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Improvisation in Vocal Contrapuntal Pedagogy: An Appraisal of Italian Theoretical Treatises of the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries

Valerio Morucci

The extemporaneous application of pre-assimilated compositional paradigms into musical performance retained a central position in the training of Medieval and Renaissance musicians, specifically within the context of Western polyphonic practice.¹ Recent scholarship has shown the significance of memorization in the oral transmission of plainchant and early polyphony.² Attention has been particularly directed to aspects of orality and literacy in relation to “composition” (the term here applies to both written and oral), and, at the same time, studies correlated to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century contrapuntal theory, have mainly focused on the works of single theorists.³ The information we

1. I thank the anonymous readers of this journal for their comments and suggestions on previous drafts. Pioneering studies on the improvisation and pedagogy of vocal counterpoint in the Renaissance include Ernest T. Ferand, *Die Improvisation in der Musik* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1938); Ernest T. Ferand, “Sodaine and Unexpected Music in The Renaissance,” *The Musical Quarterly* 37 (1951): 10–27; Ernest T. Ferand, “Improvised Vocal Counterpoint in the Late Renaissance and Early Baroque,” *Annales Musicologiques Moyen-age et Renaissance* 4 (1956): 129–174; Peter Schubert, “Counterpoint Pedagogy in the Renaissance,” *The Cambridge History of Western Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 503–33; Folker Froebe “Satzmodelle des Contrapunto alla mente und ihre Bedeutung für den Stilwandel um 1600,” *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 4 (2007): 13–55. A recent and more specific examination is Peter Schubert, “From Voice to Keyboard: Improvised Techniques in the Renaissance,” *Philomusica on-line* 11, no. 1 (2012): 11–22. Here, Schubert presents a summary of improvised techniques that are found in various Renaissance treatises. See also Schubert’s forthcoming article “From Improvisation to Composition: Three Case Studies,” 11th publication of the Collected Writings of the Orpheus Institute, Leuven University Press. I thank the above author for sharing his work before publication.

2. Anna Maria Busse Berger, *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005); Busse Berger, “Models for Composition in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Memory and Invention in Medieval and Renaissance Literature, Art and Music* (Florence: Olschki, 2009), 59–80; in this same collection see also Philippe Canguilhem and Stefano Lorenzetti’s articles. Related aspects of improvisation are discussed in Ross Duffin, “*Contrapunctus Simplex et Diminutus*: Polyphonic Improvisation for Voices in the Fifteenth Century,” *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* (2007): 73–94; Busse Berger, “The Problem of Diminished Counterpoint,” in *Uno gentile et subtile ingenio: Studies in Renaissance Music in Honour of Bonnie J. Blackburn*, ed. Gioia Filocamo and M. Jennifer Bloxam (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 13–27.

3. For aspects of improvisation in compositional process refer to Jessie Ann Owens, *Composers at Work: The Craft of Musical Composition 1450–1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 64–75.

possess regarding improvised vocal counterpoint rests almost entirely on theoretical treatises, which, in spite of their simplistic nature, provide us with a relevant, even though partial, account of the subject. Through close scrutiny of various theoretical sources, this investigation attempts to present a comprehensive historiographical account of the phenomenon. What emerges is the persistence of a long-standing didactic tradition and performance practice of improvised vocal counterpoint well through the early Baroque era. As will be shown, Italian treatises of this period, in addition to presenting more or less standardized contrapuntal rules, often provided students (in most cases amateurs) and singers with supplementary practical examples of basic interval progressions, cadential patterns and graphic illustrations, which were conceived as a mnemonic gamut of formulas to be incorporated into contrapuntal practice.

The first Italian theoretical treatise in which an implicit distinction between written and unwritten counterpoint can be discerned is Prosdocimus de Beldemandis's *Contrapunctus* (1412).⁴ The author begins his work by specifying that all of the rules discussed in it apply to both written and unwritten contrapuntal practices, refraining, however, from making any further remarks on the subject. Ernest T. Ferand, in an article published in 1957, initiated a fervent debate concerning Tinctoris' ambiguous use of the terms *res facta* and *cantare super librum*, which was later re-examined by Margaret Bent and Bonnie Blackburn, among others. The main point of debate pertained to the interpretation of the expression "*alla mente*," which, as Blackburn has convincingly argued, was synonymous with extemporaneous performance. It is on this ideological basis that Rob Wegman illustrated the socio-cultural pre-eminence of improvisation in the European liturgical musical tradition, particularly in the Low Countries.⁵

***Contrappunto ad videndum* and Ornamentation in Vocal Contrapuntal Pedagogy**

If we look at Italian theoretical treatises of the Renaissance and early Baroque eras we notice that the expression *contrappunto alla mente* was the most widely used term when referring to unwritten vocal counterpoint.⁶ Scholars have overlooked the fact that the theorist Giovanni del Lago introduced the term *ad videndum* in reference to extempo-

4. Prosdocimo de' Beldomandi, *Contrapunctus*, ed. Jan Herlinger (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 32–33.

5. Ernest T. Ferand, "What is Res Facta?" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 10 (1957): 141–50; Margaret Bent, "Resfacta and "Cantare Super Librum," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 36 (1983): 371–91; Bonnie J. Blackburn, "On Compositional Process in the Fifteenth Century," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 40 (1987): 249–51; Rob C. Wegman, "From Maker to Composer: Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450–1500," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 49 (1996): 409–79.

