IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Gioseffo Zarlino, *The Harmonic Institutions* (1558)

It would be risky to venture to say who might be the “most important” music theorists of the Renaissance. Important for what? The prescience of their thinking, the encyclopedic quality of their vision, or the influence that their writing exercised on subsequent musicians? Using these three criteria as standards, however, one might well conclude that Johannes Tinctoris (c1435–1511), with his twelve books on aspects of music theory (see previous In Their Own Words), and Gioseffo Zarlino (1517–1590), author of the four-volume *Istitutioni harmoniche*, were, respectively, the most important music theorists of the early and late Renaissance.

Zarlino received his musical education at the basilica of St. Mark in Venice under the composer Adrien Willaert, and in 1565 he succeeded a pupil of Willaert as director of music at that venerable institution. Zarlino himself went on to become a prominent teacher, and his pupils included Claudio Merulo (see Anthology, No.63), Giovanni Maria Artusi (see In Their Own Words for Chapters 28 or 29), and Vicenzo Galilei, father of the famous astronomer and early advocate of equal temperament. In his encyclopedic *Istitutioni harmoniche*, Zarlino aimed to unite the theoretical and the practical, believing that the works a composer creates should be built squarely on a solid knowledge of music theory. Thus his treatise revisits much ancient Greek music theory at the same time that it exhaustively posits rules and lists of intervals that are acceptable in good musical composition. In this sense, Zarlino was both a conservative and a progressive. He advocated a system of intonation, called “just tuning,” which involved consonant intervals built on the ratios 2:1, 3:2, 4:3, 5:4, 6:5, a system that had been praised by Ptolemy (flourished c100 c.e.). Yet he embraced Heinrich Glarean’s expanded system of twelve modes (including the Ionian and Aeolian), which had been introduced only a decade before Zarlino published his own work. Perhaps because of the catholic nature of Zarlino’s treatise, it later provided abundant information for French theorist Mersenne, Dutch theorist and composer Sweelink, and the Englishmen John Dowland and Thomas Morley, as we will see (see In Their Own Words for Chapter 27).

In Book III of this four-book encyclopedia of music theory and composition, Zarlino addresses the subject of counterpoint, not as a dry exercise but as the moist fountain from which all good compositions spring. He tells us how the composer should select the “subject” that will become the melodic foundation of the work and how the composer should proceed in writing simple note-against-note counterpoint (what is today called “first species” counterpoint). Soon he will expand his treatment to include diminished counterpoint (more than one note against the given melody). At the beginning of Book III, Chapter 26, Zarlino quickly enumerates, in the simplest terms, the basic steps involved in composing a musical work and then goes on to specify the method by which a composer should select the “subject” of this composition.

Throughout his treatise Zarlino emphasizes that the foundation of good harmony is the proper selection and alternation of vertical intervals—proper counterpoint. Perfect consonances should not come in succession and certainly not perfect consonances of the same type (no parallel fifths, for example). Perfect and imperfect consonances should alternate. Moreover, imperfect consonances (major and minor) should alternate; for example, it is better to alternate major and minor thirds than to...
write a string of either, a rule to which Zarlino himself (and the examples he recommends) cannot always adhere.

Ultimately, Zarlino’s rules, or recommended procedures, became the norm for traditional counterpoint, exemplified in the *prima pratica* style of Palestrina and its descendant, the *stile antico* of the seventeenth century (see Chapters 25 and 32). They were codified in Johann Fux’s *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725) that every great composer—Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and others—studied and that serves as the basis of our study of species counterpoint today.

Book III, Chapter 26: What Is Necessary to Every Composition, and Above All the Subject.

Now we come to the topic of counterpoint, but before I launch into this topic, it is important to understand what are the things that should be found in every good counterpoint and in every good composition. And if any one of these is lacking, it could be said that the work is imperfect.

The first step is to choose the subject, without which nothing can be made. For just as in each and every work that he creates, a craftsman will keep in mind the end result and build his work on a foundation, called the subject. So, too, the musician, working on his creation and having the end in mind, finds the material or subject upon which he is going to build his composition, and in this way perfects his work right to the end. . . .

The second step in composing is to use mainly consonances, though the composition should include incidentally [accidente] many dissonances, handled according to the rules that I wish to demonstrate below.

