

# Contrapuntally crafted, harmonically eloquent : Corelli's sonatas and the compositional process in the late 17th century

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CONTRAPUNTALLY CRAFTED, HARMONICALLY ELOQUENT.  
CORELLI'S SONATAS AND THE COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS  
IN THE LATE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

by ALBERTO SANNA

Since Dennis Libby published the first fully-fledged analytical article on Corelli's trio sonatas in 1973,<sup>1</sup> music analysts of diverse theoretical orientations have played a conspicuous role in defining the way we listen to and make sense of the music of Corelli and, by implication, his predecessors and successors. The series of musicological conferences hosted at regular intervals in the composer's home town of Fusignano since 1968 has featured a number of thematic round tables in which the efficacy of various analytical techniques has been tested on Corelli's sonatas and concertos. Particularly prominent have been Schenkerian, semiotic, computational and comparative analyses, alongside several variants of traditional style analysis.<sup>2</sup> This body of research has isolated within Corelli's œuvre those recurring structural features – variously referred to as ‚formulae‘, ‚formats‘, ‚figures‘, ‚models‘, ‚topics‘, ‚procedures‘ and the like – which, by reason of their consistency and pervasiveness, have endowed Corelli's music with a degree of coherence, unity, balance and symmetry unknown to his contemporaries. The majority of the analytical studies, moreover, have subscribed to Manfred Bukofzer's theory of the origins of harmonic tonality in the Italian instrumental music of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

Libby himself, for example, maintained that „Corelli's reuse of material is to some extent connected to his sense of harmonic progression and his recognition of some of the possibilities of the incipient tonal system“. For this scholar, „the music is similar to something used elsewhere because it is the underlying harmonic progression and the way that it fits into the overall tonal format that really interests Corelli much more than the surface character of the music“.<sup>4</sup> Consistent with his explanation, Libby singled out the cadence and the sequence as the primary structural devices that gave the Corelli sonatas „shape and organic wholeness“.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on the cadence has also suited particularly well the needs of Schenkerian theorists. As early as 1982 Christopher Wintle argued that „Corelli's music is centrally, and directly, about ‚cadential progressions, which Schenker described as ‚the primary means of coherence‘ in the structure of a tonal work“. Wintle presented „the simplest

<sup>1</sup> Dennis Libby, „Interrelationships in Corelli“, *JAMS* 26/2 (1973), 263–287.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance *Studi corelliani III*, 15–117; *Studi corelliani IV*, 1–121; *Studi corelliani V*, 185–345.

<sup>3</sup> Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era. From Monteverdi to Bach*, New York: Norton, 1947, 219–259. For a more recent, updated version of the same theory, see Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. II: *Music in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, rev. edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 177–231.

<sup>4</sup> Libby, „Interrelationships in Corelli“ (see n. 1), 267.

<sup>5</sup> Libby, „Interrelationships in Corelli“ (see n. 1), 270.



elements of Corelli's musical language in the form of a number of concrete models, all of which relate back to the cadential progression" and attempted to demonstrate „that it is the elaboration of these models that provides the stuff of Corelli's music“. <sup>6</sup> Several years later, William Rothstein claimed that Corelli should be considered „as a tonal composer *tout court*“, on the basis of the way in which he treated „the cadence, including the motion leading up to the cadence“. Rothstein also believed „that Corelli's musical language resonates throughout the ‚common-practice‘ period, and that „to study the music of Corelli is to see how, even at the dawn of the tonal era, Schenker's motto already rings true: *semper idem, sed non eodem modo* [always the same, but not in the same way]“. <sup>7</sup> Recent elaborations of these old theoretical tenets include Robert Gjerdingen's notion of „schemata“ and Kofi Agawu's concept of „archetype/prototypes/proto-structures“. Gjerdingen draws on contemporary cognitive theory, Agawu on social theory. Agawu explicitly acknowledges his Schenkerian upbringing; Gjerdingen replaces it with the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian and German tradition of instructional basses (*partimenti*) in which Schenker's speculation was partly rooted. <sup>8</sup>

Historically-minded analysts have shown instead a distinct interest in those chordal progressions that link opening gambits to cadential patterns in the music of Corelli. Peter Allsop concocted a whole list of these „stock formulas“ from a treatise published in 1708 by a former student of Corelli's – Francesco Gasparini's *L'armonico pratico al cimbalo*:<sup>9</sup>

- a) 7–6 suspensions over a descending scale in the bass;
- b) 5/3–6/3 chords over a rising scale in the bass;
- c) 6/5–5/3 chords over a bass falling a third and rising a second;
- d) chains of sevenths over a bass of rising fourths and falling fifths;
- e) 4/2 chords over a tied bass;
- f) ninth suspensions over a bass rising either a second or a fourth.

Allsop related Corelli's use of these formulae directly to his Bolognese upbringing, arguing that „such progressions became the lingua franca of early eighteenth-century ‚tonality‘, and [that] it was the degree of consistency with

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Wintle, „Corelli's Tonal Models. The Trio Sonata op. III, n. 1“, *Studi corelliani III*, 37 and 59.

<sup>7</sup> William Rothstein, „Transformations of Cadential Formulae in the Music of Corelli and his Successors“, in Allen Cadwallader (ed.), *Essays from the Third International Schenker Symposium*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2006, 246–247, 278.