6. For a list of other general terms see Ferand, 141–42.

aneous contrapuntal singing.⁷ After discussing basic aspects of solmization, interval and modes, del Lago presents four distinct contrapuntal procedures: first species counterpoint, counterpoint *ad videndum*, diminished counterpoint, and counterpoint in four and five voices. In line with most sixteenth-century theorists, his theoretical ideas, particularly those related to the eight rules of first-species counterpoint, were derived from the works of Tinctoris, Gaffurius, and Aaron.⁸ Del Lago, like his later colleague Scipione Cerreto, dedicated a full chapter to *contrappunto ad videndum*. For both theorists this definition entailed an oral approach to improvised discant, which as the term indicates, was performed “at sight.” According to del Lago, this classification applies to simple and diminished counterpoint, and it was defined as such for the reason that “you should not trespass with the eye the fourth line of the *cantus firmus*.”⁹ Del Lago is here suggesting to maintain the contrapuntal lines within an octave while improvising. He is concerned also with the difficulty that singers have to face to avoid dissonances in relation to prolation, tempus and intervallic motion. He never employs the word *improvisatione*, which is, however, a term used repeatedly by Scipione Cerreto to indicate the same unwritten practice.¹⁰ The association of these two theorists is coincidental. Indeed, del Lago’s name appears along with other contemporary theorists in Cerreto’s opening acknowledgments, corroborating evidence of Cerreto’s familiarity with del Lago’s theoretical ideas. Moreover, Cerreto, in discussing *contrapunto ad videndum*, clearly draws on del Lago’s description, re-emphasizing the importance of not exceeding the fourth line of the *cantus* when ascending and descending. We shall now take a closer look at the last chapter of Cerreto’s treatise.

Cerreto strictly correlates oral and written counterpoint (*contrappunto improvvisato* and *scritto*) as part of the same broader conception. His views seem to be in line with those of his predecessor Stefano Vanneo, who more than a half-century earlier had admonished those “false professors of music” who attempted to propose an esthetic-critical devaluation of oral counterpoint in favor of composition.¹¹ According to Vanneo, these were two ontologically integrated processes that should not be separated. Cerreto

7. Giovanni del Lago, *Breve introduzione di musica misurata* (Venice: Brandini & Octaviani Scoti, 1540), 35–36, facsimile (Bologna: Forni, 1969).

8. Franchino Gaffurio, *Practica musica* (Milan: Gulielmum signer Rothomagensen, 1496); Johannes Tinctoris, *Liber de arte contrapuncti*, translated and edited with an introduction by Albert Seay (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1961); Pietro Aaron, *Toscanello in musica* (Venice: Sessa, 1539).

9. “Non potete preterire la quarta linea del canto fermo con l'occhio.” del Lago, 36. All translations and paraphrases are my own unless otherwise indicated.

10. Scipione Cerreto, *Della prattica musica vocale et strumentale* (Naples, Carlino, 1601), facsimile (Bologna: Forni, 1969).

11. “Hinc qda Musiculi, & Musices adulterine professores, ferula superbientes, dicrimen constituent, inter floridus anctus & contrapuntus, seu inter contrapunctixare & componere, ridicula ac imbecilla quada ratione freti.” Stefano Vanneo, *Recanatum de musica* (Basel: Documenta Musicologica, 1969), 70r.

also refrains from making any conceptual distinction between oral counterpoint and written composition. In the fourth chapter of his treatise, he includes an extensive number of musical examples to be employed (probably memorized) by students when improvising contrapuntal lines below and above a given *cantus firmus*. He then introduces additional illustrations of contrapuntal patterns in canonic imitation. His usage of different note values (minima, semiminima) to create melodic and rhythmic variation strongly resembles the well-established improvisational techniques of diminution with *passaggi*, which were widespread in contemporary vocal and instrumental music. The latent impact that this method of ornamentation seems to have exerted on conventional vocal counterpoint, especially on theorists like Cerreto, who were also instrumentalists, remains an unexplored area of research.

Examples of the influence of ornamental procedures “borrowed” from instrumental manuals and from the emerging monodic style on vocal counterpoint of this period are also found in Giovanni Battista Bovicelli’s *Regole di passaggi di Musica*.¹² Almost all of the musical examples employed by Bovicelli are drawn from liturgical motets and *falso bordone* compositions by Palestrina, de Rore, Correggio, Gabucci, and Victoria. Bovicelli uses the soprano lines of these compositions as high-pitched *cantus firmus*, below which ornamental lines are improvised.

In figure 1, we see an instance of Bovicelli’s *passaggi*, in which he introduces a thematic idea that is derived from the *secunda pars* of Tomas Luis de Victoria’s motet *Dilectus tuus*. Similar illustrations of embellishments based on a pre-existing vocal line appear also in Adriano Banchieri’s *Cartella musicale*, where the author inscribes short motivic incipits (on both vernacular and Latin texts) for aural memorization, which function as referential guidelines when extemporizing *passaggi* (fig. 2).¹³

In this latter case, the *passaggio* is shown as a rhythmic variant with faster notes (the memorized portion moves with longer notes). The correlation of these systematic formulas with Banchieri’s conception of vocal contrapuntal improvisation transpires in the final pages of his treatise, where he asserts: “In Rome, in the chapel of our lordship, at the Santa Casa of Loreto, and in many other chapels, when they sing *contrapunto alla*

12. Giovanni Battista Bovicelli, *Regole di passaggi di Musica* (Venice: Giacomo Vincenti, 1594). Related theoretical instructions on *passaggi* were also presented by Silvestro Ganassi, *Opera intitulata Fontegara* (Venice: s.n., 1535); Giovanni Camillo Maffei, *Delle lettere del signor Giovanni Camillo Maffei* (Naples: Amato, 1562); Ludovico Zacconi, *Prattica di musica* (Venice: Alessandro Vincenti, 1622); Giovanni Luca Conforto, *Breve et facile maniera d’essercitarsi* (Rome: s.n., 1593); Giovanni Bassano, *Ricerche passaggi et cadentie* (Venice: Giacomo Vincenzi and Ricciardo Andimo, 1585); Adriano Banchieri, *Cartella musicale* (Venice: Giacomo Vincenti, 1614); Francesco Rognoni Taeggio, *Selva di vari passaggi* (Milan: Filippo Lomazzo, 1620); and Riccardo Rognoni, *Passaggi* (Venice: Giacomo Vincenti, 1594).

