Nicolas Meeùs[*1]

[*]*Institut de Recherche en Musicologie (IReMus), France*
[1]nicolas.meeus@sorbonne-universite.fr

Theoretical Aspects of the Modal and Tonal Organization of Renaissance Polyphony

ABSTRACT

The problem of the modal and tonal organization of Renaissance polyphony remains complex. Powers' question 'Is mode real?' (Powers 1992) may have left us in an 'epistemological impasse' (Mengozzi 2008). We must ask anew: What do we mean when we say that an early polyphonic composition is modal? The question does not concern so much what composers thought than what they did. More specifically, it is not whether composers consciously wrote modal music, but whether we are justified thinking that the music they wrote is modal.

I will shortly present the questions at stake in five specific domains: scales and systems; pitch and transposition; tonal or modal centricity; melodic formulas; chromaticisms; and chord progressions.

Scales and System

Modes are often described as scales and the difference between modes is said to result from their being based on different scales. But, in some sense at least, the modes of Occidental music are all built on the same scale, the diatonic one (possibly with chromatic inflections, but these do not really alter the overall diatonicity), and the modes differ from each other only in the position of their 'reference' or 'nominal' note — their final — within this diatonic scale. Mode, in other words, is as much a matter of tonal center as one of scale.

Modality differs from tonality in that it is based on the diatonic system, asymmetric and internally hierarchized — while the chromatic system at the background of tonality is symmetric and without internal hierarchy. The diatonic hierarchy to which I refer here is that described for instance in Handschin's *Der Toncharacter* (1948). Medieval theorists spoke of it in terms of the *qualitas* of the notes and Guido's theory of the *modi vocum* (Meeùs 2010) describes qualities of the notes that are independent of the particular modal scale in which they appear.

Pitch and Transposition

Renaissance compositions are usually written either without signature or with the signature of one flat, in what have been called *cantus durus* and *cantus mollis*, or *systema naturale* and *systema transpositum*. This dual system fulfilled two purposes. One was to bring the voices within a range comfortable for the singers, especially if they sang with the accompaniment of instruments of fixed sounds such as the organ. The second purpose was to ensure that each written part remained within the limits of the staff (Meeùs 2009). But the choice of one or the other notation also determines the position of the 'reference note' (the final) within the ambitus of each part.

Powers (1992) apparently assumes that the choice of either *cantus durus* or *cantus mollis* was a free choice of the composer, as was the choice of writing either in *chiavi naturali* or in *chiavette*. But the reality is more complex and the choices are often constrained by circumstances. Besides, many pieces were notated in neither of the two standard systems of clefs. The notational choices, their constraints and their relation to pitch deserve more study.

Centricity

A modal composition needs a tonal center. If the tonal center merely is the final note or the final chord, then all compositions are modal (since all have a final) — or, rather, none is modal because, as Powers said, mode in such case is not 'real'.

If mode is real, it must be possible to perceive the tonal centricity before the final, possibly even during the whole of the composition. One aim of our analyses is to determine how the tonal center is asserted — i.e. how the modal scale is hierarchized. Common conceptions on this point include the planning of cadences, the frequency of occurrence of the various notes, melodic profiles, etc.

The articulation of the modal octave in a 5th and a 4th, and possibly the articulation of the 5th in a major and a minor 3rd, creates a 'modal space' similar to the tonal space described by Schenker (Meeùs 2013). The occupation of this modal space by the various voices of the polyphonic web contributes to creating and asserting the tonal center.

Melodic Formulas

One characteristic of monodic modality is that the inner hierarchies within each mode are partly dependent on those inherent in the diatonic system. In other words, whatever the mode, it inherits hierarchical values of its degrees from the diatonic system in which it is written. This was the basis of Guido's theory of the *modi vocum (*Meeùs 2010).

In several cases, the diatonic hierarchy expresses itself in an underlying pentatonicism. This may form one way to distinguish, say, between C modes and transposed F modes. Considering that the hierarchically strong notes of the diatonic system may be C D F G A (a pentatonic scale), an F mode may stress F G A C D (or, transposed, C D E G A) while a C mode would be articulated on C D F G A.