<sup>8</sup> Heinrich Schenker, *Free Composition (Der freie Satz)*, two vols, translated and ed. by Ernst Oster, New York: Longman, 1979; idem, *Counterpoint. A Translation of Kontrapunkt*, two vols, translated by John Rothgeb and Jürgen Thym, ed. by John Rothgeb, New York: Schirmer, 1987; Felix Salzer and Carl Schachter, *Counterpoint in Composition. The Study of Voice Leading*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969; Robert O. Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; Kofi Agawu, *Music as Discourse. Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Francesco Gasparini, *L'armonico pratico al cimbalo*, Venice: Antonio Bortoli, 1708.



which Corelli applied them that recommended his works as tonal models".<sup>10</sup> John Walter Hill further extended the list of procedures comprising „the normalized harmonic style of Corelli and his contemporaries“ as to include:

- a) 5/3–6/3 chords over a bass falling a third and rising a fourth;
- b) 6/3 chords over a descending scale in the bass;
- c) 4/2–6/3 (or 6/5) chords over a descending scale in tied notes in the bass.

This scholar too followed Gasparini's prescriptions to keyboard players.<sup>11</sup>

Whether based on the writings of contemporary or later music theorists, these interpretations of Corelli's work are theoretically oriented analyses, not dissimilar in principle if not in scope from Schenker's own analyses of Austrian-German masterworks.<sup>12</sup> Like Schenker's, they are cast in the mould of the great art historian Heinrich Wölfflin. Wölfflin was one of the fathers of the morphological description of art, to which he contributed powerful interpretative tools such as the notion of „visual schema“. His legacy to future generations was the quest for the universal laws of art – what he called „modes of representation“ – underneath the apparent chaos of multifarious artistic manifestations.<sup>13</sup> In a similar vein, analysts interested in Corelli's music have set out to discover its fundamental structural devices: root progressions, contrapuntal models, galant schemata. The composer's original intention has been a secondary when not an altogether irrelevant aspect of their analyses; the crux of the matter has been to find the denominator which ultimately makes a piece of music work.

In this article I present an example of a different type of analysis – an aesthetically oriented analysis whose purpose is to provide a conceptual transcription of the particularities of a Corelli composition rather than a proof of a theory of musical-historical development.<sup>14</sup> On the evidence of my analytical work, I argue for a more flexible view of the compositional process in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century as well as a more personal view of Corelli's talent informed by contemporary notions of harmony, counterpoint, craftsmanship and artistry. By shifting the emphasis from the analytical agenda of 20<sup>th</sup>-century theorists to

<sup>10</sup> Peter Allsop, *Arcangelo Corelli. New Orpheus of our Times*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 88–89; idem, *The Italian 'Trio' Sonata. From its Origins Until Corelli*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 233–234.

<sup>11</sup> John Walter Hill, *Baroque Music. Music in Western Europe, 1580–1750*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005 (The Norton Introduction to Music History), 330–343; including examples of ‚normalised‘ cadences as well.

<sup>12</sup> Heinrich Schenker, *The Masterwork in Music. A Yearbook*, two vols, translated by Ian Bent et al., ed. by William Drabkin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 and 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History. The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, translated by M. D. Hottinger, London: G. Bell and Sons, 1932; repr., London: Bell & Hyman, in association with Dover Publications, 1950); Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art. An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance*, translated by Peter Murray and Linda Murray, London: Phaidon, 1953.

<sup>14</sup> For a non-dogmatic view of the difference between theoretically and aesthetically oriented analysis, see Carl Dahlhaus, *Analysis and Value Judgment*, translated by Siegmund Levarie, New York: Pendragon Press, 1983, 8–10.



the grammatical standards set by their late 17<sup>th</sup>-century counterparts, I hope to make a case for the richness of Corelli's musical eloquence over our desire to locate the establishment of a 'Common-Practice' of musical composition in Italy in the early decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## I.

Ex. 1: Arcangelo Corelli, Sonata op. 1, no. 4: 2<sup>nd</sup> movement (Adagio), complete.

The musical score for Example 1 is presented in three systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 5, and the second system contains measures 6 through 12. The score is for three instruments: Violin 1, Violin 2, and Violone. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The music is in the Adagio tempo. The Violone part is in the bass clef, while the Violin parts are in the treble clef. The score shows a complex polyphonic texture with intricate melodic lines and harmonic support.

Example 1 shows an especially fine specimen of a flexible approach to the composition of instrumental polyphony in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is the second movement (Adagio) from Corelli's sonata op. 1, no. 4. The composition belongs to the collection that marked Corelli's *début* as a publishing author in 1681. Corelli's op. 1 contains twelve sonatas a 3 scored for one bass and two soprano instruments (either a violone or an archlute, and two violins) with an additional figured-bass part for the organ (SSB/bc).<sup>15</sup> The Adagio in question is a mere twelve-bar-long gem set in between an initial Vivace in two parts ending on a chromatically charged imperfect cadence and a fugue characterised by a well-designed subject whose potential, however, is left unexplored. An imitative Presto – actually a Gavotta in disguise – completes the sonata by concluding once again on an imperfect cadence underscored by a written-out *ritardando*. Thus, although Corelli has been often credited with establishing „once and for all that most characteristic cycle of the Baroque sonata, four movements in the order of S(low)-F(ast)-S-F“,<sup>16</sup> this particular sonata provides a

<sup>15</sup> Arcangelo Corelli, *Sonate a trè, doi violini, e violone, ò arcileuto, col basso per l'organo, op. 1*, Rome: Giovanni Angelo Muzi, 1681. The figured-bass part for the organ has been omitted in Exx. 1 and 5. The model for the Corelli Adagio was the Largo that opens Giovanni Battista Mazzaferatta's *Il primo libro delle sonate a due violini con un bassetto viola se piace, op. 5*, Bologna: Giacomo Monti, 1674. For a discussion of the relationship between the two pieces, I refer the reader to my forthcoming monograph on Corelli.