13. Adriano Banchieri, *Cartella musicale* (Venice: Giacomo Vincenti, 1614), facsimile (Bologna: Forni, 1968), 216–17.

Figure 1. Giovanni Battista Bovicelli, *Regole passaggi di musica*, 59.

Del Vittoria Seconda Parte, à Sei. 59

I le tus

tu ms can di dus

rubicon dus e le-

tus ex mil li bus ta-

lis est sa lis est di le-

Di Gio. Battista Bovicelli. H 2

Figure 2. Adriano Banchieri, *Cartella musicale*, 216–17.

216 C A R T E L L A.
CENTO VARIATI PASSAGGI
Accentuati alla moderna, Latini, & Volgari;

Dedotti in celebri compositori de i nostri tempi, & con le note semplici à giouamento di chi compone, applicate in termine di memoria locale.
Del P. D. Adriano Banchieri Monaco Oluetano.
Et distinti in quattro ordini cioè
Vinticinque alla Voce Soprana. 25. Alla Voce Contr'Alta.
Vinticinque alla Tenora, & 25. Alla Parte Graue.

ALLA VOCE SOPRANA.

MEMORIA. PASAGGIO.

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DEL BANCHIERI.
MEMORIA PASAGGIO

Super Domini flam Su per Domini flam.
Deus meus De us me us.
Veni Domine Ve ni Do mi ne.
Deus meus es De us me us es.
Et sperio fa Et spe ti o fa.
Virginita tis Vir ginita tis.
Deo no stro De o no stro.
Et nos Et nos. Cartella del Banchieri. H

mente above a bass, no one knows what his fellow singer shall sing, but everybody, following certain previously shared indications, produces a very pleasing sound.”¹⁴ The idea of using the bass as a *cantus firmus* on which the other voices improvise is also employed by Lodovico Zacconi in the second book of his *Prattica di musica*.¹⁵

As Zacconi contends, the inner voices assume the function of intervallic implementation, with the tenor shaping the harmonic basis of the overall contrapuntal structure (“Il tenore è quello che da forma all’armonie, & à lui s’attende per l’aere armoniale”). He makes clear that notes of shorter rhythmic value, like *chrome* and *semichrome*, could be used for diminution in all types of counterpoint, providing us with a musical illustration of improvisatory ornamental procedures that employ *minime*, *semimine*, and *chrome*

14. Banchieri, 230. “In Roma nella Capella di N. S. Nella S. Casa di Loreto & alter infinite Capelle, mentre cantano il Contrapunto, alla mente sopra il basso, niuno sa quello che cantar deve il compagno, ma tutti, con certe osservazioni tra di loro conferite rendono un udito gustosissimo.”

15. Lodovico Zacconi, *Prattica di musica* (Venice, Alessandro Vincenti, 1622), facsimile (Bologna: Forni, 1971), 59. “Sempre il Basso è quello che canta detto canto fermo, e tutti I cantori vi vanno contrapuntizzando sopra.”

above a bass line that moves by *breves* (fig. 3).¹⁶ Zacconi explains that many “valorous men” teach their students how to improvise a *contrappunto alla mente semplice* (again on a *cantus firmus*) without relying on written exercises. His pupils were indeed trained to elaborate contrapuntal vocal lines on a text or by solely using solmization syllables.¹⁷

Returning now to Cerreto’s treatise, one must note that his fourth book ends with a discussion of tablature and, even more importantly, on how to improvise *passaggi* on the viola da gamba (after a number of examples of cadences in two and more voices based on a preexisting chant). It is interesting that his debate on *contrappunto ad videntum* was preceded by a section on “the eight inviolable rules to be observed in counterpoint” (*otto regole inviolabili da osservarsi nel contrapunto*). As the theorist remarks, these rules, which are evidently modeled on Gaffurio’s premises, apply to both improvised and written counterpoint. Cerreto’s first “rule” consists of instructions for the subdivision of *contrappunto all’improvviso hò scritto* into *sciolto*, *ligato* and *sincopato*. *Sciolto* is the gradual contrapuntal movement by consonances only, *ligato* by consonances and dissonances, and *sincopato* by consonances with ligature between measures.¹⁸ The theorist is here essentially describing a prototypical form of first, second, and third species counterpoint to be used in *ad libitum* and pre-conceived performance.¹⁹ This last aspect suggests again that no substantial conceptual separation between unwritten and written counterpoint existed in Cerreto’s theoretical vision, a hypothesis that is supported by his discussion of counterpoint in other sections of the treatise.

16. Ibid., 59, 76, 93.

17. Ibid., 127. In chapter 34, he recounts also an interesting biographical anecdote concerning the first time his teacher Hippolito Baccusi taught him *contrappunto alla mente*.

18. The full passage reads: “Il contrapunto all’improvviso hò scritto si fà di tre maniere, cioè sciolto, ligato, & sincopato. Il sciolto procede di due modi: uno farà quando le notule caminano gradatamente per consonanze, & dissonanze. Et l’altro quando caminano le notule solamente per consonanze. Il contrapunto ligato procede sempre per consonanze, & dissonanze. Et il contrapunto sincopato sarà quando le notule procedono sempre per consonanze, & che anderanno contra la batuta.” The above instructions are also found in a manuscript copied by Cerreto himself titled *Dialoghi Armonici pel contrapunto e per la composizione*, which survives at the Biblioteca del conservatorio di Napoli and was compiled in the same year. The material contained in it, which is almost identical, suggests that Cerreto may have used it for the preparation of his printed treatise.

