CONTRAPUNTAL ANALYSIS OF NICOLAS GOMBERT'S MOTETS

Gonzalo Varela

Original language: Spanish. English translation by the author.
Finish date: 15 July 2013. Revision: 14 May 2020.
gonzalo@gonzalovarela.com / www.gonzalovarela.com

Study done for the course "Taller de contrapunto 1" ("Counterpoint workshop"), lectured by prof. Alejandro Barbot at the Escuela Universitaria de Música (University School of Music) of the Universidad de la República (University of the Republic), in Montevideo, Uruguay.

Introduction

Nicolas Gombert (c. 1495 – 1560) might be the most representative Franco-Flemish composer of the 4th generation. Theoretician Hermann Finck says that Gombert studied with Josquin des Prez, and describes Gombert as an innovator of his generation, and as someone who avoids rests and whose work is full of harmony and imitation (*Practica Musica*, 1556).

Imitation in succession is used greatly in Gombert's work. As a result, voices tend to have equal importance, although the bass plays harmonic functions during cadences, and the highest voice is sometimes slightly more florid than the rest.

He favored lower voices, and his works usually feature 5 or 6 voices, at a moment when most composers wrote for 4 voices (Gombert even got to write for 8, 10 and 12 voices). Among the 5 or 6 voices, most are active and performing independent melodies at any moment of the pieces, being there very few moments of homophony. He gave predominance to binary rhythms, and made frequent use of syncopation and cross-accents.

The endings of his works are generally extended through plagal cadences, frequently with a pedal note that tends to be in the highest voice (resource that he uses almost exclusively in endings, as in the ending of the motet **Beati Omnes**, analyzed for this study). It is very infrequent his use of ostinato, canon, cantus firmus and double texts, common in motets of the previous generation, with the certain exceptions such as the

one of his motet **Musae Jovis**, possibly because of it being a tribute to Josquin des Prez (who was representative of the 3rd generation).

His motets are his most representative works, of which he wrote more than 160. The formal structure of this music is conditioned by the character of the text that is being used, which is generally taken from the Bible. In addition to close to 140 motets, his surviving works include 10 masses, about 70 *chansons*, a *canción*, a madrigal, and a handful of instrumental pieces.

He was very well-regarded among his contemporaries, and his work was printed from 1529 until much after his death, in spite of which the next generation for the most part did not continue with his extreme contrapuntal style. However, subsequent instrumental forms such as the ricercare, or even the fugue, show similarities with his style.

For the present study the motets **Media Vita** (for 6 voices), **Beati Omnes** (for 5 voices), and **Musae Jovis** (for 6 voices) were analyzed, identifying contrapuntal resources of interest (mostly ones that differ from the usual practice of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina) and classifying them in three groups according to how frequently they were found. Fragments of the scores are attached to illustrate some of the these resources.

General observations

* Predominance of 𝅝 and 𝅗𝅥 in melodic lines.

* ♪ always used in pairs.

* Harmonic changes mostly in levels of 𝅝 and 𝅗𝅥.

* Movement generally in steps.

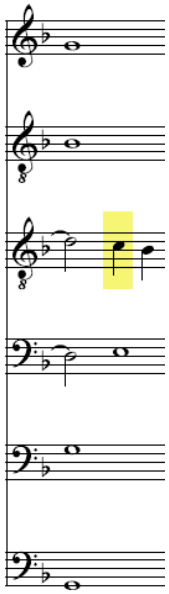
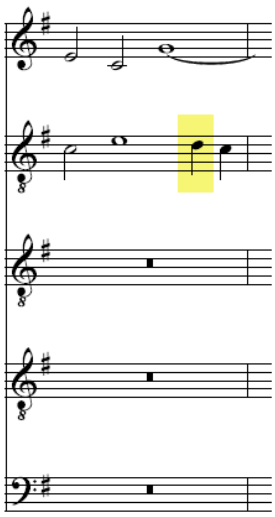
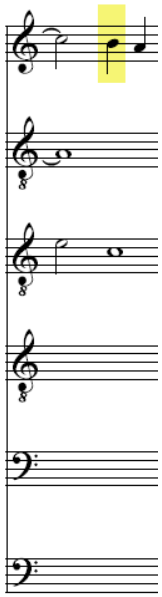
* Balance (in number of appearances) between chords in root position and chords in first inversion.

Frequently used resources

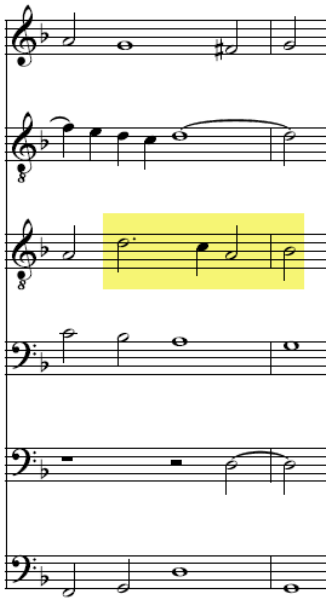
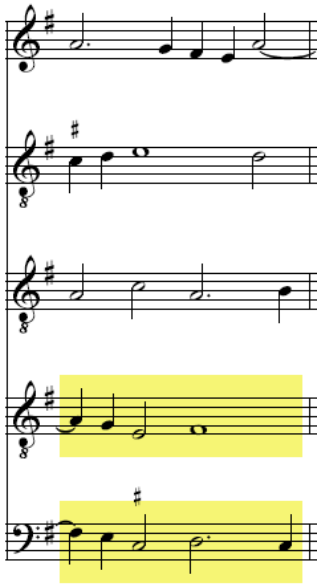
* Changing the first interval and/or the duration of the first note in the imitation of a melody.

* Accidentals and cadences characteristic of different modes inside a same motet. For example, **Media Vita** has a beginning characteristic of *G dorian*, but an ending in *A phrygian*; and throughout the piece leading tones and cadences characteristic of different modes are used. Meanwhile, **Musae Jovis** seems to clearly be in *E phrygian*, but uses the note *Bb* and has several cadences in *D* (without the use of a leading tone).