<sup>16</sup> William S. Newman, *The Sonata in the Baroque Era*, New York: Norton, 1983, 69.



rather distinctive response to the problem of arranging the other movements of a textless musical work around the movement written in fugal counterpoint.

Possibly in deliberate contrast to the fugue's treatment, Corelli made sure he got the most out of the subject he devised for the brief Adagio. The music material in itself is anything but impressive. It comprises three disjointed descending tetrachords which form a diatonic scale spanning the range of a twelfth – a full octave and a fifth – from pitch class *e* down to *a*, plus a single inflected *g* sharp. The notes of the diatonic series are all of the same duration: they are all quavers. The sharpened note on which the scale comes to rest takes the value of a minim every time but the very last when it too is cut down to the length of a quaver (see Ex. 2).

Ex. 2: Arcangelo Corelli, Sonata op. 1, no. 4: 2<sup>nd</sup> movement (Adagio), material.



In what must have been its original conception, the subject appears three times across the movement, twice complete and once incomplete: in a most audible form in bars 5–7, when the bass plays it through on its own; somewhat disguised in bars 3<sup>3</sup>–5<sup>2</sup>, when it is split between the two sopranos; literally halved in bars 6<sup>3</sup>–8<sup>2</sup>, when the three parts build jointly an ascending line *d–e–f* after the two sopranos in combination have covered the first octave of the descending scale (see lines 2, 3 and 4 in Ex. 3). These three consecutive statements of the subject neither begin nor conclude the piece. Instead, they are flanked on both sides by an enlarged version of it – so to speak – whereby the descending tetrachords overlap with one another so as to produce a sensibly longer cantus. For reasons which will become clear presently, this version of the subject requires some adjustments as regards its pitch content. The *g* is inflected to *g* sharp in the second but not in the third tetrachord; and the *c* is inflected to *c* sharp in the fourth tetrachord alone. The ensuing shape ensures that, every time the previous tetrachord's penultimate note is retaken to begin the next tetrachord, it produces an interval of an ascending minor second with the last note of the previous tetrachord. As in the first and third statements of the original subject in bars 3<sup>3</sup>–5<sup>2</sup> and bars 6<sup>3</sup>–8<sup>2</sup>, the utterance of this enlarged subject is entrusted to different voices: the first soprano, the bass and the second soprano with two tetrachords each in the first appearance at bars 1–3; the bass with two tetrachords and the first soprano with four tetrachords in the second appearance at bars 8<sup>3</sup>–11<sup>1</sup> (see lines 1 and 5 in Ex. 3). In either form, the main material is pervasive across the entire piece. Every bar but the last two features a descending tetrachord. The two versions of the subject also overlap to such an extent that there would be almost no discontinuity were it not for the agogic caesura correspondent to the incomplete statement in the middle of bar 8 and for the concluding cadence in bars 11–12.



Ex. 3: Arcangelo Corelli, Sonata op. 1, no. 4: 2<sup>nd</sup> movement (Adagio), subjects.

1 (bars 1-3) S1 S1 B B S2 S2

2 (bars 3-5) S1 S2 S1 S1

3 (bars 5-7) B B B B

4 (bars 6-8) S1 S2 S1 S2 B

5 (bars 8-11) B B S1 S1 S1 S1

Agawu has recently written that „a theory of musical meaning is essentially a theory of closure“.<sup>17</sup> This observation may well ring true in relation to most music composed in the last two hundred years – even more so perhaps in pieces that avowedly elude closure. But to claim on the basis of a similar premise that closed harmonic progressions provide the stuff of Corelli’s works – as numerous musicologists have done ever since Bukofzer’s time – amounts to overemphasising an aspect of the compositional fabric which, however relevant to 20<sup>th</sup>-century analysts, might not have been so relevant to 17<sup>th</sup>-century composers. On the contrary, with Corelli cadential points often act as harmonic milestones of a composition but just as often do not act as its structural determinants. To put it differently, although when listening to the Adagio one is likely to know where one is in the piece, one could not possibly leave at the beginning of each utterance of the subject and return in time for the next one just by counting bars or even beats. It is, therefore, something of an overstatement to say as Allsop does that in the music of Corelli „the melodic period becomes the basic unit of construction, juxtaposed in a succession of balancing complementary periods directed towards predetermined tonal goals“.<sup>18</sup> This may be a procedure common enough in the chamber works – and even there only in the dances or dance-inspired movements. In the remaining genres, however, cadences on different scale-degrees articulate the individual movements without achieving great significance as structural markers.

Far more essential to the musical eloquence of this particular Adagio is its pitch content. This was clearly an aspect the composer must have thought out in advance of writing it up. Notwithstanding possible transpositions by fifths with the relative problems of tuning and sonority, the material he devised is

<sup>17</sup> Agawu, *Music as Discourse* (see n. 8), 98.

