# Playing from original notation

JOSCELYN GODWIN

People who perform and enjoy early music are generally interested in one of two things: either they wish to re-create the music of the past, or else they are trying to re-create the past through music. They want to be able to say either 'Ah, that is how Monteverdi sounds!' or 'Ah, this is what it must have been like to be a *settocento* Venetian!' The latter refers to the pleasure, more psychological than musical, of experiencing to some degree how our ancestors felt and behaved, and it is this which concerns me here.

The attempt to experience the past has inspired some most interesting adventures: the Camerata, the Italian Journey, the Gothic Revival, archaeology, the cult of the Stately Home, and the Package Tour — as well as innumerable historical novels and films. Living in our time, we do well to holiday in saner ages. Many readers will have noticed that music is an excellent vehicle for such voyages.

But in spite of the contributions of musicologists and instrument makers, who have gone far towards restoring the sounds of the past, today's performer will still have his eyes firmly fixed on the present, if he is playing or singing from a modern edition. The point is not so trivial as it may seem. Just as handwriting reveals character, so typography reflects its Zeitgeist. The transition from Black Letter to Roman type has something of the very essence of the Renaissance about it — and, significantly enough, it appeared late in England and never quite got a foothold in Germany. In the 18th century, think of the elegance and amplitude of Baskerville's folios; in the 19th, of all those novels with fancy covers concealing tiny, mean typefaces on thin paper, printed by steam. And in music, nothing could be more appropriate than the marriage of Josquin's and Petrucci's careful arts, or Handel in Walsh's engraved title pages, or Boulez in the cool, white covers of Universal Edition, with their asymmetrical lower-case lettering.

Something of this is lost in even the handsomest modern editions. Look, for example, at a fragment from Raymond Leppard's Faber edition of Cavalli's *Ormindo* (1644).

Ex. 1

Oh tor - men-to, oh tor - men-to.
*Oh, this tor-ment! Oh, this tor-ment!*
Oh, die Mar-tern! Oh, die Qua-len!

Typographically, it is as much of the 20th century as the Stockhausen fragment by Universal Edition.

I have nothing against (most) modern editions but I would not hesitate to say that a mere pianist who can play from the original score of *Parthenia Inviolata,* for example, has penetrated further into the Jacobean musical world than someone who plays from a transcription on a Ruckers-type virginal, with the proper bass viol accompaniment. We can learn much from a specific comparison. In the second example we have the final bars of 'The first part of the old yeere'.

There is no reason to suspect any fundamental error in this beautifully engraved work, made in 1624-5 as a wedding gift for Prince Charles and Henrietta Maria.[1] And yet it strikes one immediately that the vertical alignment of the notes is completely haywire (as also in its predecessor, *Parthenia*). Note the position of the *a* in bar 1, the relation between

Ex. 2

(Bass Viol part omitted)

the hands in bar 2, and what appear to be parallel thirds in the right hand in bar 3. These, and much more, are thoroughly misleading to the modern player. Since I refuse to believe them the result of stupidity, on anyone's part, I am forced to the conclusion that the problem which they present to us simply did not exist at that time. This means that those people must have approached the page either with eyes that could synthesize a whole bar at a time or else with a mind that thought so horizontally that it scarcely noticed orientation on the vertical axis.[2] The latter hypothesis is borne out by keyboard publications of another kind, those in score or 'partitura'. Example three shows two bars of Asconio Mayone's *Primo libro di diversi capricci per sonare* (Naples, 1603).

Facility in reading at the keyboard from a score in four different clefs is still required in some universities, and by the Royal College of Organists, but even they are more merciful than Mayone, since they take the trouble to align notes which sound together. The same carefree attitude is to be found in Samuel Scheidt's better-known *Tablatura Nova* of 1624: 'new' because he adopted the open score in four staves rather than the usual German system which combined notes with letters (and which remained in use in J. S. Bach's day). Evidently players up to and including Scheidt's time had an utterly contrapuntal approach, which we should seek to emulate, perhaps even in playing their less polyphonic pieces and continuo parts.

This tells us something about their psychology. Just as music lagged behind the other arts (experiencing its classical renaissance, after all, only in 1600), so musical perception continued for a long time to bear witness to an earlier, 'medieval' frame of mind: one which in certain respects was less 'holistic' than our own. It is a frame of mind which cannot conceive of History, only of Chronicles; one for which a biography was a list of events, not a rounded 'character': and one which, I am convinced, heard separate melodies where we hear chord-progressions. How aptly this fits with the medieval Cosmos, in which the songs of the Planets and the Hierarchies blend without confusion as they circle the Earth! And it may be no accident that music became 'vertical' during the era of the Copernican revolution.