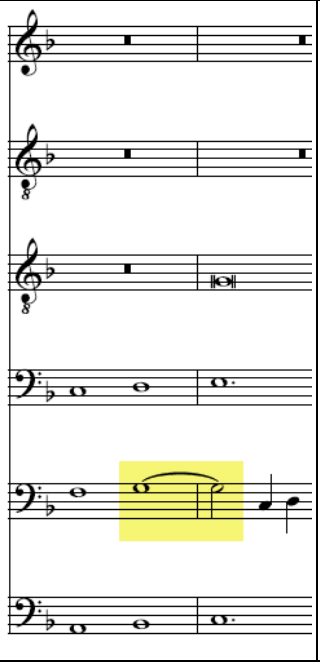
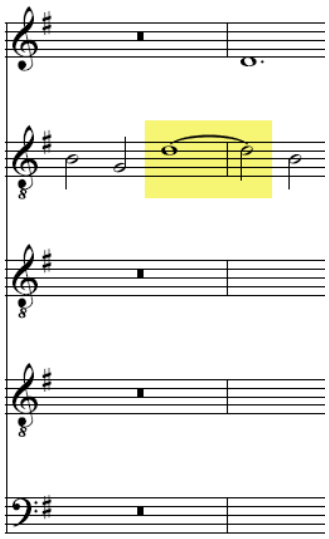
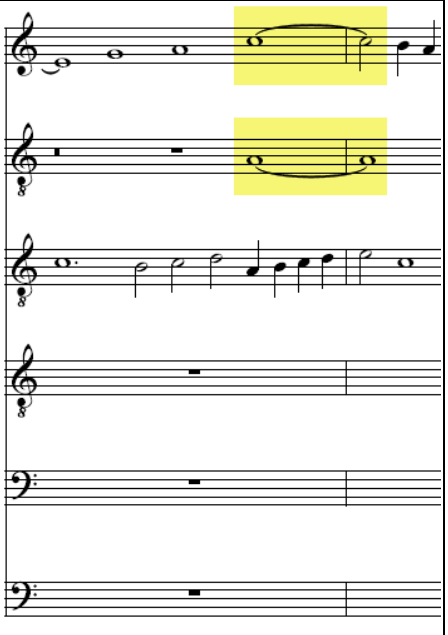
* Accented passing tone. For example:

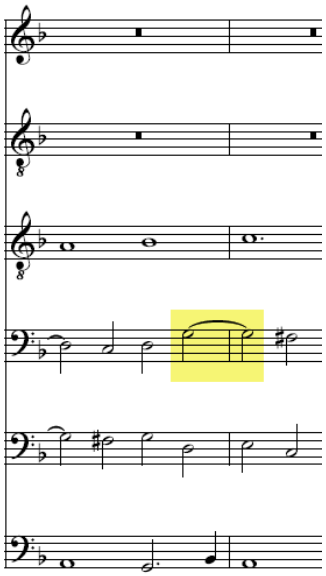
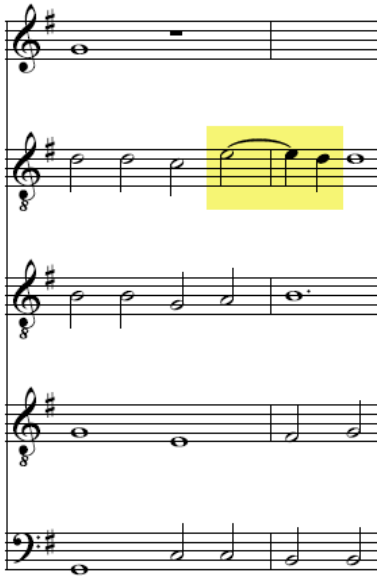
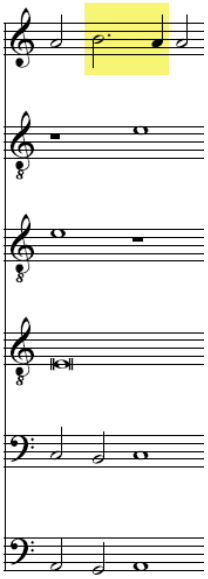
Media Vita, m11	Beati Omnes, m4	Musae Jovis, m3
		

* Cambiata. For example:

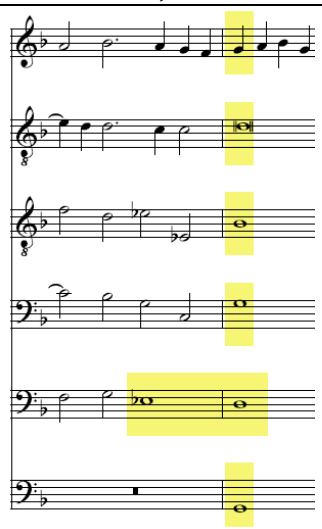
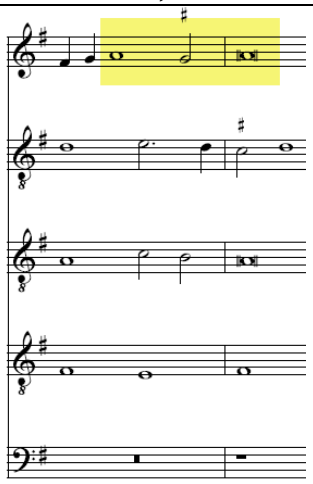
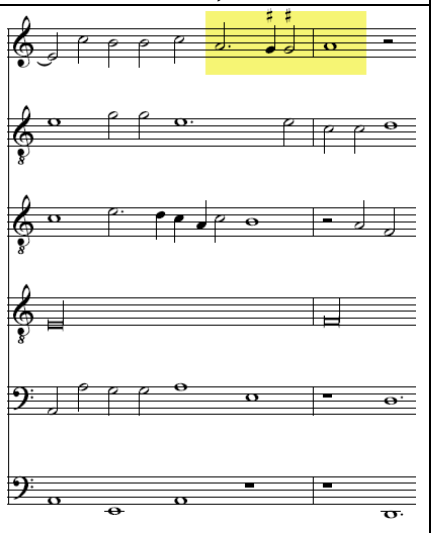
Media Vita, mm74-75	Beati Omnes, m94
	

* Consonant syncopation and dissonant suspension. Some suspensions are embellished, for which anticipations in ♩ are used. For example:

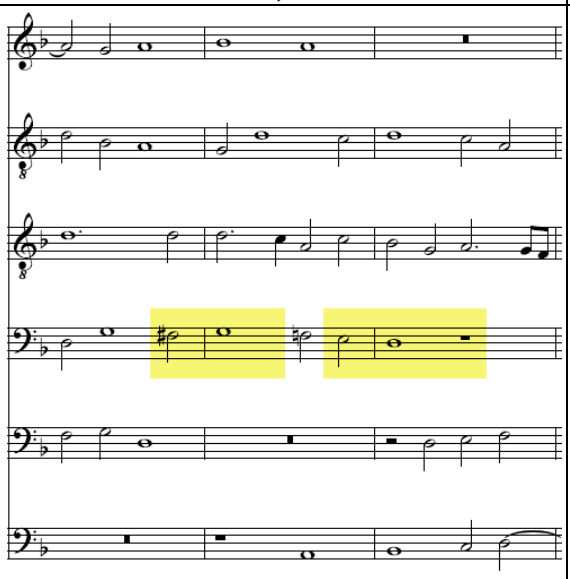
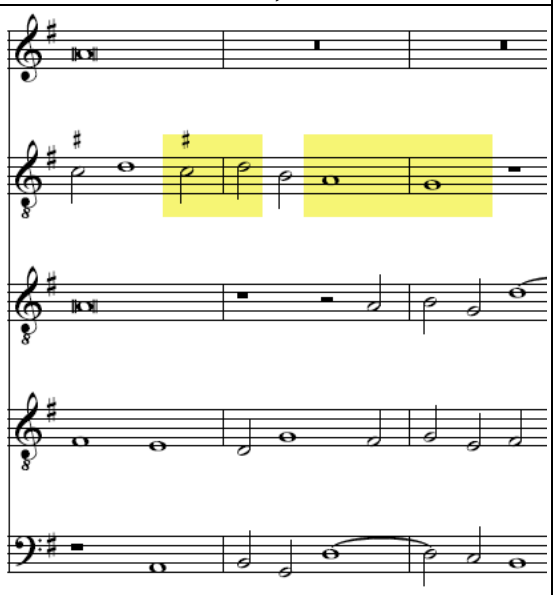
Media Vita, mm4-5	Beati Omnes, mm2-3	Musae Jovis, mm2-3
		

Media Vita, m6-7	Beati Omnes, mm21-22	Musae Jovis, m8
		

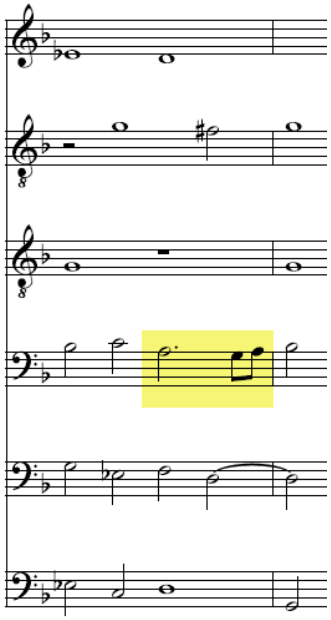
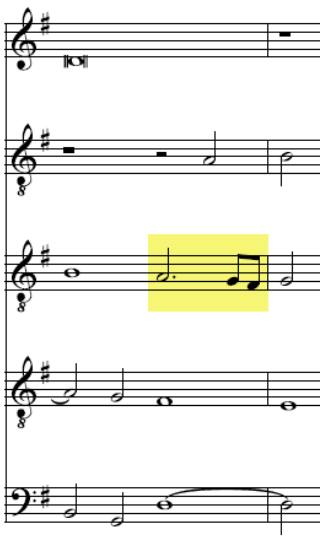
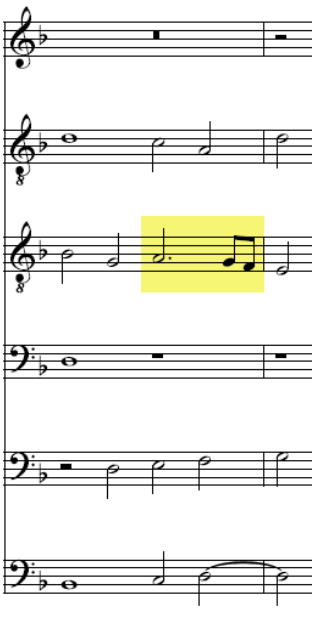
<u>* Deceptive cadence (cadence of a voice in a note that is harmonized with a chord of which that note is not the root).</u> For example:

Media Vita, mm16-17	Beati Omnes, mm36-37	Musae Jovis, mm10-11
		

* Leading tone resolution that do not coincide with the ending of that melody, and melody ending that does not feature a leading tone nor suspension. For example:

Media Vita, mm27-29	Beati Omnes, mm37-39
	

* | 𝅗𝅥. 𝅘𝅥𝅮𝅘𝅥𝅮 | rhythm (the eighth notes can include neighbor tones of the preceding note, neighbor tones of the next note, or passing tones). For example:

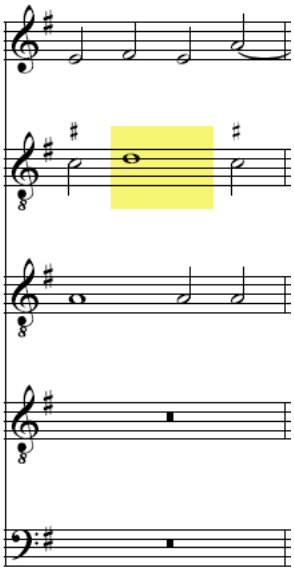
Media Vita, mm46-47	Beati Omnes, mm43-44	Media Vita, mm29-30
		

Less frequently used resources

* Melody without “apex” (even in the highest voice).