<sup>18</sup> Allsop, *Arcangelo Corelli* (see n. 10), 82.



the sole configuration that meets two conditions. First, the diatonic series beginning on pitch class *e* is the only one that features a semitone at the end of each tetrachord preceded by two whole tones (T T ST, T T ST). This is the ‚diatonic tetrachord‘ (*tetracordo del genere diatonico*) discussed by a spate of early modern theorists up to and including Giovanni Maria Bononcini, Giovanni Andrea Angelini Bontempi and Zaccaria Tevo.<sup>19</sup> The latter author in particular explained „that the semitone at the beginning of the fourth makes for a sad effect [...] for, whether ascending or descending, the softness of the note somehow softens the following notes and somehow engenders the sadness [...]“; and he recommended „the judicious contrapuntist to hold this semitone in high esteem, for the manner of moving the human spirit proceeds from its use in combination [with other intervals] [...]“.<sup>20</sup> In this instance, Tevo would have found Corelli quite judicious, indeed. Second, the diatonic series spanning the interval of a fifth between the pitch classes *d* and *g* sharp changes the pattern T T ST into alternating tones and semitones (T ST T ST). As the subject unfolds, then, the semitone becomes more conspicuous further to accrue to the poignancy of the main musical material. Corelli’s simplified tonal space makes these musical gestures very persuasive. When not entrusted with the subject, the individual parts fill in the texture with consonant harmonies only: thirds, fifths, sixths and octaves. This is consistent with Bononcini’s observation that „the trio (that is, the composition in three parts) must sensibly share in the low and in the high, and never do without the third or the fifth and, in their absence, the sixth [...]“.<sup>21</sup> But it is also in line with Corelli’s own treatment of every tetrachord as both a metric and a harmonic unity, and his insistence on the imperfect cadence as the means of ending all statements of the subject in either version.

The static, repetitive and even obsessive harmony resulting from Corelli’s compositional choices plays no small part in defining the Adagio’s affective content. Still, the harmonic progression carries little meaning of its own and is thoroughly appreciated only against the forward-moving, chameleon-like nature of the subject. In its original form, the descending tetrachord of the minor third had long been a topos of musical sorrow, both in its chamber version as a vocal or instrumental passacaglio and in its theatre version as

<sup>19</sup> Giovanni Maria Bononcini, *Musico pratico, op. 8*, Bologna: Giacomo Monti, 1673, 43; Giovanni Andrea Angelini Bontempi, *Historia Musica*, Perugia: Costantini, 1695, 51; Zaccaria Tevo, *Il musico testore*, Venice: Antonio Bortoli, 1706, 64.

<sup>20</sup> „[...] che il semitono posto nel principio della quarta fa tristo effetto [...] perche la voce tanto ascendente, quanto discendente con la sua mollitie in un certo modo ammolisce li tuoni susseguenti, & in un certo modo genera la tristizia [...]“; „il giudicioso Contrapuntista haver molto in consideratione questo semitono, poiche dalla combinatione di esso ne deriva il modo di mover l’hanimo humano [...]“ (Tevo, *Musico testore* [see n. 19], 100–101).

<sup>21</sup> „Il Terzo (overo Composizione à trè voci) deve partecipare discretamente del grave, e dell’acuto, e non sia mai privo della terza, ò della quinta, & in mancanza di loro della sesta [...]“ (Bononcini, *Musico pratico* [see n. 19], 109).



an operatic lament.<sup>22</sup> In the Adagio, Corelli employed it to the same purpose yet reinterpreted it as the composition's thematic substance rather than harmonic scaffolding and rephrased it throughout as pairs of quavers (indicated by slurs). These subtle yet crucial modifications restored the expressiveness of the „black notes“ or „minute notes“ (*note nere* or *note minute*) whose skilful manipulation Giuseppe Ottavio Pitoni and other late 17<sup>th</sup>-century theorists deemed one of the aesthetic desiderata of the so-called „consort or minute styles“ (*stili di concerto o minuti*).<sup>23</sup> Antimo Liberati for example reckoned that „in the instrumental modulation the composer must make the greater part or majority of his theme or subject heard all on its own, later transferring the same to the other parts [...], as if it were a master accompanied by one or more servants in such a way as to be always recognisable and distinguishable from them [...]; and in such a manner and with such a criterion [the composer] must weave and spin his fabric to the end“.<sup>24</sup> In fact, without giving due prominence to the quavers for the whole duration of the movement and constantly altering the status of the individual parts by making them do different things at different moments, Corelli could not have possibly composed the piece of instrumental polyphony the Adagio truly is.

## II.

Corelli's responses to harmonic challenges frequently (if not exclusively) entailed contrapuntal composition. This is easy to appreciate, for in the major urban centres of the Papal State well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century counterpoint was still the dominant mode of thought within circles of professional musicians. In Rome in particular, notwithstanding the career enjoyed by chordal instrumentalists the like of Lelio Colista and Bernardo Pasquini, alternative conceptions did not generate a large consensus. In fact, they did not find a space in music theory at all. In the papal city musical discussions invariably involved questions of contrapuntal procedures. The so-called ‚schools‘ of counterpoint grew out of

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Walker, „Ciaccona and Passacaglia. Remarks on their Origin and Early History“, *JAMS* 21/3 (1968), 300–320; Ellen Rosand, „The Descending Tetrachord. An Emblem of Lament“, *MQ* 65/3 (1979), 346–359; Richard Hudson, *Passacaglio and Ciaccona. From Guitar Music to Italian Keyboard Variations in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, Ann Arbor and Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981 (Studies in Musicology 37).