The third important point is that the parts of the composition [cantilena] should proceed well, and that its changing lines [modulationi] unfold through true and legitimate intervals, that arise from the numerical basis of sound [the 2:1, 3:2, 4:3, 5:4, and 6:5 intervals mentioned above], and that from this a good harmony will result.

The fourth condition is that the modulations and the harmony (*concento*) be varied; for harmony is born of nothing else than diversity of the changing lines and from the diversity of the consonances mixed together with variety.

The fifth requirement is that the composition be organized around a prescribed and predetermined harmony, or mode, or tonality (*tuono*), as it is commonly called, and that it not be disorganized.

And the sixth and last quality, though others might be added, is that the harmony of the composition should accommodate itself to the text, that is, to the words, that in an energetic passage the harmony not be placid, and the reverse, that in a placid passage the harmony not be energetic.

And so that everything will be perfectly understood, I will discuss each of these requirements in order as they fit into my plan and my needs.

Let us begin with first things first: The subject of every composition takes its name from the fact that it is the part of the composition upon which the composer exercises his creativity to fashion all the other lines of the piece, no matter how many there may be. Such a subject can come into existence in many ways. First, it can be entirely new—one that the composer has found entirely within himself; or it can be taken from another composition and tailored to fit his new one, adorned with various parts and lines, as it pleases the composer, according to the greatness of his genius. Such subjects can be found in several places: it might be the tenor or some other part of some other *cantus firmus* composition or polyphony work, or it might be two or more parts that follow each other in fugal fashion or in imitation or in some other fashion. Indeed, the various ways of finding such subjects are infinite.

After the composer has chosen the subject he will craft the other lines around it, in the way that we will describe below. When this manner of composing is followed, as our practicing musicians say, one is “making counterpoint.” . . .
Book III, Chapter 27: How to Go About Composing Mainly Through Consonance and Occasionally Through Dissonance.

Although each composition and each counterpoint, and, in a word, every harmony is principally composed of consonance, nonetheless dissonances are occasionally and secondarily used to achieve greater beauty and grace. Although such dissonances are not very pleasing by themselves, nonetheless when they are handled in a way that follows the rules that we will articulate, the ear not only tolerates it but welcomes it, finding therein pleasure and delight. Among other advantages of dissonance, there are two that are particularly useful to the musician. The first is that they facilitate the passage from one consonance to the next. The other is that a dissonance makes the consonance that follows it sound more pleasing: the ear perceives and appreciates it more, just as after a period of darkness the appearance of light is more pleasing, and after something bitter tasting something sweet is all that much more delicious.

Book III, Chapter 40: How to Go About Writing Simple Counterpoint in Two Voices, Which Is Called Note Against Note.

To come now to the application of the rules that I have set forth, how to go about making counterpoint: We begin with simple composition for two voices, note against note, and afterward we can move on to diminished counterpoint [more than one note in an upper voice against a tenor] and other sorts of compositions. First we should do what all good writers and compilers on any subject do, and that is start with the basics. In this way things will be easier and be less confusing for the reader.

First of all, having absorbed what was said in Chapter 26 [see above]: at the outset it is necessary to choose a tenor from any pre-existing melody [canto fermo] that will serve as the subject of the composition and examine it as to its qualities and how it might serve in a contrapuntal work, determining its mode, and consequently the places where cadences should properly be made, in order to make evident the structure of the composition. For if the cadences through carelessness are placed outside of the proper position, one mode will be mistaken for another, and the end of the composition will not agree with the beginning and the middle.

We place the first note of the counterpoint against the first note of the subject in a way that they stand at the distance of a perfect consonance. Having done this we place the second note of the counterpoint against the second note of the subject at the interval of one or another of the consonances, be it perfect or imperfect, only that it be different from the first interval, so that it will not violate what was said in Chapter 38, keeping the voices as close together as possible and making sure that neither engages in large leaps, as said in Chapter 27 [should read 37]. Having done that, we can now proceed to the third note of the counterpoint, placing it against the third note of the subject, varying not only the intervals but also the steps, making use of a perfect consonance after an imperfect one or the reverse, or writing consecutive perfect or imperfect consonances of different species one after the other, according to the rules given above in Chapters 33 and 34. Similarly we do the same for the fourth note of the counterpoint and of the subject, and thus also of the fifth and sixth and the others in order up to the end where according to the rule given in the preceding chapter [39] we end on a perfect consonance.

