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A New Model for Modal Analysis in Baroque Music

ABSTRACT

Background

Developing a model for modal analysis in early music is a deeply fraught enterprise. As Hans-Georg Gadamer has shown, both historicist (emic) and presentist (etic) approaches present hermeneutic and epistemological pitfalls. In music, the often discrepant relationship between theory and practice — two distinct if often commingled creative spheres — is complicated by the many historical genres subsumed under our word ‘theory’ and the many activities comprising ‘practice’, including a continuum of performance, improvisation, and composition in a variety of contexts and styles. Modal parameters, terminology, and classification schemes originating in relation to one repertoire or theoretical agenda are applied with peril to another. Mere contemporaneity is no guarantor of veracity, relevance, or analytical helpfulness.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

A newly developed model for change in modal theory and practice, arising from a forthcoming book on the transition from modes to keys, furnishes a helpful etic framework for relating emic modal concepts. This paper presents this conceptual model and considers its relevance for analysis of Monteverdi’s 1610 Vespers of the Blessed Virgin. The psalm settings and motets of Monteverdi’s Vespers furnish a stylistically diverse but delimited repertory within which to demonstrate this *rapprochement* between etic and emic approaches.

Methods

This meta-analytical approach, though itself etic, arises from a deeply emic study of historical music theory texts. We can make sense of the chaotic state of late Renaissance and Baroque modal theory by recognizing that theorists’ representations of mode were shaped by the ongoing interplay of three historical layers or theoretical meta-parameters: 1) the *tonus-modus* continuum expressed in medieval chant theory; 2) monophonic vs. polyphonic modal traits articulated in Renaissance theory; and 3) vocal vs. instrumental (and specifically keyboard) ways of organizing tonal space arising with the introduction of *basso continuo* c. 1600. The transition from modes to keys — there is no single ‘path’ — unfolds within this three-dimensional dynamic. Fundamentally, however, this transition may be understood as a shift from a preeminently vocal, ladder-like conceptualization of tonal space, rooted in the gamut, to a keyboard, increasingly circular conceptualization. These three layers in historical theory in turn furnish a useful meta-analytical framework. Locating historical theoretical sources within this three-fold dynamic is essential to evaluating their degree of relevance for elucidating the generative and structural principles of the music itself.

Implications

In Monteverdi’s Vespers, the motets based on psalm-tone *cantus firmi* reflect the deep influence of the oldest historical layer, that of *tonus*. At the same time, these and others of the motets reflect the next historical layer, that of Renaissance polyphonic norms, affecting cleffing, imitation, cadential degrees, and *facta*. Finally, other modal traits, including transposition levels and certain harmonic norms, especially for cadential approaches, arise from the pervasive role of keyboard, including *basso continuo*. These traits include the negotiation between vocal pitch levels and keyboard temperaments as well as the torque (exploited by Monteverdi) between vertical and horizontal elements, between harmonic and contrapuntal considerations on the part of the composer. While the differing but often admixed generative premises of *cantus-firmus* and free movements, of old-style polyphony and modern monody, call for a variety of historically informed analytic approaches, the most cohesive view of this transitional masterpiece will be afforded if these approaches are related to one another via the three-fold meta-analytic framework.

Keywords

Modality, Tonality, Early Tonality, Early Music, Analytical Theory.

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