<sup>23</sup> Giuseppe Ottavio Pitoni, *Guida armonica*, Rome: [Giuseppe Ottavio Pitoni, circa 1708]. For a theoretical and musical analysis of this particular aspect of late 17<sup>th</sup>-century musical thinking, see my „Learning from ‚the most fam'd Italian Masters‘. Sonata Composition in the Seventeenth Century“, in Andrew J. Cheetham, Joseph Knowles and Jonathan P. Wainwright (eds), *Reappraising the Seicento. Composition, Dissemination, Assimilation*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, 43–90, especially 70–79.

<sup>24</sup> Antimo Liberati, *Lettera scritta dal sig. Antimo Liberati in risposta ad una del sig. Ovidio Persapegi*, Rome: Mascardi, 1685, 53–54: „Nella modulatione instrumentale il Compositore deve far sentire il suo tema, ò soggetto per lo più tutto solo, ò nella maggior parte; poscia deducendo l'istesso all'altre parti [...] à guisa d'un Padrone, che sia accompagnato da uno, ò più Servitori, mà in maniera, che sempre si riconosca, e si distingua il Padrone dal Servo [...] & in tal maniera & avvertenza deve tessere, e condurre la sua tela sino al fine.“



the informal gatherings of musicians where different opinions were measured against one another and assessed in terms of their relative merits. Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, alongside the two brothers Giovanni Maria and Giovanni Bernardino Nanino, held to one such school. To belong to it meant to be part of an educational setting characterised by strong beliefs about harmonic practices. One gains this and other hints of late 17<sup>th</sup>-century Roman attitudes from Pitoni's biography of his teacher Francesco Foggia:

Francesco Foggia. A Roman, he mastered counterpoint at the school of Antonio Cifra and then of Paolo Agostini, both disciples of the Nanino brothers, Giovanni Maria and Giovanni Bernardino, that is at the school of Pier Luigi da Palestrina who, jointly with his schoolmate and best friend Giovanni Maria Nanino, held a counterpoint school, deciding upon the differences and the opinions that arose between diverse scholars or professors who participated in it. [...] He composed a number of works with great fluency of genius, composition coming very easy to him, though he did not play the keyboard nor made use of harpsichord or other instrument. [...] He left numerous students who have all progressed considerably in the art of music.<sup>25</sup>

Foggia was brought up in the Palestrina tradition but was no slavish imitator. Interestingly, he could not play the keyboard and yet was extremely successful as a composer as well as a teacher. He had been specifically trained to become an expert in counterpoint. And as such, in 1685, was called for as his advocate by Corelli in the famous „Affair of the Fifths“ with the Bolognese musical establishment.<sup>26</sup>

In Rome contrapuntal skills were considered so indispensable to the profession of composer that those musicians untrained in counterpoint remedied their shortcomings with a period of instruction from an established contrapuntist. Two notable examples were Corelli himself and Giovanni Lorenzo Lulier, first violin and *violone* player of a formidable string trio that also comprised the violinist Matteo Fornari and enjoyed the protection of the powerful Cardinals Benedetto Pamphilj and Pietro Ottoboni in the 1680s and 1690s. Lulier studied with Pier Simone Agostini,

<sup>25</sup> Giuseppe Ottavio Pitoni, „Notizia de' contrapuntisti e compositori di musica“, Rome, circa 1720, s. v. „Francesco Foggia“: „Romano, s'ammaestrò nel contrapunto sotto la scuola di Antonio Cifra e, poi, di Pavolo Agostini, ambedui discepoli di Giovan Maria e Giovan Bernardino, fratelli, de Nanini, cioè sotto la scola di Pier Luigi da Pellestrina che, unitamente con Giovanni Maria Nanino, suo condiscipolo et amico confidentissimo, assisteva a tener scuola di contrapunto, decidendo le differenze et opinioni che nascevano tra scolari o professori diversi che ivi concorrevano. [...] Compose opere infinite e con gran velocità d'ingegno, essendo molto facile nel comporre, benché non maneggiasse tasti né avesse uso di cimbalo o altro istromento. [...] Lasciò scolari numerosi che tutti hanno fatto degno progresso nell'arte della musica.“

<sup>26</sup> For a study of the aesthetic implications of this famous musical quarrel, see my „Between Composition and Performance: Generic Norms and Poetic Choices in the Work of Arcangelo Corelli“, *Studi corelliani* VII, 101–124.



Corelli with Matteo Simonelli. Contrary to a still held misconception, it really made no difference whether one ended up writing music for the church, the chamber or the theatre. One of the most celebrated composers of operas and cantatas of the time, the Modenese cellist Giovanni Bononcini was the son of Giovanni Maria Bononcini, whose contrapoint manual (cited above) circulated widely. The younger Bononcini underwent a period of training in counterpoint with Giovanni Paolo Colonna in Bologna; and another leading composer of vocal music, Corelli's friend Giacomo Antonio Perti, whilst enjoying a successful career in Bologna went to Parma to improve his contrapuntal skills under the guidance of the choirmaster Giovanni Corsi da Celano. Perti intended to write a counterpoint treatise and publish it as his op. 3, in order „to demonstrate with the greatest brevity and clarity possible the manner of applying all the principles of music to the modern style“ – a task he unfortunately was never to accomplish.<sup>27</sup>

What, then, did counterpoint mean to musicians from the Papal States in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century? Essentially the word stood for an Aristotelian *techné* or Horatian *ars* – i. e. a technical knowledge – which enabled composers and performers alike to craft voices onto one another so as to produce harmony. It was, in brief, what enabled them to improvise or write better polyphony. In this sense, it was equivalent to other techniques of human expression such as rhetoric (*oratoria*) – the discipline that enabled orators to improvise or write better speeches – and drawing (*disegno*) – the discipline that enabled painters to produce better pictures. Across northern and central Italy counterpoint was the lingua franca of musicians – not an anachronistic theoretical system unrelated to the actual development of musical practice but still the fundamental basis of music pedagogy, composition, theory and to a lesser extent performance.