In Book IV of his Istitutioni harmoniche, Zarlino undertakes what may be the most innovative discussion in his work: an investigation of the relationship between musical harmony and text. Zarlino states that the mood of the text should determine the feeling of the harmony, this some fifty years before Monteverdi would do so more famously with the epithet “the word must be the boss of the harmony” (see In Their Own Words for Chapter 29). The sixteenth century, of course, saw the advent of the madrigal and the text-expressive motet in which we encounter localized text expression.
As mentioned in Chapters 20–21 and 28–29, the appearance of onomatopoetic music, leading to a complete vocabulary of musical expression as we know it even today in film and cartoon music, was one of the most important developments in the history of music. Zarlino is the first music theorist to account for this development in technical terms—in terms of intervals and scale patterns. He is the first to say, for example, that the major intervals should be used to underscore bright, bold feelings, and the minor to emphasize sadness.

Book IV, Chapter 32: In What Way the Harmony Should Accommodate Itself to the Meaning of the Text.

There remains now to discuss how the harmony should accompany the subject of the text [soggette parole]. I say “accompany the subject of the text” because, although, as has been said in Book II, following Plato, melody is a combination of speech, harmony and number [rhythm], and although it appears in a composition that no one of these things is superior to the other, nevertheless Plato posits that speech is superior to the other two components, and that they are subservient to speech. Harmony and rhythm should follow the dictates of speech; that is the rule. For it is necessary that in a given text, be it an oration or a narrative or an imitation (which are sometimes found in speeches), that if the material is lighthearted or mournful, full of gravity or entirely without it, honest or lascivious, the harmony and rhythm should reflect it. . . . Thus it would not be fitting to set a lighthearted text to a mournful harmony and a grave rhythm; and conversely it would not be appropriate to have a text that is mournful and lachrymose set to a lighthearted harmony and lively rhythms. For a sad text should be set to a sad harmony and somber rhythms. Everything should be done in proper relationship.

The composer who has thought about the things I have written in Book III and has thought carefully about the qualities of the mode upon which he would like to compose his piece, should make every attempt to follow the text, each and every word, and where it speaks of harshness, hardness, cruelty, bitterness, or any such sentiment, the harmony should be made to be similar to it, that is to say, hard and harsh to some degree, but not in an offensive way. Similarly, when the words convey softness, sadness, downheartedness, signing, tears, and similar sentiments, the harmony should be completely mournful.

He who wishes to express well the first type of feelings [hard, bracing ones] will take care to avoid using the semitone in the vocal lines of his piece. Instead, he should employ the whole tone, the major third, the [major] sixth, and the [major] sixth plus octave, for these are more bracing when sounded against the lowest note in the harmony. He should accompany these with 4-3 or 11-10 suspensions, moving rather slowly, and likewise 7-6 suspensions.

When, however, he wishes to express the second type of feelings [sad, soft ones], then he should use, following the rules, movements that proceed through the semitone and through the minor third and related intervals using the [minor] sixth or the minor thirteenth above the lowest pitch in the harmony. For these are more sweet and suave, especially when set in the appropriate modes and used with discretion and judgment.

But it should be observed that capacity to express such effects can be attributed not only to the aforementioned consonances set up in this way but also to the nature of the vocal lines [cantando le parti], of which there are two types: natural and accidental [diatonic and chromatic]. Natural motion is that which runs through the natural notes of the piece, without signs for accidental pitches. These [natural] motions have more virility than those made with an accidental pitch, notated by means of a sharp or a flat, which are really “accidental” and somewhat languid. And from these are born accidental movements that lead to what are called “accidental” intervals. But from the natural movements are born those that are called “natural” intervals. Thus we should note that the first kind of motion [diatonic] makes for music that is more sonorous and virile,
while the second kind [chromatic] makes for music that is more sweet and languid, and therefore the first motion should be used to express the first type of feelings, and the second should be used for all the rest.

In this way, by judiciously accompanying the text with intervals of the major or minor consonances, and with diatonic or chromatic motion, the vocal lines will be knowledgeably crafted, and the harmony will be well suited to the words.