for what follows. For, while the theorists were writing about exceptions, the evidence that Toft draws on suggests a wide acceptance of these possibilities as effective and normal solutions to what may not even have been thought of as "problems." He starts from a discussion of the tradition of transmitting and intabulating Josquin's motets. As he says, we do not have intabulations from Josquin's lifetime, and we cannot reconstruct a contemporary practice. (What we know of lute-playing from the time suggests that there would have been little information, in any case.) This chapter follows exactly the order of thought present in the theoretical introduction. A long and valuable discourse on the patterns of using the subsemitone at cadences is followed by a brief discussion of the raised third (also at cadences), and a similarly concise collection of examples of the use of the subsemitone other than at cadences. Subsequently we are offered demonstrations of vertical and linear dissonances and a short comment on the problems of imitation.

This chapter is not always easy to read and follow, primarily because examples are arranged by composition, rather than by specific solution, or by the work of the individual intabulator. In addition, there is sometimes a tendency to present every possible side of an argument. For the reader, the great benefit of this arrangement is that the full range of possibilities for many specific situations is made readily apparent. However, at times, I feel that Toft is confusing different compositional points. Thus, his example 2.12 purports to illustrate a situation where the subtone could not be sharpened to a subsemitone, since the "leading note" is doubled in different voices. This idea is reinforced by an additional example in the notes. In practice, however, neither of these examples is relevant, for (in each) the composer has constructed his melodic lines so that the "leading note" could not have been sharpened—the individual line itself precludes it—and vertical considerations are irrelevant. Similarly, examples 2.24-26 actually present various harmonic situations that *require* the differing solutions that Toft interprets as signs of flexibility. I have argued elsewhere that composers regularly constructed melodic lines so that certain *musica ficta* options were removed from consideration.¹ This is apparent in both these sets of examples. Nonetheless, the benefit of the range of examples offered by Toft, and of the manner in which he marshalls his evidence is that both offer the attentive reader much of assistance in the editing or performing of this music.

The final major section reinforces this benefit, for it takes a number of specific compositions, and discusses particular points within each. This is perhaps the most valuable part of the book for the performer. Toft draws on patterns of transmission, along with questions of mode, of signature *versus* accidentals, and of imitation, calling upon each of these as relevant, in order to reveal how and why different intabulators behaved as they did in works by Josquin, Agricola, and Clemens non Papa. This section cannot be fully appreciated without the rest of the book. But it does provide for the diligent reader a primer not only on how intabulators seem to have thought, but also on how we should approach the pitch content of these pieces.

Between these sections is a brief discussion of a distinctive German practice for unnotated accidentals. This is far too short a section, for the investigation of a specific local convention would have been quite significant for Toft's central thesis. In general, he is demonstrating the range of possibilities that existed. He is trying to provide for us, rather than

¹Stanley Boorman, "False Relations and the Cadence," *Altro polo: Essays on Italian Music in the Cinquecento*, ed. Richard Charteris (Sydney: Frederick May Foundation for Italian Studies, and the University of Sydney, 1990), 221-64.

specific solutions, a demonstration of the manner in which we should proceed. At the same time he is giving us the freedom to tailor our musical decisions to our own view of the music. If, then, particular musicians, or groups of musicians, took a given position, that would seem both to confirm his approach, and also make sense of the complexities he presents. In addition, it would make sense of the ideas of other scholars. Toft rejects Lowinsky's long-argued theory of a "secret chromatic art" for a group of works from a specific milieu, arguing against it within a discussion of a *crux criticorum* in Clemens non Papa's *Fremuit spiritu Jesus* (pp. 161-2, note 5). I rather believe that Lowinsky's hypothesis is exactly the sort of thing we should expect to find, especially in that specific circle. The more that different groups of musicians perceived different aural solutions, the more that different composers wrote works that included or excluded some of those solutions (as I have argued they did), the more should we expect that a closed circle might have experimented with the implications of chromatic alteration. I believe, in short, not only that Lowinsky was probably right, but that other circles as well will eventually be shown to have played with the implications of *musica ficta*, of the hexachord system, and of the harmonic palette, producing a variety of effects. Only close analysis will reveal the truth of this.

It is one of the merits of Toft's book that he allows us to think in this manner. If it is occasionally hard to follow, if he has tried to include too much, in the process heaping possibility on possibility and rarely following any one argument far enough, he has nonetheless brought a most welcome breath of fresh air into the discussion of the "purity" or "impurity" of the sonority of high-Renaissance music. For that, all scholars and performers ought to be grateful, and be willing to accept what he calls the "divergent performing traditions" which "existed at that time" (p. 124).

Stanley Boorman