19. The remaining seven rules are: 1. A piece must start with a perfect consonance (for this rule, Cerreto directly refers to Gaffurio’s third book, chapter four of *Prattica musica*). 2. No perfect consonances should be used in succession when descending or ascending (no parallel fifths and octaves). 3. Contrary motion is preferred when proceeding from a perfect major to a minor consonant interval. 4. Two or more imperfect consonances should be inserted between two similar perfect consonances (in this regard, Cerreto cites his Neapolitan colleague Luigi Dentice). 5. Different perfect consonances in succession are allowed when ascending or descending. 6. Similar perfect consonances can follow each other immediately if they are placed in the low and high register respectively or vice versa. 7. A piece must end with a perfect consonance.

Figure 3. Lodovico Zacconi, *Prattica di musica*, 76.

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Prattica di Musica

Fatto questa poi, et esercitatosi alquanto in ciascuno de i sudetti essempj possano dar di mano di contrapunti che si fanno con l'intervento di tutte le sudette figure, nella forma che qui si vede.

Et in questi esercitarsi tanto, che li faccia si può dire all'improvviso, et a beneplacito di ogn'uno farli li volesse far fare. Dovendo a questo, non poco avvertire; che la finezza della scienza nascendo dal giudicio e dal diletto, non bisogna che sia ne troppo frettoloso ne troppo pigro cioè lento. Frettoloso, perche caminando più avanti che non bisogna, trascurar le cose più importanti, e nel più bello si pensa di sapere, e non saprà nulla. Pigro poi, perche, ne nasce il dispregio e la dimenticanza; e dove bisognasse doverebbe innamorar delle cose, le cominciava ad aborrire, et odiare. Io dico questo per quelli che non sapendo trouar la via d'innanzi, si dimenticano con tal animo, che non facendo mai altra, fera e materia, fanno (come suolice per proverbio) il fuoco di paglia, che facendo in un tratto offe bel la o chiara fiamma, quasi in un momento si spegne et estingue. Così dico sogliano far alcuni, che per un bel principio che vi danno, in otto, o dieci di fanno cose di marauiglia; ma poi gittata la Carlotta in un cantuccio, per non far più, non la toccano più, e non la vogliono più vedere.

Due altre cose per conclusione di questo Capitolo mi restano a dir, l'una delle quali; che se bene esser debba mia di mostrar a parte a parte, come fanno i Contrapunti tutte di minime buone, e poi di buone e cattive miste insieme, con quelli di legatura et altro; ma che gioua? Io presuppongo che li Scolari questo l'hanno veduto in altri Autori, o lo facciano da se stesso per stimolo di accortezza e famore. L'altra di che questi essempj non potrebbono per i miei esser molto più pieni, eleganti, e belli; ma lo, bora trasto con Scolari, e non sono per mostrarvi molti di difficoltà, et oscuro, ma facile et inimitabile, accio che detti Scolari venendo dietro a me, non trovino le vie più scure, e facili, per non confonderli, o raffreddarli nel più bello.

Delle maniere de Contrapunti, e quanto all'aere, e modo di cantare. - Capitolo. 26.

Il Canto, e la Musica essendo per una cosa molto dilettevole, nel modo che l'uomo ha avvertenza di nascondersi dentro con ottima e buona disposizione le dissonanze, e cercar d'impedire l'ottima e buona consonanze, e cadenze, così anco debbe bauer riguardo l'habito, e l'agac bñ per essere nel cantare; poiche da quello io tengo che ne nasce la dilettezione, e la vera armonia; benetosa che, quanto più il Cantante ha la sua parte ben disposta, facile, e ben ordinata al Cantare, la canta meglio con più vaghi accenti, et inuaghiate con l'accentuato e vago modo della voce. Che se la parte ch'egli ha in mano, ha brutta maniera di Cantare, e che sia difficoltosa quanto alla disposizione delle figure musicali, attendendo a quello, non ha diletto a se, ne san poco li di animo d'inuaghiarlo.

Io soglio dire, che la Musica sia come un grā giardino pieno e colmo di vaghi e bei fiori: E che andò

Improvisation in the Treatises of Pontio, Tigrini, and Picerli

While some Italian theorists are explicit with regard to improvisation in vocal polyphony, the idea that first-species counterpoint was often implicitly intended as extemporized, even though not openly stated, can be deduced in other treatises of the period. Various passages in Pietro Pontio's *Ragionamento di musica* suggest as much.²⁰ In his *secondo ragionamento*, the author maintains that only two types of counterpoint exist, one called *semplice* or *uniforme* and the other *florido* or *diminuito*. Of particular importance is Pontio's claim that *contrappunto diminuito* (diminished counterpoint) is conceivable only for those who want to make music their profession, and who desire to move on to composition, from which many genres like masses, motets, psalms, hymns, lamentations, ricercars, and even madrigals are created.²¹ In the second and third sections of his treatise (*secondo* and *terzo ragionamento*), Pontio never explicitly uses the term "improvisation," nor does he employ other common analogous terminology of the day; however, he emphatically distinguishes *contrappunto* from *composizione*. This distinction suggests an intrinsic notion of "oral" versus "written" practice, with the former being regulated by six main principles, which Pontio articulates as follows:

First, ordinarily proceed, as much as you can, by conjunct motion. Second, include some beautiful ornaments, (and) the longer they are the more appropriate the counterpoint will be. Third, vary your ornaments in different ways; this instruction must be observed not only in two- and three-voice counterpoint but also in compositions for four and five voices. Fourth, avoid intervals that are difficult to sing; these are the intervals of the seventh and ninth, and the major sixth when descending and ascending; the minor sixth may be used when ascending but not in descending; this also applies to compositions for more voices. Fifth, ornament few, really very few, cadences, and if you must, use cadences in order to repeat ornaments you have already invented or to have a bit of rest or to create new ornaments. Sixth, ornament only if the chord is minor; or do not begin your ornamentation on the major tenth or third of a chord, but only on the minor tenth or third.²²

20. Pietro Pontio, *Ragionamento di musica* (Parma, Erasmo Viotto, 1588), facsimile (Basel: Documenta Musicologica, 1959).