Essential to contrapuntal thinking was the skill of imagining music that was not written down. Contrapuntal devices, that is, relied on an ability to visualise in the mind complementary parts prior to their actual utterance. Thus, unlike 20<sup>th</sup>-century approaches to analysis, 17<sup>th</sup>-century approaches to composition were often generative and rarely reductive. In the Corelli piece under scrutiny the technical procedure is doubly generative. On the one hand Corelli derived further material from a prime subject by way of lateral expansion – if a spatial metaphor may be permitted here. On the other hand he created the aural impression of a multiplicity of subjects by constantly dislocating the constituent tetrachords to various *loci* in the musical texture. In addition, Corelli's technique is generative also in the more traditional sense: the *cantus firmus* so devised, whether uttered by a specific part or spread out across different parts, engenders new musical material in the form of its own counterpoints. In the Adagio Corelli developed two interdependent ideas, both in relation to the enlarged subject:

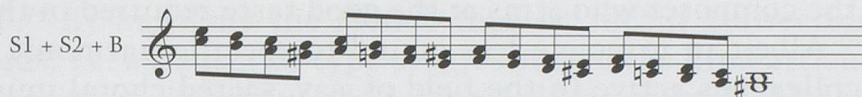
<sup>27</sup> Anne Schnoebelen (with Marc Vanscheeuwijck), „Perti, Giacomo Antonio“, in: Deane Root (ed.), *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*; [www.oxfordmusiconline.com](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com) (12.04.2015).



- a) harmonisation in simple counterpoint at the lower third (see Ex. 4) and  
 b) canonic imitation at the pitch interval of a unison and at the time interval of a minim (see Ex. 5).

When the leading voice in the canon is split between the various parts, the ensuing imitations assume a slightly different guise, of course, but the time interval stays the same throughout. Hence, they are best described as canonic imitations between the two sopranos at the unison in bar 13 and in bar 101, and at the upper fourth in bar 93; between the second soprano and the bass at the lower twelfth in bar 21; between the bass and the first soprano at the upper octave in bar 2; between the bass and the second soprano at the upper double octave in bar 91 (see Ex. 5).

Ex. 4: Arcangelo Corelli, Sonata op. 1, no. 4: 2<sup>nd</sup> movement (Adagio), counterpoint.



Ex. 5: Arcangelo Corelli, Sonata op. 1, no. 4: 2<sup>nd</sup> movement (Adagio), imitations.

Yet Corelli seems to have been alert to the risk of overdoing it in this case. Typically for his way of thinking, he sacrificed several opportunities for imitation, however captivating they may have been to him, rather than spoiling the Adagio's tonal content. In fact, the same devices could not have been applied to the subject in its original format if not at the cost of considerably expanding the piece's tonal repertoire as well as increasing its range by a major third. Another glimpse at Ex. 5 will show that on at least four occasions Corelli either did not resort to a possible imitation or did not carry on with the one already begun: in both sopranos in bar 3<sup>1</sup>; in the second soprano in bar 9<sup>3</sup>; in the bass in bar 11<sup>1</sup>.



In other words, Corelli could not have it both ways. He had to compromise between an *ars recte modulandi* and an *ars bene modulandi* – between the technical perfection expected from all professional composers and the musical perfection expected from the very best amongst professional composers.<sup>28</sup> Contemporary musicians were fully aware of this aesthetic dilemma. Lorenzo Penna concluded the second book of his music treatise by warning the beginner student of composition that „for the counterpoint to be praised, it is not sufficient that it be correct but that it be noble and not ordinary [...]“.<sup>29</sup> Pitoni's *Guida armonica* was the most consistent attempt from the time to account for these technical subtleties in relation to the work of numerous composers, including Corelli's. In his analysis of a passage from the first Allegro of the sonata op. 1, no. 3, Pitoni justified Corelli's use of a diminished twelfth between the bass and the second violin by claiming that „sometimes it is permitted because of the resulting good effect which is produced by the art and mastery of the composer who aims at the good taste required in these minute styles [...]“.<sup>30</sup> Albeit in principle less bound to specific harmonic procedures than their colleagues active in the field of, say, sacred choral music, specialists of instrumental ensemble music had their own set of compositional and performative constraints related to the far more elusive notion of good taste.<sup>31</sup>

### III.

Lest the above attempt at an aesthetically-oriented analysis of Corelli's music be judged guilty of perpetuating its own anachronism, I should like to note in conclusion that the dichotomy between linear counterpoint and triadic harmony underlying most discussions of late 17<sup>th</sup>-century works is a false one. The fact is that at the time the concept of harmony did not stand in opposition to the concept of counterpoint. Musicians in northern and central Italy would not have subscribed to Knud Jeppesen's standard distinction between a musical texture „in which we perceive the chief structural elements in terms of melodic lines, that is to say, horizontally“ and a musical texture „in which the fundamental consideration is the harmonic structure, or, as we may say,

<sup>28</sup> Pietro Cerone, *El melopeo y maestro tractado de musica theorica y pratica*, Naples: Giovanni Battista Gargano and Lucrezio Nucci, 1613, 209 and 612. This musical terminology adapted Quintilian's rhetorical distinction between *ars recte loquendum* („correct speech“) and *ars bene loquendum* („elegant speech“) as expounded in his famous treatise *Institutio Oratoria*.