My conviction is that modality, in general, is characterized by a tension between the diatonic hierarchy, which may be said 'pre-compositional', and the hierarchies that arise from the mode itself. In some modes, the modal hierarchies confirm the diatonic ones: these modes are particularly stables. In other cases, the tension between modal and diatonic hierarchies is particularly perceptible. *Mi* modes evidence this because *mi*, the tonal center, usually does not belong to the important degrees in the diatonic hierarchy.

Chromaticism

Modal compositions, in principle essentially diatonic, at times cover the whole chromatic scale, or large parts of it, much faster than any common-practice tonal composition ever would. This seems to be because chromatic alterations in modal compositions come, so to say, *causa pulchritudinis* (affecting mainly the third of the triads that they majorize), while in tonal compositions they arise *causa necessitatis* (in modulatory shifts from one key, from one tonal span to another). Chromatic alterations in Renaissance polyphony remain ephemeral. They do not really affect the overall diatonicity, which remains in either *cantus durus* or *cantus mollis*. Chromatic alterations in common tonal practice, on the contrary, establish areas of tonal stability corresponding to transposed diatonies.

Progressions

The taste for consonant triadic sonorities in the 16th century allows us to evaluate the counterpoint and harmony in terms of root progressions. As soon as this evaluation is possible, it puts several points in evidence.

The first is that polyphonic compositions often use seven different roots or more — that is that each degree of the diatonic scale may serve as a root. This again is a situation that is not found in common-practice tonality, where each tonal span occupies four or five roots — a tonal composition without modulation may be satisfied of four roots. The larger number of roots in modal polyphony probably reflects more diffuse tonal functions of each of them, outside cadences at any rate.

Roots in modal polyphony also display a moderate but striking directional tendency favoring descending fifths, descending thirds and ascending seconds. This asymmetry may result almost mechanically from the addition of consonant counterpoints around a melody *prius facta*. But it may also result from an unconscious or conscious will of the composers. The origin of the directional tendency of root progressions and its increase as compositions progress towards tonality is a phenomenon that deserves more study.

Final Reflections

Theories of modality too often reduce to theories of modal classification, while what we need is a theory of modality itself. Even Powers' theory of the tonal types does not escape that problem. Yet, knowing whether or not a composition is modal is more important than to be able to classify it in this or that mode, in this or that tonal type.

Keywords

Mode, Notation, Transposition, Melodic Formulas, Chromaticism, Progressions.

REFERENCES

Handschin, Jacques, 1948. *Der Toncharakter*. Zürich: Atlantis.

Meeùs, Nicolas, 2008. 'Notations modales au XVIᵉ siècle', in Mark Delaere and Pieter Bergé (eds.), *Recevez ce mien petit labeur, Studies in Renaissance Music in Honour of Ignace Bossuyt*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 179–94.

——, 2010. '*Modi vocum*: réflexions sur la théorie modale médiévale', in Anna R. Addessi, Ignazio Macchiarella, Massimo Privitera, and Marco Russo (eds.), *Con-Scientia Musica. Contrappunti per Rossana Dalmonte e Mario Baroni*. Livorno: LIM, 21-34.

——, 2013. 'Modalité de la polyphonie pré-tonale', in Henri Gonnard (ed.), *Regards sur la tonalité*. Sampzon: Delatour, 169–78.

Mengozzi, Stefano, 2008. 'Getting to Emic Music Through Etic Categories: Rethinking Harold Powers's Tonal Types', paper presented at the *Early Music: Context and Idea* Conference. Kraków: Institute of Musicology Jagiellonian University. (<https://fliphtml5.com/avay/mgrn>, accessed 20/04/2023.)

Powers, Harold, 1992. 'Is Mode Real? Pietro Aron, the Octenary System, and Polyphony', *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* 16: 9–52.