21. Pontio, 21. His literal assertion is "Due varità di contrapunto si trovano; uno è detto contrapunto semplice, over uniforme; l'altro florido, ò per dir meglio diminuito; & questo secondo è quello, che conviene à coloro, che di Musica vogliono far professione; perche con questo contrapunto ve ne passate alla composizione; dalla quale vengono poi tante variate compositioni; come sono Messe, Motetti, Salmi, Hinni, Lamentationi, & Ricercari; & di piu ancon el modo, ch'alcuni sogliono essercitarsi Madrigali."

22. Ibid., 89. "Primo, che vada ordinariamente più, che può con movimento congiunto. Secondo, habbia in se alcune belle tirate, & quanto più in longo s'estenderanno, tanto più saranno proprie adetto contrapunto. Terzo, habbia qualche replica d'invention per modi diversi; & questo avvertimento frà tutti gli altri si deve osservare non solamente nel contrapunto di due voci, & tre; ma ancora nelle compositioni di Quattro, & cinque voci. Quarto, non si trovano in lui movimenti, che cantare non si possano; come

Here, Pontio associates the notion of *contrappunto* with counterpoint on a *cantus firmus* and, more in general, with two-voice counterpoint. While the remainder of the chapter focuses on this latter aspect, he also acknowledges the traditional subdivisions of *contrappunto diminuito*, *legato e fugato*, moving then into a discussion of cadences and of the eight modes. In his anachronistic rejection of Glarean's theory of twelve modes, Pontio lines himself with the older school of thought of Gaffurio.

Pontio's views pertaining to the pre-eminence of written florid counterpoint over the implied oral practice of *contrapunto semplice* are reflected also in Orazio Tigrini's *Compendio della musica*, which was published in the same year (there is no direct evidence of affiliation between the two theorists, who indeed do not cite each other in their respective treatises). In Tigrini's words "true counterpoint on a *cantus firmus* occurs when it is first written down, because (in) the one that is created in the mind it is almost impossible that there are no 'infinite' mistakes."²³ In spite of his sceptical position, Tigrini does not refrain from giving simple suggestions on the topic. He reminds his students to follow the cadential structure of the mode in which the *cantus firmus* is based, and that the intervallic distance between the two voices must not exceed a twelfth. When three voices are singing, he adds, the soprano (cantus) should be placed a tenth above the *cantus firmus*, keeping in mind that the middle voice must avoid two successive imperfect consonances. If the middle voice and the bass proceed twice at the sixth, the soprano will be at the fifth, and if the middle voice and the bass move twice at the third, the soprano will be at the octave.²⁴ Apparently, Tigrini's theoretical work was highly regarded, as Cerreto and Zacconi acknowledged in their two respective theoretical treatises. But Tigrini was not the only theorist to admit the technical limitations of improvised vocal counterpoint caused by the inevitable occurrence of contrapuntal errors during performance. This point of view is also reflected in Silverio Picerli's *Specchio di musica*.²⁵ Akin to Tigrini, Picerli's attitude toward *contrappunto alla mente* echoes that of his predecessor Nicola Vicentino who had affirmed, "True counterpoint over on a plainchant

movimenti di Settima, di Nona, & di Sesta maggiore nell'ascendere, & discendere, & di sesta minore nel discendere; perche nell' ascendere si può fare; & questo sia detto ancora per le compositioni di più voci. Quinto, tenga poche, anzi pochissime cadenze;& se pur se ne facessero, siano fatte per replicare l'inventione, overo per fare un poco di riposo, over per trovare nuove inventioni. Sesto, si trovano le parti manco, che si può in Ottava, over Unisone in principio di misura; quando la parte bassa ascende, & questo sarà, quando la decima, & la terza saranno maggiori, ma quando elle saranno minori il passaggio si potrà fare."

23. Orazio Tigrini, *Compendio della musica* (Venice, Ricciardo Amadino, 1588), facsimile (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 116. "Il vero Contrapunto sopra il Canto fermo si è quando prima si fa scritto: perche in quello, che si fa alla mente, è quasi impossibile, che non si facciano infiniti errori."

24. Ibid., 115.

25. Silverio Picerli, *Specchio secondo di musica* (Naples, Matteo Mucci, 1631), facsimile (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2008).

occurs when all the parts that might be sung extempore are written down.”²⁶ Picerli’s discussion of unwritten counterpoint reveals conceptual similarities, on aesthetic and technical grounds, with both Vicentino and Zarlino’s previous premises, especially in relation to the function of the *soggetto* in oral performance.²⁷ In addition, Picerli formulates a distinction between “contrappunto” and “compositione,” which unmistakably recalls that of his earlier colleague Pontio:

Counterpoint and composition are very different from each other, for every counterpoint can be called composition, but not vice versa. (While) counterpoint, in its strict sense, must proceed with very few melodic leaps, with good inventions, with varied repetitions of fast scales, ornaments, ligatures, and fugues. No octaves or unisons should be used at the beginning of measure, no breves, no simple dotted but only syncopated semibreves, no perfect cadences and cadences of the mode, except when the fugues or the subject are repeated. If any of these things are lacking, then one cannot appropriately call it counterpoint, but composition, which does not proceed with such rigorous observations.²⁸

It is evident from this passage that Picerli, by making his readers aware of the more rigid rules that apply to unwritten counterpoint, is differentiating it from the implied notion of “composition,” which is here intended as a preconceived musical artifact. While the remainder of the chapter continues with an examination of other general contrapuntal rules, in chapter fifteen, he directs his attention specifically to *contrappunto alla mente*. His considerations on the topic can be summarized as follows:

- When performing *Contrappunto alla mente* in two voices on a given subject (*cantus firmus*), all types of consonances, dissonances, ligatures, and cadences may be used.