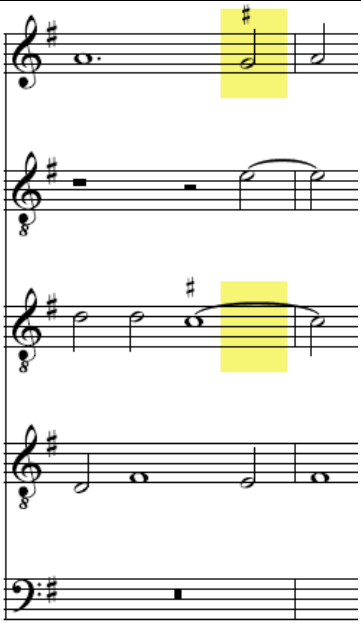
* Consonant 4^{th}. For example:

Beati Omnes, m8

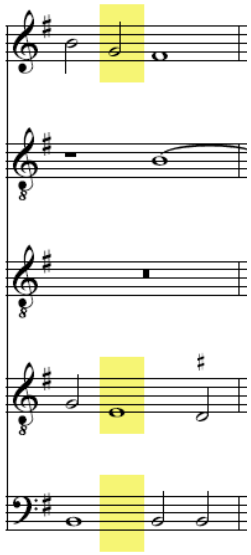
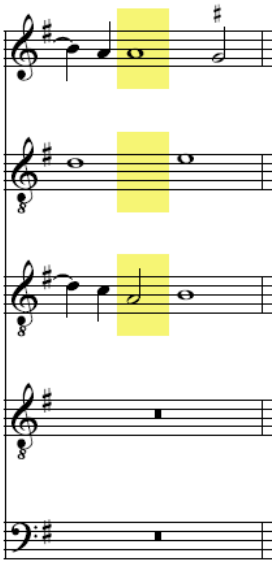


* Verticality with more than one altered note. For example:

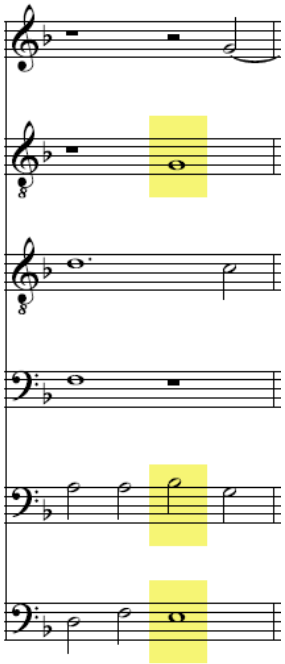
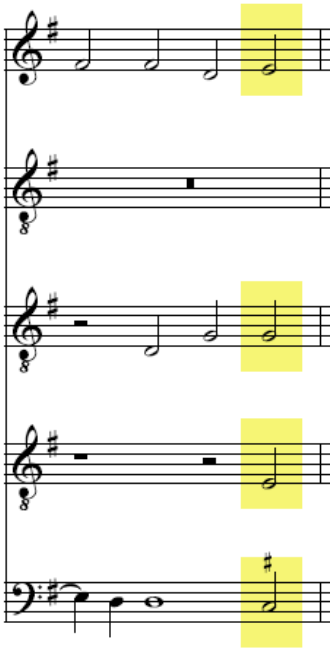
Beati Omnes, mm62-63



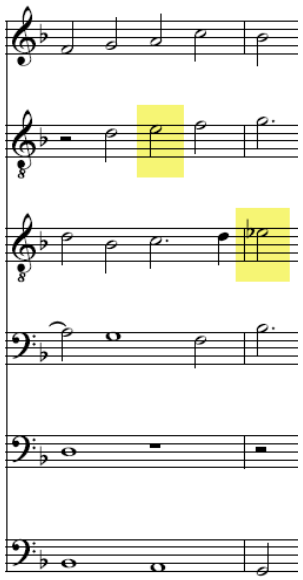
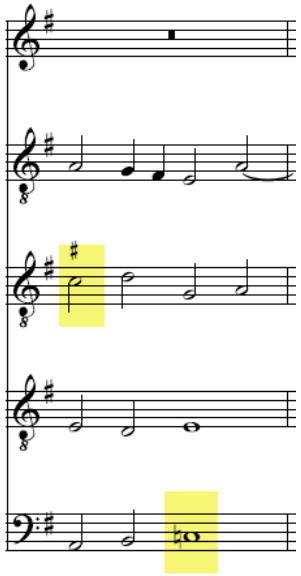
* Chord in second inversion (or simply an interval of *4th* against the bass) treated as a consonance. Used frequently in **Beati Omnes**; for example:

Beati Omnes, m14	Beati Omnes, m46
	

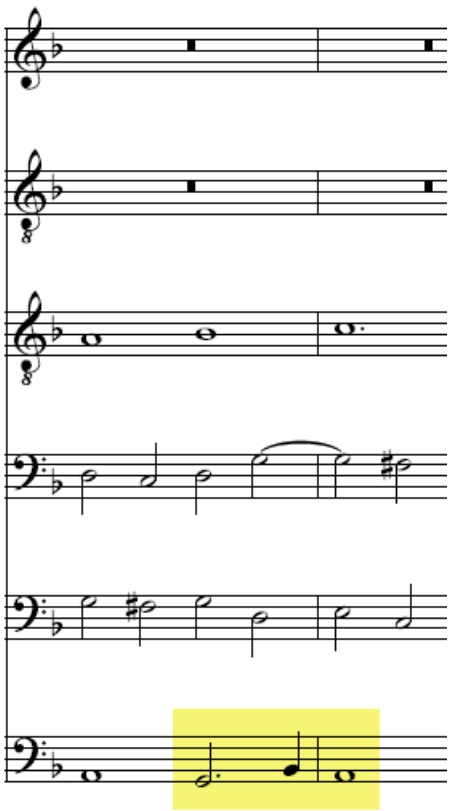
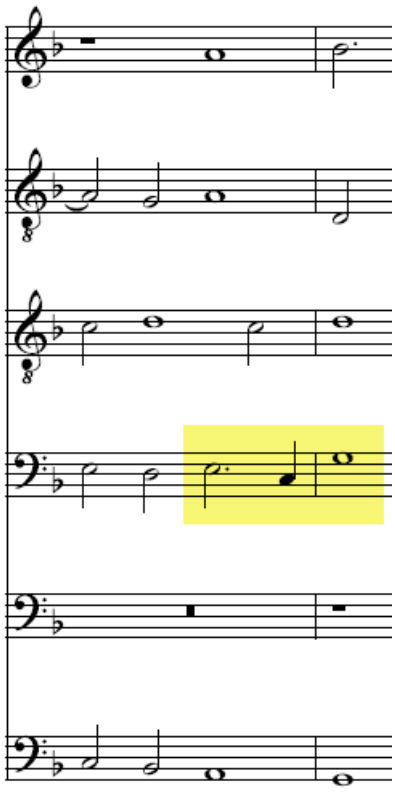
* Diminished triad in root position. For example:

Media Vita, m48	Beati Omnes, m18
	

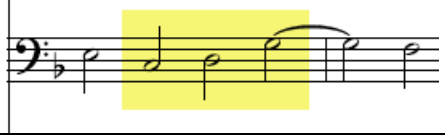
* False relation. For example:

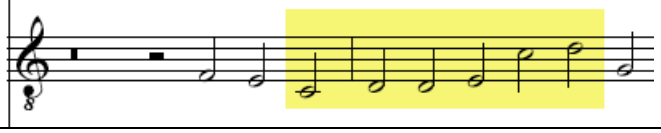
Media Vita, mm44-45	Beati Omnes, m31
	

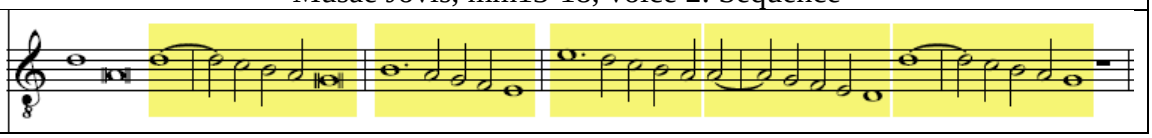
* | 𝅗𝅥. 𝅘𝅥 | rhythm with a skip towards the quarter note (which not always continues through stepwise motion). For example:

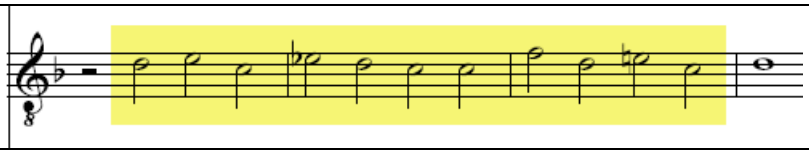
Media Vita, mm6-7 (ascending skip)	Media vita, mm67-68 (descending skip)
	

* Other peculiar melodic or rhythmic events. For example:

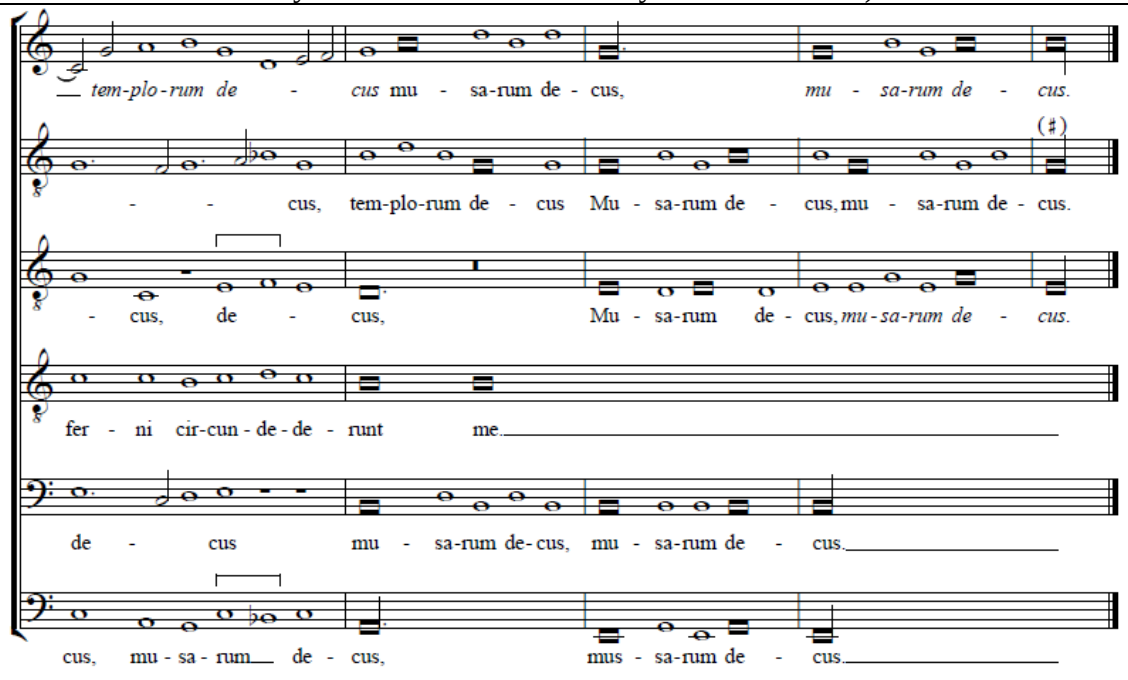
Media Vita, mm7-8, voice 5: Low step and high skip in a same direction


