

BOOK REVIEW

Bonnie J. Blackburn, Edward E. Lowinsky, and Clement A. Miller, eds. *A Correspondence of Renaissance Musicians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Reviewed by Ralph Lorenz

A Correspondence of Renaissance Musicians provides us with a monumental study of 110 letters from the years 1517-1543 that were collected by the Venetian music theorist Giovanni del Lago. Fifteen correspondents are represented, chief among them music theorists Giovanni Spataro of Bologna, Pietro Aaron of Florence, and del Lago. Del Lago intended to publish twenty-two of these letters as *Epistole composte in lingua volgare*; he changed them to cast his reputation in a more favorable light and in so doing borrowed freely from other music theorists. He would have been shocked to see the letters in their present state, with all the unfavorable references to him that he meant to delete.¹ Spataro had hoped that his own letters “might interest a refined soul in the future” (64), but little did he realize that it would be 450 years until publication!

These letters have been the subject of previous studies, the most complete being Knud Jeppesen’s article, “Eine musiktheoretische Korrespondenz des früheren Cinquecento”² (*A Correspondence* is dedicated to the memory of Jeppesen). In 1747 Padre Martini came across the manuscripts in the Vatican Library and over the next twenty-six years obtained copies of the first seventy-two letters. Gaetano Gaspani, “the first historian to make extensive use of the

¹Much of the dialogue exchanged is quite vitriolic; del Lago in particular ran into problems with Spataro. After del Lago and Spataro’s relationship has become strained, for example, Spataro complains to Aaron in no. 50 that “No gain comes of dealing with such people, who are like a sterile field incapable of growing good fruit.”

²Knud Jeppesen, “Eine musiktheoretische Korrespondenz des früheren Cinquecento,” *Acta musicologica* 13 (1941): 3-39.

Correspondence” (7), completed the transcription in the mid-nineteenth century. Some of Aaron’s letters have also been transcribed by Peter Bergquist in his dissertation on Aaron.³ This updated study, however, makes the entire collection accessible and helps to put everything into proper context. Although Lowinsky died in 1985, he had already approved the edition of the first fifty-nine letters (ix).

The book contains eight very informative introductory chapters: “A Correspondence of Renaissance Musicians,” “History of the Manuscripts,” “Giovanni Spataro,” “Pietro Aaron,” “The Art of Composition,” “Giovanni del Lago and his *Epistole*,” “Giovanni del Lago’s ‘Authorities,’” and “Mensural Notation” (the letters themselves do not even start until p. 201). The letters are divided into four sections, of which the first provides the bulk of material and the most interesting: “The Correspondence between Giovanni Spataro, Marc’Antonio Cavazzoni, Giovanni del Lago, and Pietro Aaron.” Many of the letters are accompanied by individual commentaries. Helpful supplements include a biographical dictionary with entries on all the personal acquaintances mentioned by the writers and notes on problematic terms. The wealth of background information is marvelous.

For many reasons much of the correspondence has been inaccessible until now (Spataro’s handwriting in particular is difficult to decipher, the condition of the ink has deteriorated, etc.). The editors have cleaned up punctuation in the original Italian and have also provided condensed English versions of each letter, while cautioning that the English versions “should not be quoted in place of the original letters” (196). The writers of these letters were no different from other Renaissance figures in that they rarely credited sources for references, except when they called upon the “authorities” to substantiate an argument; the editors have painstakingly traced these sources for our benefit.

A Correspondence contains much biographical and historical information, but in this review I would like to focus on issues of particular interest to music theorists. The letters have important

³Peter Bergquist, “The Theoretical Writings of Pietro Aaron” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1964).

ramifications for the history of theory, especially concerning the major figures represented.

The emphasis favors practical over speculative theory, with frequent mention of contemporaneous compositions. Some of the dialogue provides useful information for modern pedagogy of sixteenth-century counterpoint. Spataro, a student of Bartolomeo Ramis, did not use rules for rules' sake and felt that advanced musicians should not necessarily be held to the same rules as beginners. In letter no. 11, for instance, Spataro tells Aaron that the rule of perfect consonances at the beginning and end of a piece is only for beginners in two-part counterpoint; he wants to allow for imperfect consonances at the end (297). It is interesting to see that Spataro often allows what we would consider to be "textbook" errors, by the use of intervening rests or quick note durations. In no. 17 he allows the tenor of his motet for Pope Leo X to move from C# to F# because he considers an intervening rest of a perfect breve to be sufficient for the ear to forget the C#; he goes on to provide similar musical examples from practice that do not even have the intervening rest (348-349). Most of the criticisms exchanged between Spataro and Aaron deal with contrapuntal problems, and elsewhere they include examples of "allowable" parallel perfect intervals (see for example no. 39). In no. 37 Spataro responds to Aaron's criticism of his motet, "Nativitas tua Dei genitrix," which contains an augmented octave between the alto and bass; Spataro claims that the ear accepts such dissonances if they occur on weak beats and are not sounded simultaneously.