26. Nicola Vicentino, *Antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica* (Rome: Antonio Barre, 1555), 83, translated and edited with an introduction by Claude Palisca (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 258. As Vicentino himself states, various methods were used for singing counterpoint over a *cantus planus*. Most of his ideas on the subject were derived from Vicente Lusitano, *Introduttione facilissima & novissima* (Rome: Antonio Blado, 1553). An important discussion on Lusitano is presented by Philippe Canguilhem, “Singing upon the Book According to Vicente Lusitano,” *Early Music History* 30 (2011): 55–103.

27. For Vicentino and Zarlino’s theoretical ideas on the topic see Ernest T. Ferand, “Improvised Vocal Counterpoint in the Late Renaissance and Early Baroque,” *Annales Musicologiques Moyen-age et Renaissance* 4 (1956): 147–58.

28. Picerli, 10. “Il contrapunto, e compositione sono alquanto differenti, poiche ogni contrapunto si puo dir compositione, ma non e’ converso. Onde il contrapunto propriamente detto, deve procedere con pochissimi salti tutti cantabili, con bell’inventione, e tirate, diversamente replicate, con fiori, legature, e fughe. Non vi si devon fare ottave, overo unisoni, in principio di misura, ne brevi, e semibrevi co’l punto, ne forti semplici, ma solo sincopate, ne le cadenze perfette, e proprie del tono, eccetto quando si vuole replicare il soggetto, o fughe, e dar principio all’altre, ma si sfiuggono. Mancandogli alcuna di dette cose, non si potra’ dire propriamente contrapunto, ma compositione, quale non procede con si rigorose osservazioni.”

- When performing *contrappunto alla mente* in more than two voices, the contrapuntist must attempt not to use sixths (and its derivations), ligatures, or cadences. Other types of consonances and dissonances are allowed.
- The contrapuntist must have confidence with all types of musical keys. When singing consonances and dissonances on a *cantus firmus*, the contrapuntist must memorize the distance and the visual position of the notes in the space and on the lines of the music staff. For example, if the note of the *cantus firmus* (or subject on the bass) appears in the space, the related intervals of third, fifth, and seventh will be on the space as well, while the remaining intervals (second, fourth, sixth, and octave) will be on the lines, or vice versa.
- Every contrapuntist must practice extensively. The singers must observe some pre-determined principles before performing. The Cantus should proceed almost always with descending *minime*, *semiminime*, and *crome*, preferably with profuse movements by tenths. The Tenor may do the same but ascending. The Altus should move below and above the subject (*cantus firmus* on the bass) by thirds and fifths with syncopated *semibrevis* or *minime*. If other voices are added, they will move in the opposite direction of their counterparts.²⁹

With his third consideration, Picerli is suggesting a technique for memorizing the intervallic distance between notes by utilizing the music staff as a visual aid, which is strikingly modern. It indicates a gradual didactic departure from the solmization system of the gamut (which is not entirely abandoned by Picerli) in favor of the mnemonic internalization of graphic spaces and lines. Picerli's fourth observation, on the other hand, recalls what Lusitano defined as *contrapunto concertado*, that is, a collective extemporaneous polyphonic practice (with four or more voices) based on the agreement, prior to performance, among the different contrapuntists who improvise their melodic parts.³⁰

Mnemonic Components of Improvised Counterpoint

A substantial contribution to our understanding of the role of memory in improvised vocal contrapuntal practice of this period comes from a little known manuscript, which is attributed to Giovanni Maria and Giovanni Bernardino Nanino, and appears under the title of *MS B124 Regole di musica*.³¹ This source contains some didactic

29. Picerli, 125–26.

30. For Lusitano's description of *contrapunto concertado* see Canguilhem, 80–83.

31. A study of the manuscript B124 is presented by Daniele Sabaino, "Aspetti della teoria contrappuntistica e della didattica della composizione nella Roma del Giovannelli: I precetti teorici manoscritti attribuiti a Giovanni Maria e Bernardino Nanino," *Ruggero Giovannelli "musicista eccellentissimo e forse il primo del suo tempo" atti del convegno internazionale di studi* (Palestrina: Fondazione Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, 1998), 363–88. For a discussion of the manuscript in connection with the circle of Cardinal Montalto and a transcription of the contrapuntal exercises contained

examples to be memorized and used when performing *contrappunto alla mente*. The first four instances show various solutions of *passaggi* above a *cantus firmus*. In two of these examples, the student (possibly a bass singer) is expected to learn by heart five different contrapuntal melodic variations. The first exercise is the strict imitation of the *cantus firmus* in second-species counterpoint, which is then followed by three similar solutions using quarter- and eighth-note values, and another that employs faster sixteenth-note phrases (see fig. 4). The same procedures are then applied to the construction of similar *passaggi* below a different *cantus firmus*.

After a very brief explanation of the rules for a correct imitation of the plainchant in second-species counterpoint (which relates to the first solution mentioned earlier), we find a number of pages with multiple variants of a bass, which moves by whole notes. What is remarkable is the sheer number of diverse contrapuntal combinations that the students were expected to memorize and employ extemporaneously. As table 1 shows,

Figure 4. Giovanni Maria, Bernardino Nanino, *Regole di musica*, f. 22v–23r.

in it see John Walter Hill, *Roman Monody, Cantata, and Opera from the Circles Around Cardinal Montalto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1:134–39, 1:423–49.

Table 1. Contrapuntal Exercises in *MS B124 Regole di musica*.

