

Joel Lester. *Compositional Theory in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992.

*Reviewed by Gordon D. McQuere*

A good book often raises as many questions as it answers, and Joel Lester's study of an important era in the history of music theory is no exception. This fine book undertakes the formidable task of sorting through the array of ideas current in the eighteenth century and synthesizing the many studies that have appeared over the last few decades. The questions raised in the process range from matters of detail to broad, epistemological ones. Many are invitations to further studies in this rich field. The book's historical sweep and command of source materials are remarkable. Indeed, any one of the book's eleven chapters can function independently as a survey of some aspect of the era. Where appropriate, the survey begins a century or more earlier in order to place the ideas or individuals in proper context.

The first three chapters provide such a historical context for the remainder. Chapter One concerns the influence of Zarlino on theorists of subsequent centuries. Lester convincingly argues that understanding Zarlino's contribution is essential to understanding the many streams in eighteenth-century music theory: "The controversies over musical style that split the world of composition into *prima pratica* and *seconda pratica* (controversies in which Zarlino was an early participant) were crucial to the rise of thoroughbass, the evolution of major and minor keys, the continued existence of contrapuntal theory alongside growing harmonic perspectives, and also the use of rhetoric to explain the ordering and content of musical composition" (8). Chapters Two and Three begin surveying various traditions with species counterpoint (from its roots in the early sixteenth century through Fux) and the thoroughbass. Fux is seen as "the last important theorist of the *prima pratica* tradition" (35), but one whose system had influence for centuries to follow. Lester concludes that Fux's work was surprisingly up-to-date: "It is a document of its own era, as well as a testament to eternal verities" (48). The brief discussion of the later fate of the Fuxian species tradition suggests that a substantial study of its influence

in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would be in order. Chapter Three traces the thoroughbass tradition beginning from its roots around 1600. One of the more useful parts of this discussion concerns the role of unfigured basses, particularly as they relate to the “rule of the octave” (69-74). Raised but not settled is the question of when thoroughbass is a compositional device and when a performance tool. The brief discussion of composition instruction from the aspect of thoroughbass in the work of Niedt (66-68) suggests that further explorations would be rewarding. Possible questions include who used thoroughbass in which way and how did its application to composition change over time.

Chapters Four and Five are devoted to Rameau, his early works and later works, respectively. It is hardly a criticism to point out that Lester’s discussion is barely adequate to the needs of a topic so vast. Once again, he is strongest at sorting through and tracing the influences on Rameau. Not clear is whether Rameau (or any of his predecessors) conceived of the triad as a “thing,” a concrete entity, as in thoroughbass, or as an abstraction, a way of understanding a musical phenomenon. Clarification of this point would enlighten the discussion of the ways in which a theory of inversion was known before Rameau (96-100). Also incomplete is the discussion of the plagal or “irregular” cadence, as it relates to the “chord of the added sixth.” That Rameau begins by assuming two chord types, the perfect chord and the chord of the seventh, is not at issue. But the “double emploi” requires that the fourth scale step, not the second, be the root of the added sixth chord when it resolves to the tonic (ii6/5-I, if you will). Even in the *Traité de l’harmonie* (1722), Rameau writes in regard to the irregular cadence, “The chord formed by adding a sixth to the perfect chord is called the chord of the large sixth. Although this chord may be derived naturally from the seventh chord, here it should be regarded as original.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the important question of whether the chord of the added sixth represents a fundamental harmony for the fourth degree (later subdominant) along with the triad (tonic) and the chord of the seventh (dominant) remains unaddressed.

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<sup>1</sup>*Treatise on Harmony*, trans. Philip Gossett (New York: Dover, 1971), 75.

Chapter Six, on Mattheson and melodic theory, introduces a fourth stream of influence on eighteenth-century theory, that of rhetorical theory. In some ways, rhetorical theories as applied to music are as much a part of compositional practice as is harmony. Conspicuously absent here is a discussion, similar to those in earlier chapters, that would trace the rhetorical tradition at least from Joachim Burmeister (*Musica poetica*, 1606) through Mattheson (*Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, 1739) as a preparation for the formal theories coming later in the century. I am reminded of the excellent study by Mark Evan Bonds,<sup>2</sup> which concentrates on the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I am not aware of an extended study of the preceding period from the standpoint of the history of theory.

Chapters Seven and Eight study the beginnings of the fusion of counterpoint and harmony and the next generation's developments in harmonic theory. Included are brief, useful explications of the ideas and teaching methods of, among others, Martini, Mozart, Albrechtsberger, Sorge, Tartini (hardly compositional theory), Daube, and Vogler.

Chapter Nine takes up the Marpurg-Kirnberger controversies and is particularly helpful in regard to Marpurg's ideas and the distinction in his work between speculative and practical theory. Lester raises the question of the possible roots of Kirnberger's ideas (255) in the Bach circle in the 1730s and 1740s as a possible area of fruitful further investigation.

The developments in theories of melody and form in the work of Joseph Riepel are the concern of Chapter Ten. This chapter is the natural continuation of the sixth, on Mattheson, and a proper preface for the last chapter, on those aspects of Koch's work that fall in the eighteenth century. Koch's work ranges widely into the various streams of eighteenth-century theory. At the level of details, this last chapter is one of the most stimulating and raises questions worthy of further study about the integration of the various theoretical disciplines.

On the face of it, these chapters make an excellent outline. Indeed, the outline suggests a potent thesis for the entire book, a thesis

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<sup>2</sup>*Wordless Rhetoric: Musical Form and the Metaphor of the Oration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

that is hinted at but not developed: that the several strands investigated (counterpoint, figured bass, harmony, and rhetoric) finally merge in the work of Koch. The book's aim is rather more modest than this: "Finally, this work should be regarded as a preliminary sketch of a history of eighteenth-century theory," and "My aim is to present a comprehensive view of the century" (6). While the book reaches its goal in fine fashion, I am disappointed by its missed opportunity.

Perhaps the most substantial questions raised by the book concern the meaning of composition. What are the boundaries of compositional theory? What can be taught, and how much can the process be conceptualized? The book does not directly address them; by not doing so, it leaves stones unturned in crucial places, rhetorical theory being first among them. Parallel is the unanswered question of whose definition of composition is being used, a twentieth-century one or an eighteenth-century one. Thus the word "compositional" in the title seems arbitrary; the book might as easily be considered an exploration of eighteenth-century *musica practica*.

Even with its weaknesses, the book must be considered a major contribution to the history of music theory. Over the last few decades, the discipline has grown from having available only a handful of documents and a few pioneering articles to experiencing a veritable flood of materials: good editions, skilled translations, and an increasing number of highly focused articles and collections. The present, exemplified by this book, finds an increasing number of extended studies of an era or an individual theorist. We can aspire to a further stage of pure monographic studies of the ideas themselves. Each new stage of scholarship in this young discipline has relied on its predecessors' work. Lester's book is a landmark.