One of the most significant aspects of *A Correspondence* deals with the compositional side of the history of theory, namely the use of a *cartella*, a type of erasable score tablet. This is significant because it sheds light on the controversial evolution from "successive composition" to "simultaneous conception"; for the first time we have discussion about composing music with the use of a *cartella* as score (121). Prior to this study the earliest known reference to the use of a

cartella was in 1606 by Cipriano de Rore.⁴ Jessie Ann Owens suggests, however, that Rore composed in parts rather than full score, and that scores were used for study or keyboard performance rather than composing.⁵ *A Correspondence* gives us direct evidence, though, of someone who used a *cartella* expressly for composing. In no. 18 Spataro asks del Lago to purchase and send a *cartella* for composing; in no. 54 he requests another of different size. In no. 49 Spataro apologizes to Aaron for having missed some errors when he copied music from the *cartella* without singing through it; this is significant because it shows that the finished product existed on the *cartella* before transfer to partbooks. (Though Spataro used it for composing, he checked for errors with a partner by singing works two voices at a time.) Blackburn suggests that works probably were not barred, but “the voices were probably simply aligned under each other” (123).

A good portion of the dialogue is devoted to mensuration and accompanying problems of notation. The important performance issue of the equal breve versus the equal minim (whether the breve or minim is the unchanging value from which other notes are derived) finds Spataro (see nos. 2 and 45) and late Aaron ascribing to the former, with del Lago and early Aaron (see no. 64, para. 4) to the latter, though del Lago apparently did not truly understand the differences (189). Spataro was influential in generating support for the equal-breve concept, until by around 1530 it was completely overtaken by the equal-minim school. These letters provide valuable information on how Renaissance musicians dealt with such issues of notation.

Another important subject, the theory of *coniuncta*, is discussed

⁴See Jessie Ann Owens, “The Milan Partbooks: Evidence of Cipriano de Rore’s Compositional Process,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 37 (1984): 270-298.

⁵Owens, 294-297. For other viewpoints see Edward E. Lowinsky, “On the Use of Scores by Sixteenth-Century Musicians,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 1 (1948): 17-23; and “Early Scores in Manuscript,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 13 (1960): 126-173; Bonnie J. Blackburn, “On Compositional Process in the Fifteenth Century,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 40 (1987): 210-284.

in several letters (e.g., nos. 15, 17, 30-31, 34, 53-60, and 71). In no. 15 Spataro disapproves of Aaron's hexachord on A^b, saying that it exists only in the imagination. He is also unhappy with Aaron's demonstration of the thirty mutations possible in the Guidonian hand because it only involves flats, so in no. 31 he offers to write the correct explanation for Aaron and have it published in Aaron's name (Aaron eventually published it in an untitled pamphlet) (439).

The relationship between music and text also gives rise to discussion. Del Lago advocates careful text setting, but Spataro does not feel that composers should be concerned with grammatical accent. No. 93 is del Lago's most interesting contribution because it gives a detailed account of grammar and word accents and how these relate to music.⁶

A Correspondence reminds us of the divergent definitions held by contemporaneous theorists. In no. 28 del Lago tells Spataro that the latter's definition of *fuga* is erroneous because it does not require similarity of solmization syllables; they both agree that imitation needs to be exact to be called true *fuga*, but Spataro counters in no. 29 that imitation can be exact through intervals and species, and that solmization was only invented as an aid for singers in remembering intervals. In nos. 28 and 29 Spataro and del Lago quibble over their understanding of *talea* and *color*; Spataro chides del Lago for using Johannes Tinctoris's definitions, for Spataro erroneously believed Tinctoris to have defined the two terms as equivalent (414). Spataro uses "*redicta*" to refer to a repeating duration sequence (412).

Other areas of interest include tuning (no. 99 describes how to accomplish a tempered tuning) and Adrian Willaert's "chromatic duo" (no. 12 confirms Willaert as its composer). Spataro found the duo (really a quartet) to be a very interesting though unsuccessful experiment. There is surprisingly little on mode, though del Lago's best contribution (no. 93) includes a summary of his basic modal theory.

For students *A Correspondence* provides valuable source readings

⁶Del Lago's patron was the poet Girolamo Molino, and the relationship of grammar to musical settings was probably an important topic in Molino's literary circle (893).

in the vein of Oliver Strunk's *Source Readings in Music History*,⁷ but whereas Norton has separated Strunk into affordable paperback volumes, *A Correspondence* carries quite a hefty price for its 1067 pages: \$150. Perhaps Oxford will eventually publish a less expensive version containing the most important letters, for the purpose of making it more accessible to students.

The editors are to be congratulated and thanked for undertaking such an immense project, the start of which dates back to Lowinsky's work in 1948. Their painstaking care has resulted in a valuable addition to the references available on the history of music theory.

⁷Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: Norton, 1950).