<sup>29</sup> Lorenzo Penna, *Li primi albori musicali*, Bologna: Giacomo Monti, 1672, 141: „che non basta, che il Contrapunto stia bene, mà acciò sia stimato, deve fare, che sià nobile, & esca dall'ordinario [...]“.

<sup>30</sup> Pitoni, *Guida armonica* (see n. 23), 14 „qualche volta si permette per il buon effetto, che ne risulta prodotto dall'arte, e maestria del Compositore intento al buon gusto dovuto in questi stili minuti [...]“.

<sup>31</sup> For contemporaneous, general discussions of good taste, see for example Camillo Ettorri, *Il buon gusto ne' componimenti rettorici*, Bologna: The Heirs to Francesco Maria Sarti, 1696; and Ludovico Antonio Muratori, *Riflessioni sopra il buon gusto intorno le scienze e le arti*, Venice: Alvise Pavini, 1708.



the vertical aspect of music.<sup>32</sup> Actually, for them all music in two or more parts, with or without accompaniment, was harmonic. The only conceptual opposition they acknowledged was that between monophony (*canto fermo*) and polyphony (*canto figurato*), i.e. between music for one part (with or without accompaniment) and music for two or more parts (with or without accompaniment). Other than that, whether the compositional fabric was dyadic or triadic, imitative or non-imitative, or – should one find these categories meaningful – modal or tonal, it was always called a ‚harmonic composition‘ (*armonico componimento*); and the discipline of music itself was frequently referred to as the ‚harmonic art‘ (*arte armonica*) *par excellence*. As Gioseffo Zarlino succinctly put it, „generally speaking [...] music is nothing else than harmony [...]“.<sup>33</sup>

Alfred Mann has pointed out that „it was not until the publication of Jean-Philippe Rameau’s *Traité de l’harmonie* in 1722 that the modern meaning was introduced“.<sup>34</sup> By harmony the French theorist meant a directional progression of chords, i.e. a ‚cadential-type progression‘ of the kind articulated by the tonic, subdominant, dominant and tonic triads for example. Not only was this conception different from Zarlino’s, for whom harmony was a progression of consonances and dissonances *tout court*; it was also bound to offend the sensibilities of those song composers for whom melody rather than harmony was of paramount importance. Hence, Rameau’s contention that „melody derives from harmony“ elicited the reaction of Johann Mattheson amongst others, who countered: „We however consider melody to be the basis of everything in the art of composition“.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the tension between these various mentalities still remained partially in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, for example in the speculative work of Johann Philipp Kirnberger<sup>36</sup> and the contemporaneous compositions of Haydn and Mozart.

The simultaneous presence of diverse modes of thinking harmonically was a defining characteristic of 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century musical cultures. The vogue for the Spanish guitar, for instance, must have contributed in no small way to the spreading of a mentality which valued chord progressions above anything

<sup>32</sup> Knud Jeppesen, *Counterpoint. The Polyphonic Vocal Style of the Sixteenth Century*, translated by Glen Haydon, New York: Prentice-Hall, 1939, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Gioseffo Zarlino, *Le istituzioni harmoniche*, Venice: Francesco Senese, 1561, 10: „in universale parlando [...] Musica non è altro che Harmonia [...]“.

<sup>34</sup> Alfred Mann, *Theory and Practice. The Great Composer as Student and Teacher*, New York: Norton, 1987, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Traité de l’harmonie reduite à ses principes naturels*, Paris: Jean-Baptiste-Christophe Ballard, 1722, 138: „la Melodie provient de l’Harmonie“; Johann Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, Hamburg: Christian Herold, 1739, 132: „Wir legen hergegen die Melodie zum Grunde der gantzen Setz-Kunst“. In his *Démonstration du principe de l’harmonie servant de base à tout l’art musical théorique et pratique*, Paris: Durand, 1750, Rameau harmonised a major scale by means of tonic, subdominant and dominant triads solely.

<sup>36</sup> Johann Philipp Kirnberger, *Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik*, four vols, Berlin: G. J. Decker and G. L. Hartung, 1771–1779.



else.<sup>37</sup> And so must have improvisatory and semi-improvisatory performing styles at the keyboard or thorough-bass practices on the necked lutes and on the organ. Harpsichord players, on the other hand, maintained for much longer a manner of accompanying vocal and instrumental solos in which counterpoint was highly valued – possibly due to the thinner sonority of harpsichords and spinets compared to that of organs. Tharald Borgir has argued convincingly that the very discipline of thorough-bass playing underwent crucial changes at the time: greater emphasis than ever was put on the melodic importance of the bass, on its equality with the solo voice or voices and on the independence of the improvised inner parts – in short, on contrapuntal thinking.<sup>38</sup>

Subsequent adaptations did not affect the original conception of a musical work either. A contemporary guitarist such as Gaspar Sanz, who spent some time in Rome studying with Colista, was surely capable of extracting chords from a Corelli sonata for the purpose of performance.<sup>39</sup> Still, the sonata could have originated in the composer's mind as a dyadic rather than a triadic scaffolding; and so could the chordal progressions out of the original intervallic progressions. What mattered to the performer, as opposed to the composer, in the here and now of the execution was the overall musical result. Guitar players knew all too well, just as their modern counterparts do, that the chords' lowest notes were hardly perceivable when strumming the strings and in any case hardly more relevant than the chords' sonorities as such. It was pointless to try to bring out the bass voice, for the solution of the technical problems posed by the performance of a sonata on the five-course guitar entailed a profound reinterpretation of the genre.