Type of <i>cantus firmus</i>	Number of <i>passaggi</i> above a <i>cantus firmus</i>	Folio number
Ascending by conjunct motion	17	25v–26r
Descending by conjunct motion	15	26v–27r
Ascending by 3rd and descending by 4th	16	27v–28r
Descending by 3rd and ascending by 4th	16	28v–29r
Ascending by 4th and descending by 5th	14	29v–30r
Descending by 4th and ascending by 5th	15	30v–31r
Ascending by 5th and descending by 6th	10	31v
Descending by 6th and ascending by 5th	9	32r
Ascending and descending by octave	6	32v
Descending and ascending by octave	6	33r
<i>Trattenimenti</i>	18	33v–34r
Type of <i>cantus firmus</i>	Number of <i>passaggi</i> below a <i>cantus firmus</i>	Folio number
Ascending by conjunct motion	13	34v–35r
Descending by conjunct motion	13	35v–36r
Ascending by 3rd and descending by 4th	12	36v
Descending by 3rd and ascending by 4th	13	37r
Ascending by 4th and descending by 5th	13	37v
Descending by 4th and ascending by 5th	12	38r
Ascending by 5th and descending by 6th	13	38v
Descending by 6th and ascending by 5th	12	39r
Ascending and descending by octave	6	39v
Descending and ascending by octave	6	39v
<i>Trattenimenti</i>	18	40r–v

the position and intervallic movement of the *cantus firmus* vary in conjunction with the interchangeable contrapuntal formulas that could be built above and below it. The memorized examples are also indicated in the manuscript as *trattenimenti*.

The main characteristic of these didactic realizations is the static nature of the plainchant, which remains on a single pitch for long periods of time (see fig. 5) The *trattenimenti* were inserted at the end of every section to incorporate all previous material, and to test the student's gradual internalization of contrapuntal rules. More concise exercises of this kind are then introduced along with several instances of *contrappunti in proportione*. The following section centers on modes and cadences, the knowledge of which is indispensable when improvising *passaggi* in more than two voices.

It is important to note that Giovanni Maria Nanino's techniques were transmitted to his Roman pupil Antonio Brunelli, who incorporated them in his treatise.³² As Brunelli himself states, his theoretical work was addressed to those who want to learn how to

32. Antonio Brunelli, *Regole et dichiarazioni di alcuni contrappunti doppi utili alli studiosi della musica & maggiormente a quelli che vogliono far contrappunto all'improvviso* (Florence: Cristofano Marescotti: 1610).

Figure 5. Giovanni Maria, Bernardino Nanino, *Regole di musica*, f. 33v–34r.

improvise double counterpoint and different types of canons on a *cantus firmus*. Brunelli, through various musical examples, presents twelve types of extemporized contrapuntal procedures:

1. Counterpoint at the tenth, in two and three voices (*contrappunto alla decima*): no dissonant ligatures and cadences at the end are allowed.
2. Counterpoint at the tenth with the observation of the twelfth, in two, three and four voices (*contrappunto alla decima con l'osservazione della dodicesima*): no intervals of sixth are permitted.
3. Counterpoint at the octave, in two voices (*contrappunto all'ottava*): no intervals of fourth and fifth, no dissonant ligatures except when the seventh resolves down to the sixth, which can be used as a final cadence (7-6-8).
4. Counterpoint at the octave with the observation of the twelfth, in two and three voices (*contrappunto all'ottava con l'osservazione della dodicesima*): same rules as above.
5. Counterpoint by contrary motion, in two, three, and four voices (*contrappunto per mot contrario*).
6. Inverted counterpoint in four voices (*contrappunto al rovescio*): the bass becomes a soprano and the tenor becomes an alto, or vice-versa.

7. Canon above and below a *cantus firmus*, in two and three voices (*canone sopra e sotto il canto fermo*).
8. Canon at the third, in two and three voices (*canone alla terza*).
9. Canon at the fourth, in two and three voices (*canone alla quarta*).
10. Canon at the fifth, in two and three voices (*canone alla quinta*).
11. Canon at the sixth, in two and three voices (*canone alla sesta*).
12. Canon above and below a *cantus firmus*, in five voices (*canone a cinque voci sopra e sotto il canto fermo*).

According to the author, mastery of these improvisatory practices was essential for the musical preparation of every good contrapuntist. The same opinion was held by the theorist Rocco Rodio, who was especially interested in the practice of improvised vocal canon, as can be deduced from various passages of his treatise.³³

Two other little-known treatises should at last be mentioned in the present discussion: Giovanni Battista Chiodino's *Arte pratica Latina et volgare* and Giovanni d'Avella's *Regole di musica*.³⁴ As Chiodino writes in the frontispiece of his printed book, he is concerned with the practice of both unwritten and written vocal counterpoint (*a mente* and *a penna*). After having discussed intervals, the rules for the resolution of dissonances, ligatures (which, according to the author, should be avoided when two or more voices are singing), melodic leaps, cadences, and nine general contrapuntal rules in improvised vocal counterpoint, the author concludes with a list of what he defines as *loci* (see fig. 6).

These are musical examples, which are not only pragmatic illustrations of how to improvise on a given *cantus firmus* but represent also a set of thirty short contrapuntal formulas for the student to memorize. Influenced by humanist studies on classical rhetoric and *ars memorativa*, Chiodino introduces this method to help students assimilate and recollect memorial content through musical visualization. The *loci* are represented by the spatial position and intervallic relationship of notes on the staff lines. A similar mnemonic component is also found in d'Avella's pedagogical approach.