Opportunities to play early keyboard music from original sources are scarce. There are *Parthenia* and Benjamin Cosyn's Virginal Book in Broude's series *Monuments of Music and Music Literature in Facsimile* (*MMMLF*). A large 14th-century repertoire preserved in Codex Faenza 117, published by the American Institute of Musicology, is quite possible to read at the keyboard, if not very exciting. This is not the place for a complete bibliography, but I would add, for baroque enthusiasts, the beautiful but expensive facsimile of such composers as Couperin, Rameau, Purcell and Mattheson in the *MMMLF* series, and the new Domenico Scarlatti edition, far preferable to any transcription. Later facsimiles tend to be of composer's autographs, and to reveal individualities, such as Beethoven and Chopin. The printed music of their time tells one little beyond the fact that composers were singularly ill-served by typographers.

For the singer, or player of single-line instruments, there are two large bodies of material, neither of them outrageously expensive. Editions Culture et Civilisation in Brussels publishes *Corpus of early music*

Ex. 3

*Seconda Partita.*

*in facsimile*: nicely boxed sets of part-books including Tielman Susato's fifteen chanson collections (1543-55), works by Lassus, De Monte, Gastoldi and others. The Scolar Press publishes much of the English madrigal and associated repertory, as well as facsimiles of the folios for voices and lute, which are designed for placing on a table between the performers. There is also Petrucci's *Odhecaton* from *MMMLF*, and the new series of Monteverdi's madrigals in part-books from The Renaissance Editions.

A singer faced with a 16th-century part will be deterred by two major hazards (and there are many more in earlier music): the absence of barlines, and the various C-clefs. Example 4 shows a page from a Superius part-book from Susato's *Premier livre des chancons à quatre parties* (1543).

Ex. 4

SVPERIVS A. Quatre. Fo. x.

De desplaisir en vie langoureuse .ij. Dis a par moy que seroye bien heureuse .ij.

Se par la mort estoit ma vie estaincte .ij. Se par la mort estoit ma vie estaincte.

IAMAIS ie neuz tant de soulas .ij. Que quant de vous

prins Que quant de vous prins accointance Soubdain me pris être voz lacz .ij. Dont maintes-

fois iay dict helas .ij. iay dict helas Mon poure cueur est ē souffrāce .ij.

C .ij.

Aside from these difficulties, which are actually advantages, the notation is quite simple to grasp. The symbols are our familiar ones, from quaver to breve, with the addition of the double breve or long (eight minims' worth) and the black semibreve (see last line) which is worth a dotted minim. The rests are ancestors of our familiar semibreve rest (below the line) and minim rest (above the line). The breve rest fills a whole space. It is easy to understand why they were subsequently lengthened, for these are very hard to write accurately. At the end of each line is a *custos* or 'guardian' which warns one of the next note, like the catchword at the end of each page in early printed books. The time-signature here indicates that the minims are grouped in fours (a usage which is found quite late, e.g. in the E major fugue from Book II of Bach's *48*). Thus the Superius enters on the downbeat in 'Jamais ie neuz'.

Much has been written about the effect which barlines have on the interpretation of early music, and I am not going to enter the controversy. But when there are none, and consequently no bar-numbers either, rehearsals are going to be difficult if conducted on the usual modern lines. If you break down here, you simply have to go back to the beginning; and the enormous frustration of continually doing so is a prime deterrent against the whole practice. Now I believe that if groups had suffered much from this problem in the 16th century, they would have used a system of signposts to obviate constant repetition, far exceeding their occasional use of the *signum congruentiae*. Of course even amateur singers and players of the time would, from their very familiarity with the style, have had far less trouble than we do. But all the same they must have been able to start elsewhere than at the beginning. Where better than at the points of imitation, in which all the parts habitually partake after a rest? In a piece whose form depends primarily upon such points, one should have no difficulty identifying the successive entries of the other voices, and noting at least whether one begins a point, or whom one follows.

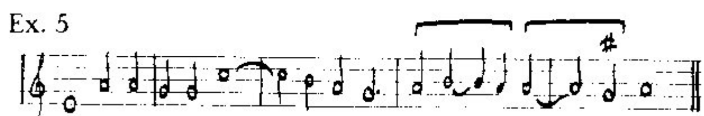
This, however, demands a degree of consciousness which is rare today. How many of us have played polyphonic music with other amateurs, or even professionals, who have the amazing facility of getting a beat off and staying there for several bars! This kind of deafness has been fostered through the ages by the tendency towards a heavy beat, the use of conductors, and the doubling of vocal and instrumental parts. Singers, however, are less guilty than instrumentalists, presumably because it is harder to sing against the harmonic tide than to play against it. But for any ensemble which reads from such parts, there will be an increase both in the members' consciousness of each other, and in their feeling of independence and responsibility when released from the grid-like page of a modern edition.