These shifts in the emphasis musicians put on various aspects of the compositional fabric were common even in a field, that of music theory, which one would imagine less inclined than music performance to compromise. Whilst recognising triads as discrete entities, northern-Italian theorists from Spataro to Zarlino and beyond did not treat them functionally – as has been claimed – but, more empirically, as aural phenomena.<sup>40</sup> Thomas Christensen has noticed that, „for all their emphasis upon chords as fundamental constituents of music“, German theorists such as Burmeister, Harnisch and Lippius also treated „triads as implicitly subordinate to intervallic/contrapuntal

<sup>37</sup> Richard Hudson, „Chordal Aspects of the Italian Dance Style 1500–1650“, *Journal of the Lute Society of America* 3 (1970), 35–52; idem, „The Concept of Mode in Italian Guitar Music during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century“, *AMI* 42/3–4 (1970), 163–183; idem, „The Music in Italian Tablatures for the five-course Spanish Guitar“, *Journal of the Lute Society of America* 4 (1971), 21–42.

<sup>38</sup> Tharald Borgir, *The Performance of the Basso Continuo in Italian Baroque Music*, Ann Arbor and Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987, 161–163. See also Giulia Nuti, *The Performance of Italian Basso Continuo. Style in Keyboard Accompaniment in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Gaspar Sanz, *Istruccion de musica sobre la guitarra española*, Saragozza: [Gaspar Sanz], 1697.

<sup>40</sup> For a competing view, see Bonnie J. Blackburn, „On Compositional Process in the Fifteenth-Century“, *JAMS* 40/2 (1987), 210–284.



features".<sup>41</sup> The opposite was also true. As Carl Dahlhaus has remarked, harmonic formulae such as the *Folia* and the *Passamezzo antico* may well have originated as descant-bass counterpoints but were often reinterpreted as chord progressions.<sup>42</sup> In fact, the enormous popularity throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century of such genres was due precisely to their harmonic Janus face. The field of music education yields perhaps the most persuasive evidence for an enduring contrapuntal mentality. The Neapolitan tradition of instructional basses and trebles (*partimenti* and *solfeggiamenti*) spread by Gaetano Greco and Francesco Durante, Fux's reformed and systematised model of contrapuntal pedagogy, Friedrich Niedt's and Johann David Heinichen's composition teaching through thorough-bass playing, are all music-educational strands contemporaneous with one another and indeed with Rameau's theories, too. However different on the surface, they betray a shared conception grounded in counterpoint. In all instances the purpose of the exercises, whether written or improvised, sung or played at the keyboard, was to gather hands-on familiarity with the commonest 'movements' or – translated into modern pedagogical language – to master voice leading. All these music teachers belonged to the generation following Corelli's. The instructional works of Penna, Gasparini, Pasquini and Alessandro Scarlatti, however, bear witness to the existence of similar pedagogical traditions in Corelli's days.<sup>43</sup>

All the same, some commentators have raised the suspicion that such distinctions may be in the end negligible and ultimately dependent on the individual analyst's agenda. In an often-cited study on the origins of harmonic tonality, Dahlhaus has stressed the similarities between the pre- and the post-Rameau paradigms, by noting that „a chain of sixths striving toward the perfection of an octave differs of course in degree, but not in principle, from Rameau's progression of seventh chords whose goal is a triad – an *accord parfait*."<sup>44</sup> In both instances the same process of musical tension-resolution is seemingly at work: the motion from instability to stability; or from a partial stability to definitive stability. And yet one may wish to explore at greater length the implications of such differences of degree as there are for the historical understanding of Corelli's creative process – if for no other reason than we know already what is left in and out with the more consolidated methods (see above). In finding a place within Corellian scholarship for the so-called 'historicist' approach to the analysis of early music, one may show not only that late 17<sup>th</sup>-century analytical tools are more than adequate to the task

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Christensen, „The Spanish Baroque Guitar and Seventeenth-Century Triadic Theory“, *JMT* 36/1 (1992), 8.

<sup>42</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Studies on the Origin of Harmonic Tonality*, translated by Robert O. Gjerdingen, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, 102.

<sup>43</sup> Penna, *Albori musicali* (see n. 29), Book 3; Gasparini, *Armonico pratico* (see n. 9); Bernardo Pasquini, „Regole del sig. Bernardo Pasquini per bene accompagnare con il cembalo. Ad uso di Giuseppe Gaetani da Fofi“, Rome, 1715; Alessandro Scarlatti, „Per accompagnare il cembalo, ò organo, ò altro stromento“, circa 1715.

<sup>44</sup> Dahlhaus, *Harmonic Tonality* (see n. 42), 29.



of accounting for contemporary works but also that, by reinvesting in the analysis of small-scale compositional procedures, we may come closer to an appreciation of Corelli's poetics of violin music from the perspective of contemporary connoisseurs. Thus, rather than drawing a divide between 'the Age of Counterpoint' and 'the Era of Common-Practice Tonality', and allocating musical objects from the past to either side, it may be more useful to attempt to grasp the cognitive set-up behind individual works of art; or – to paraphrase Wölfflin himself – to attempt to reconstruct in each individual instance the composer's mode of musical disposition, his 'aural schema'.