Musae Jovis, mm40-41, voice 3: Step, skip, step in a same direction


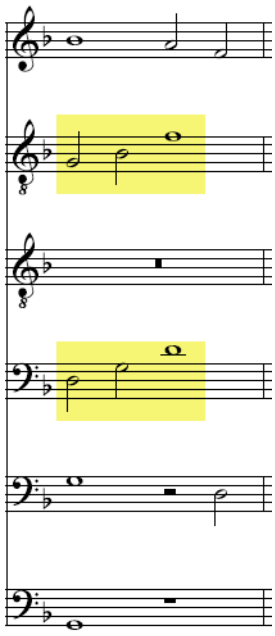
Musae Jovis, mm13-18, voice 2: Sequence


Media Vita, mm81-84, voice 2: 11 consecutive 𝅗𝅥


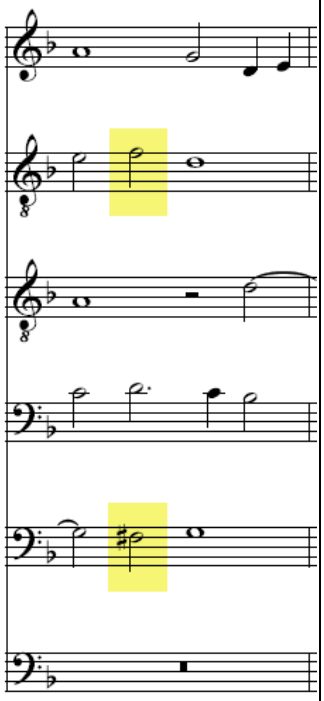
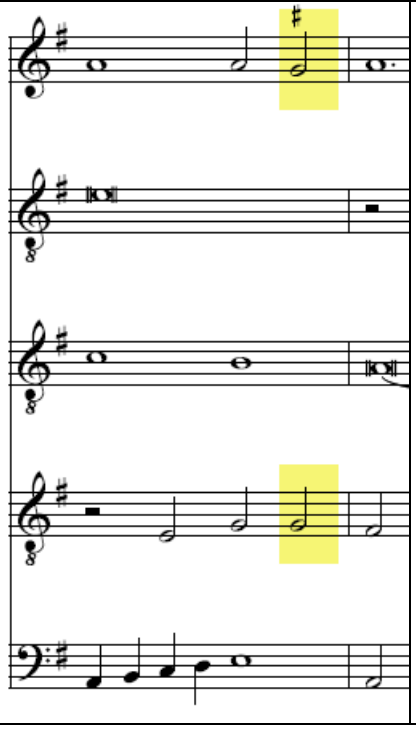
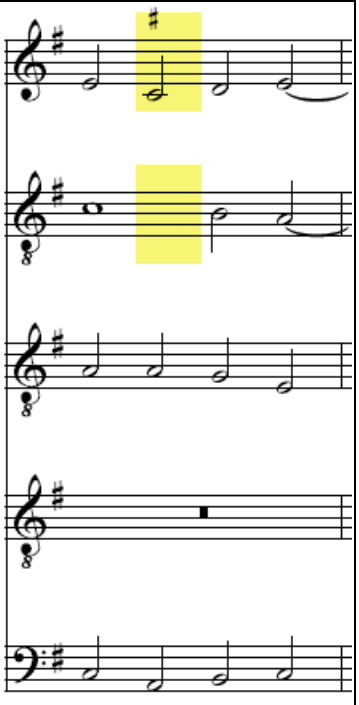
Musae Jovis, mm61-65 (end of the motet): Continuous skips of *3rd* (arpeggios) (and very little chronometric density in all the voices)



Media Vita, m14, voices 2 y 4: Consecutive skips in a same direction covering ranges of *7th* and *8th*, and in both cases with the largest skip on top



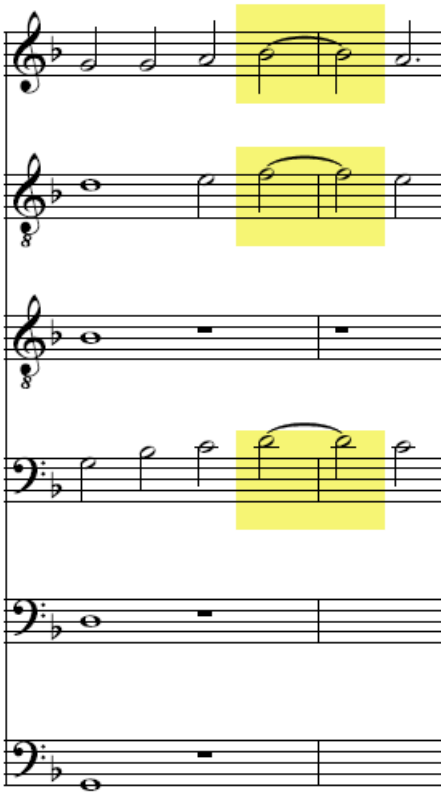
* Simultaneous use of a note in its altered and unaltered form, sometimes even in the same octave (*augmented 1st* interval). For example:

Media Vita, m64	Beati Omnes, mm50-51	Beati Omnes, m83
		

Very exceptionally used resources

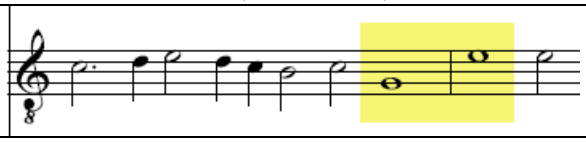
* Simultaneous syncopation in all the voices. For example:

Media Vita, mm94-95



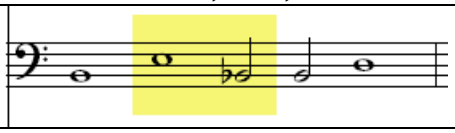
* *Major 6th* skip. For example:

Musae Jovis, mm27-28, voice 2



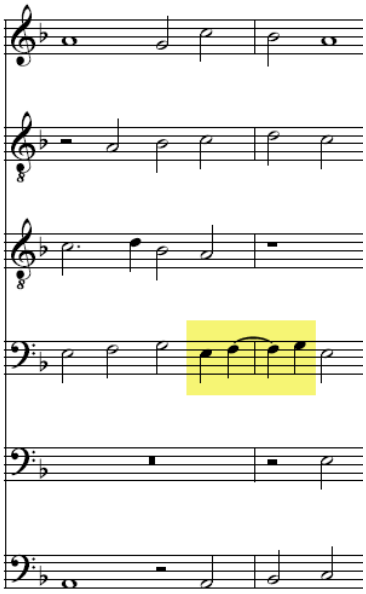
* Tritone (*augmented 4th*) skip. For example:

Musae Jovis, m26, voice 5



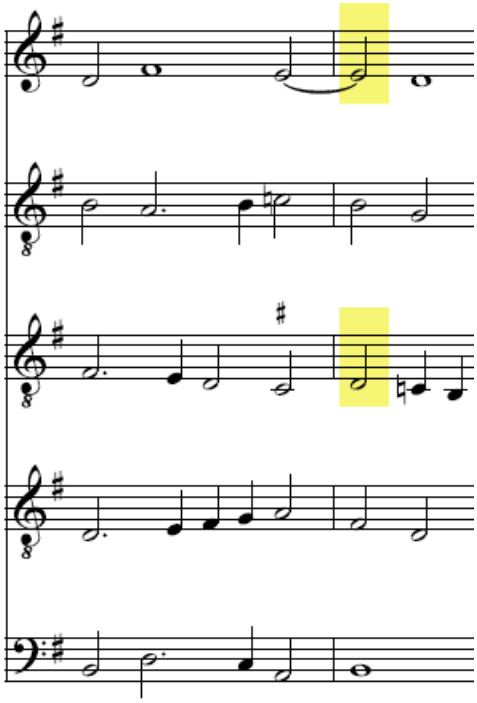
* Consonant syncopation in eighth notes. For example:

Media Vita, mm31-32



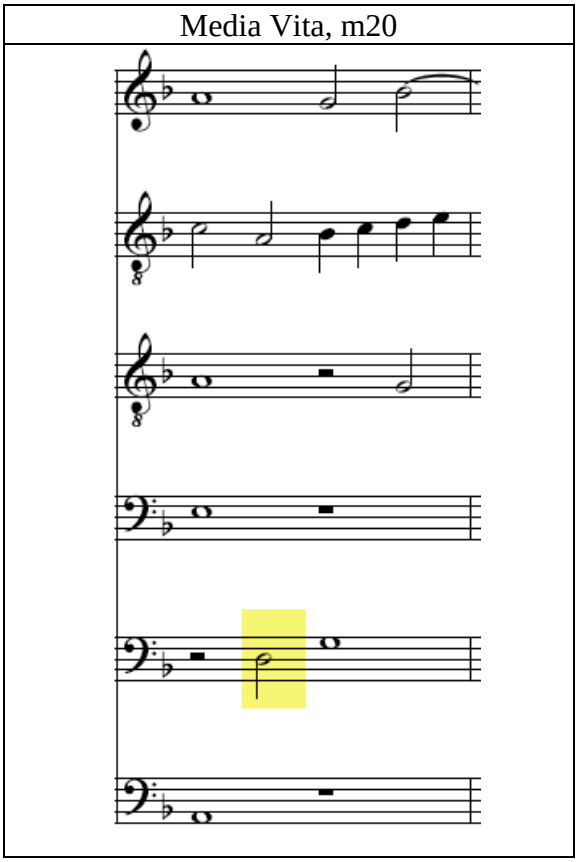
* Suspension coexisting with its resolution note, without this note being in the lowest voice. For example:

Beati Omnes, mm98-99

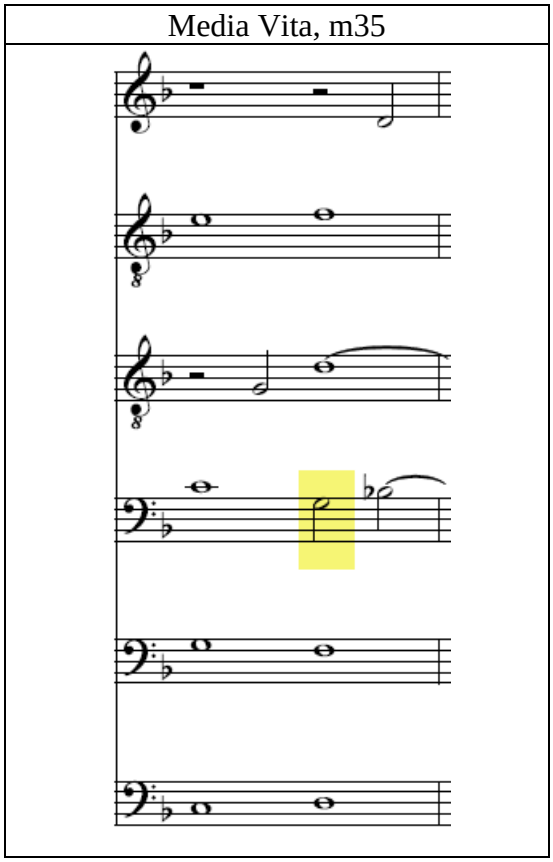


* Some cases of dissonance without treatment. For example:

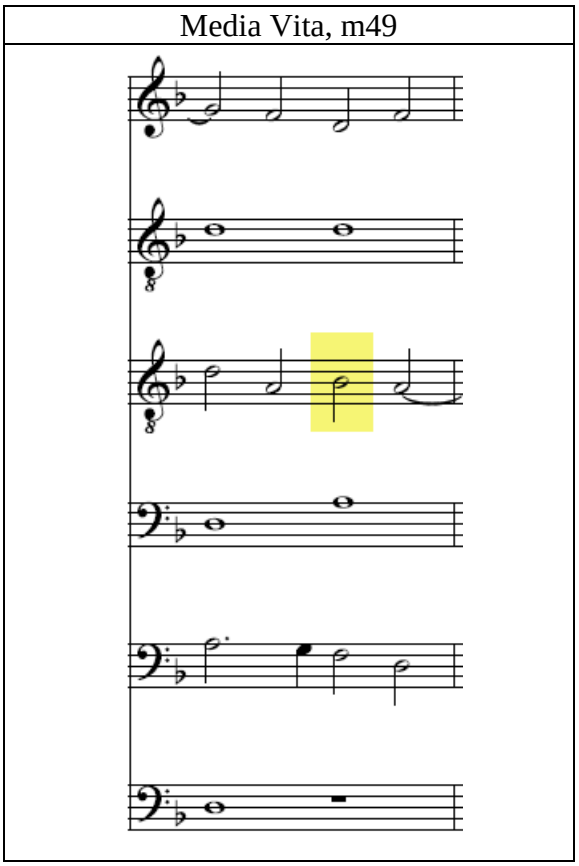
Media Vita, m20



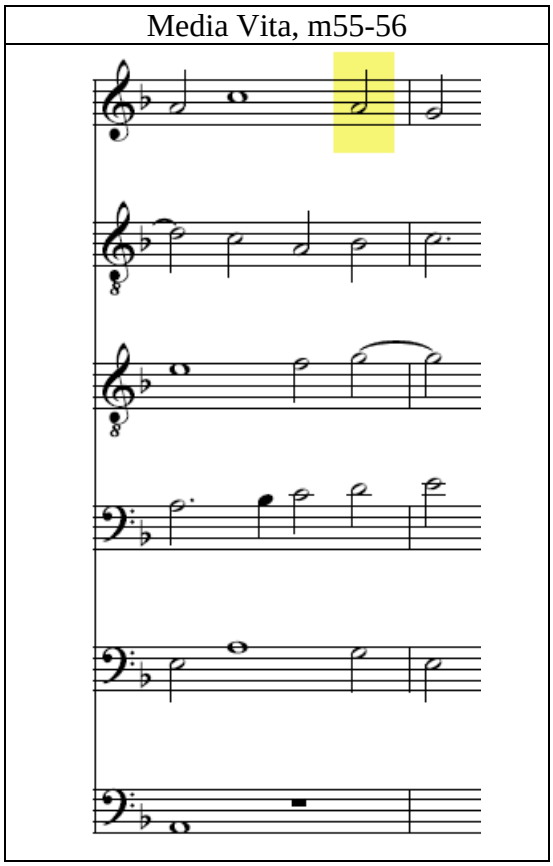
Media Vita, m35



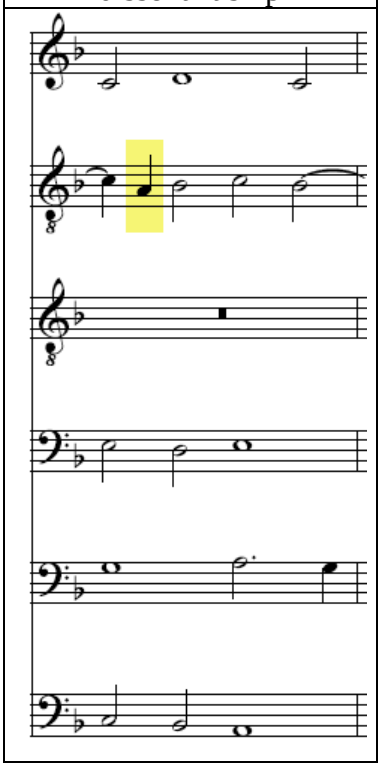
Media Vita, m49



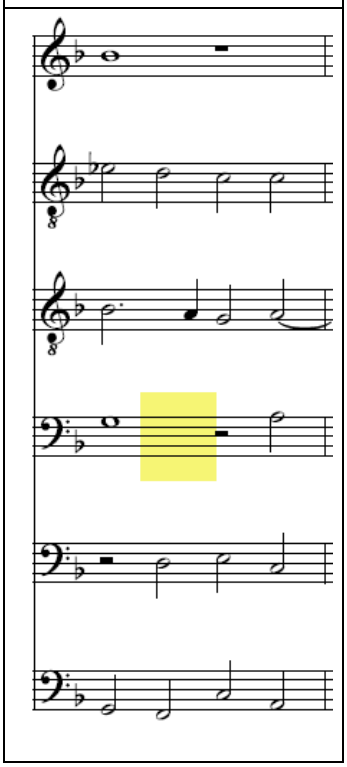
Media Vita, m55-56



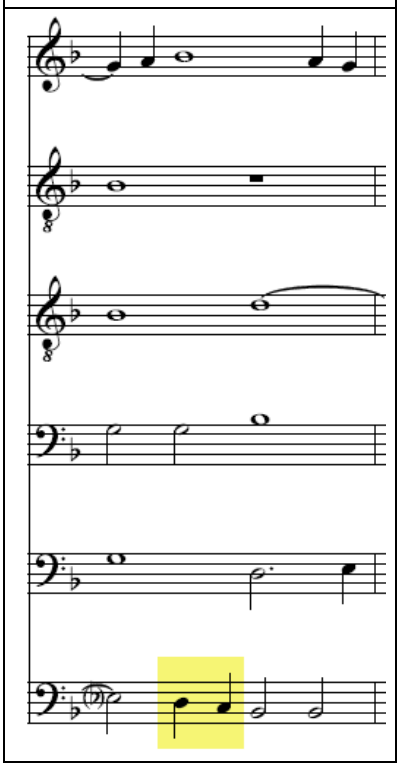
Media Vita, m61: Embellishment with a ♩ dissonant skip



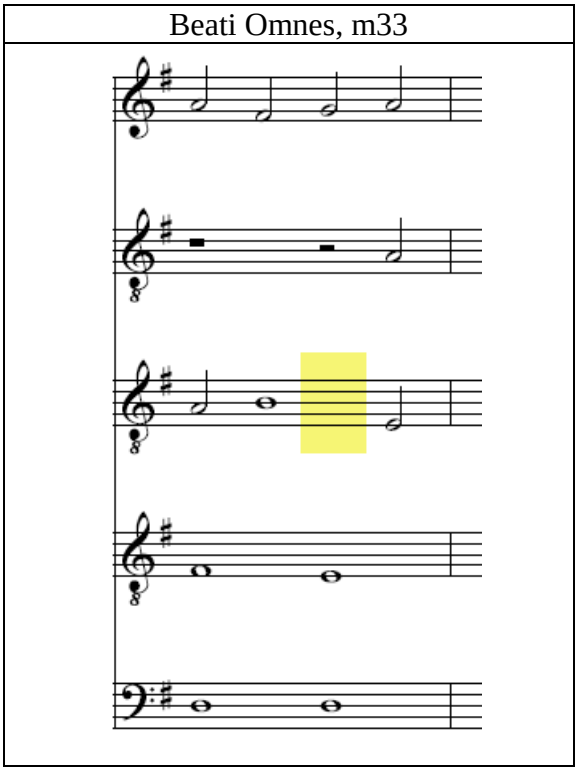
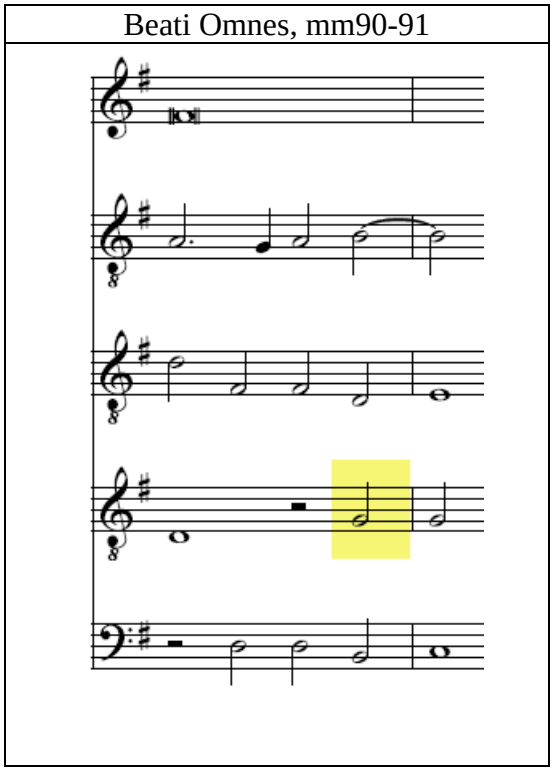
Media Vita, m82



Media Vita, m92: 2 ♩ dissonant passing tones



Beati Omnes, m33



Beati Omnes, mm90-91