Clefs constitute the other major obstacle to performers of today. In Example 4 the upper fragment is in the soprano clef (middle C on the bottom line), and 'Iamais . . . ' in the G or treble clef. This difference obviates the need for ledger lines, to which the printers had an aversion. (It is supposed that ledger-lines wasted space, and in any case they usually look messy when they are used in such prints.) The only way to overcome the situation is to respond not to the position of a note on the staff, but to its position relative to the previous note: to play or sing 'by interval' as one does when transposing. If one can

do this — and it is not hard — baritone, mezzo-soprano and even French violin clefs hold no terrors.

Playing by interval can give a feeling for line that is easily lost when each note is merely an information symbol, capable of virtual isolation from its fellows. Connected with this is the advantage of doing away with tied notes, which are after all mostly dotted notes that have the misfortune to look different in a modern edition. Once one is back to the old rule of one note, one sound, rhythmic subtleties and cross-rhythms become far more apparent. In the second line of Example 4, notice the cadential figure which occurs twice, and consider the subtle 2 × 3 grouping which is virtually impossible to see through a transcription:

Ex. 5



Two more things should be mentioned: text underlay and *musica ficta*. In 'Iamais . . . ' the syllables of the text do not underly the notes to which they are to be sung. The first phrase would probably go thus:

Ex. 6

This underlay follows the principles of changing syllables on repeated notes and ending the verbal line on the cadence. A similar arrangement of the same words would accompany the next phrase, the repeated text being indicated by *.ii.* In the second line, 'Que quant de' obviously fits on the second, third and fourth *a*'s, and 'accointance' must be strung out until the cadence on *c″*. Common sense and some knowledge of the language, together with a willingness to take risks, will look after this department. The same might be said about *musica ficta*, reading 'basic rules' for 'language'. (Here one sharpens the leading-notes in cadences on D, C and A.) It is good to experience the *ficta* as really 'made up', without editorial interference.

Whereas anyone whose technique is equal to the notes can with practice sing or play from such a part, the same is not true of medieval notation. This incurs special problems of interpretation, and of mere decipherment, especially of the words in manuscripts. Unless one is a musicologist trained in palaeography, one would do well to restrict one's efforts to medieval pieces which one already knows well. A group which had sung the Machaut *Messe de Nostre Dame*, for instance, might attempt a movement from the facsimile published by Friedrich Gennrich in *Summa Musicae Medii Aevi*.

The best way to experience much medieval music is not through the notation, but through deliberately abandoning it. Much more reliance was placed upon the memory in those days. Consider this statement from Frank Harrison's *Music in Medieval Britain*:

> By the Lincoln statutes of 1236 every vicar [*sc.* singing man] was to be examined in reading and chanting before being admitted on probation for a year, during which he was to learn by heart the Antiphonal and the Hymnal. This achieved, he was to serve a second year of probation and memorize the Psalter. (p. 5-6)

Plainsong should, ideally, be sung in no other way than by heart. In the secular field, too, can one imagine a Troubadour or Trouvère, much less a Jongleur, performing with a manuscript score?

Unfortunately we can only touch such a world at arm's length. But one can try a few things: improvise organum, in all its forms, on a familiar chant; learn a piece by Landini, close one's eyes, and extemporise brilliant variations on the upper part; forget all those mediocre Estampies and over-worked Saltarelli and try to make up something better in the same style. And then, if one is really brave (though this were best done in private) one might learn a suitable passage from Chaucer and set it in the style of a Machaut *lai*. Then it would become clear that to sing medieval music in a foreign language other than Latin is a second-hand experience. 'Poetry in translation' said the American composer Carl Ruggles (who would have been surprised to find himself in these pages), 'is like a boiled strawberry.' But to listen to medieval music in ignorance of the words — even with a 'summary' — is to omit the sugar and cream.

One can do thorough scholarly work, and build beautiful reproductions of old instruments, and still make no real contact with the past. It is the use not so much of the head or hands, but of the imagination which will help us to a better understanding of the consciousness of our forbears.

[1] According to Thurston Dart, in his Historical Introduction to the facsimile edition published by the New York Public Library 1961.

[2] It is only fair to mention that so early a keyboard print as Marcantonio da Bologna's *Rechercari, motetti, canzoni* (Venice, 1523) uses two staves and perfectly accurate vertical alignment, to judge from the facsimile given in Willi Apel, *The Notation of Polyphonic Music 900-1600* (Cambridge, Mass., 5th edition, 1953, p. 5). A glance at Apel's other facsimiles will show that this is an unusual case.