

CONTRAPUNTAL ANALYSIS OF NICOLAS GOMBERT'S MOTETS

Gonzalo Varela

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gonzalo@gonzalovarela.com / www.gonzalovarela.com

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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 these resources.

General observations

* Predominance of \circ and \downarrow in melodic lines.

* \uparrow always used in pairs.

* Harmonic changes mostly in levels of \circ and \downarrow .

* 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

* Deceptive cadence (cadence of a voice in a note that is harmonized with a chord of which that note is not the root). 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 4th. 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


* $\text{♩} \quad \text{♩}$ rhythm with a skip towards the quarter note (which not always continues through stepwise motion). For example:

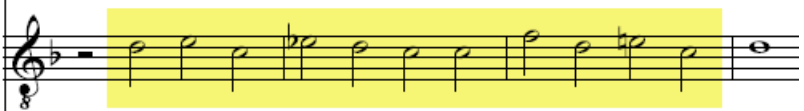
Media Vita, mm6-7 (ascending skip)	Media vita, mm67-68 (descending skip)

* 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)

— tem-plo-rum de - cus mu - sa-rum de - cus, mu - sa-rum de - cus.

- - - - - cus, tem-plo-rum de - cus Mu - sa-rum de - cus, mu - sa-rum de - cus.

- - - - - cus, de - cus, Mu - sa-rum de - cus, mu - sa-rum de - cus.

fer - ni cir-cun - de - de - runt me.

de - cus mu - sa-rum de - cus, mu - sa-rum de - cus.

cus, mu - sa - rum de - cus, mus - sa-rum de - cus.

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

The image shows six staves of musical notation. The second and fourth staves from the top have yellow rectangular highlights under the notes, indicating consecutive skips in the same direction. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The second and fourth staves have a soprano clef (C1). The third, fifth, and sixth staves have a bass clef and a key signature of one flat.

* 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

The image shows a musical score for 'Media Vita, mm94-95'. It consists of six staves. The first two staves are in treble clef, and the last three are in bass clef. The key signature has one flat. The music is in 4/4 time. The first staff has a melodic line with a syncopated note on the second beat. The second staff has a similar syncopated note. The third staff has a whole rest. The fourth staff has a melodic line with a syncopated note on the second beat. The fifth and sixth staves have whole rests. Yellow boxes highlight the syncopated notes in the first, second, and fourth staves.

* Major 6th skip. For example:

Musae Jovis, mm27-28, voice 2

The image shows a musical score for 'Musae Jovis, mm27-28, voice 2'. It consists of a single staff in treble clef. The key signature has one flat. The music is in 4/4 time. The first staff has a melodic line with a major 6th skip between the 5th and 6th notes. A yellow box highlights the 6th note.

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

Musae Jovis, m26, voice 5

The image shows a musical score for 'Musae Jovis, m26, voice 5'. It consists of a single staff in bass clef. The key signature has one flat. The music is in 4/4 time. The first staff has a melodic line with a tritone skip between the 2nd and 3rd notes. A yellow box highlights the 3rd note.

* Consonant syncopation in eighth notes. For example:

Media Vita, mm31-32

The image shows a musical score for 'Media Vita, mm31-32'. It consists of six staves. The first three staves are in treble clef, and the last three are in bass clef. The key signature has two flats. The music is in a 4/4 time signature. The fourth staff from the top (the first bass clef staff) contains a sequence of eighth notes: G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The notes from F2 to C2 are highlighted in yellow, illustrating consonant syncopation where the notes occur on off-beats.

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

Beati Omnes, mm98-99

The image shows a musical score for 'Beati Omnes, mm98-99'. It consists of five staves, all in treble clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The music is in a 4/4 time signature. The first staff shows a sequence of notes: C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4. The F#4 note is highlighted in yellow. The second staff shows a sequence of notes: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The F#4 note is also highlighted in yellow. This illustrates a suspension (F#4) coexisting with its resolution note (F#4) in a higher voice.

* Some cases of dissonance without treatment. For example:

Media Vita, m20

The musical score for Media Vita, m20 is presented in six staves. The first three staves are in treble clef, and the last three are in bass clef. A yellow highlight is placed under a note on the fifth staff.

Media Vita, m35

The musical score for Media Vita, m35 is presented in six staves. The first three staves are in treble clef, and the last three are in bass clef. Yellow highlights are placed under notes on the second and third staves.

Media Vita, m49

The musical score for Media Vita, m49 is presented in six staves. The first three staves are in treble clef, and the last three are in bass clef. A yellow highlight is placed under a note on the third staff.

Media Vita, m55-56

The musical score for Media Vita, m55-56 is presented in six staves. The first three staves are in treble clef, and the last three are in bass clef. A yellow highlight is placed under a note on the first staff.

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