Unlike some of the theorists heretofore discussed, d'Avella's attitude toward improvised counterpoint is highly eulogizing, as is evident in the following brief passage from the end of chapter 87: "I consider *contrappunto alla mente* (with rules) to be the most arduous, pleasant, and ingenious composition that one can create."³⁵ He is here

33. Rocco Rodio, *Regole di musica* (Naples, Giovanni Battista Olifante, 1609).

34. Giovanni Battista Chiodino, *Arte pratica Latina et volgare di far contrapunto a mente, & a penna* (Venice: Ricciardo Amadino, 1610); Giovanni d'Avella, *Regole di musica divise in cinque trattati con le quali s'insegna il canto fermo e figurato, per vere, e facili regole* (Venice: Francesco Moneta, 1657).

35. D'Avella, 139. "Giudico che il contrapunto fatto a mente, con regola sia il piu industrioso componimento, & il piu soave si possa fare, e di gran ingegno."

Figure 6. Giovanni Battista Chiodino, *Arte pratica*, 45.

explicitly referring to the ability of the contrapuntist to digest all the rules needed to extemporize a perfect contrapuntal line, with a particular reference to the assimilation of all dissonances and consonances. He provides the student with a visual scheme for the mnemonic internalization of simple and compound dissonances (see fig. 7).

In conclusion, the significance of improvisation to theorists like Nanino, Chiodino, and d'Avella is evident from the number of pages they devoted to the subject. Their treatises provide us with important information on the subject, and the majority of the other sources heretofore discussed have received scarce scholarly attention. The concept of improvisation that emerges from these theoretical works is founded on the extemporaneous application in performance of internalized contrapuntal paradigms. In certain cases, as we may infer, for example, in the sequence of 30 *loci* presented by Chiodino, these rules assume the pragmatic function of didactic examples of pre-conceived formulas, which were used as mnemonic aids in oral musical practices. In general, the aesthetic value attributed to contrapuntal improvisation varied according to each theorist, and reflected the more or less arbitrary proclivity for written "composition" as a process that was beginning to attain higher social status. On the other hand, we have seen that the pedagogical improvisatory approach to vocal counterpoint, which originated with the advent of polyphony, persisted until at least the first half of the seventeenth century. Moreover, examples like Cerreto's treatise show the influence of monodic practice and instrumental techniques of ornamentation on traditional vocal contrapuntal practice.

Figure 7. Giovanni d'Avella, *Regole di musica*, 141.

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C **SS** 12 Consonanza **12** Ottava ricomposta
11 Diffonanza **11** Settima ricomposta
ee 10 Emelle **10** Sesta ricomposta
dd 9 Consonanza **9** Quinta ricomposta
cc 8 Diffonanza **8** Quarta ricomposta
bb 7 Emelle **7** Terza ricomposta
aa 6 Diffonanza **6** Seconda ricomposta
gg 5 Consonanza **5** Ottava composta
ff 4 Diffonanza **4** Settima composta
e 3 Emelle **3** Sesta composta
d 2 Consonanza **2** Duodec. 5. composta
c 1 Diffonanza **1** Undec. 4. composta
b 10 Emelle **10** Decima 3. composta
a 9 Diffonanza **9** Nona 2. composta
g 8 Consonanza **8** Ottava
f 7 Diffonanza **7** Settima
e 6 Emelle **6** Sesta
d 5 Consonanza **5** Quinta
c 4 Diffonanza **4** Quarta
b 3 Emelle **3** Terza
a 2 Diffonanza **2** Seconda
G 1 Consonanza **1** Unifono

C. Nota, che hò detto di sopra,
B. che l'unifono è consonanza
 perfetta, vedi al capo 90. **A.**
 come però tutti dicono, che
 sia origine delle consonanze,
 e così dico anch'io. L'ottava
 l'hò posta trà il numero delle
 consonanze semplici, però ri-
 spetto alle ricomposte si dice
 unifono composto, e la quin-
 tadecima, rispetto alle conso-
 nanze ricomposte, si dice uni-
 fono ricomposto, perché fan-
 no l'istesso suono, che l'unifo-
 no, con quella differenza det-
 ta al cap. 40. **A.**
D. Le consonanze dunque nel
 num. 8. non possono esser più
 che tre unifono, quinta, & ot-
 tava. Le diffonanze sono an-
 co tre, la secunda, la quarta, e
 la settima (vedi la differenza
 al cap. 90. c. 93).

D E perché all'impronto si possono sapere dette Consonanze, e diffonanze, & emelle, hò fatto questo seguente arbore; potrà dunque il curioso mandarle à memoria con le lettere alla prescritta figura, & haurà ottima caparra per il contrapunto altrimenti *per plurima lustra* non farà niente.

La 22. è ottava ricomposta.	La 21. e 7. (ò Maggiore. (ò Maggiore.	La 20. è sesta. ((
La 19. è quinta ricomposta.	La 18. e 4. (ò Maggiore. (ò Minore.	La 17. è terza. ((
	La 16. è 2. (ò Minore. (ò Maggiore.	
	(ò tuono. (ò Minore.	
	(ò semituono. (ò Maggiore.	
Consonanze ricomposte.	Diffonanze ricomposte.	Emelle ricomposte.
La 15. è ottava composta.	La 14. e 7. (ò Maggiore. (ò Maggiore.	La 13. è sesta. ((
La 12. è quinta composta.	La 11. e 4. (ò Maggiore. (ò Minore.	La 10. è terza. ((
	La 9. e 2. (ò Minore. (ò Maggiore.	
	(ò tuono. (ò Minore.	
	(ò semituono. (ò Maggiore.	
Consonanze composte.	Diffonanze composte.	Emelle composte.
L'ottava.	La 7. e (ò Maggiore. (ò Maggiore.	La sesta è (ò Maggiore.
Quinta.	La 4. e (ò Minore. (ò Minore.	La terza è (ò Minore.
L'unifono.	La 2. e (ò Maggiore. (ò Maggiore.	
	(ò Minore. (ò Minore.	
	(ò tuono. (ò Minore.	
	(ò semituono. (ò Maggiore.

T D'onde