

Parallel and Contrary Motion
in the Madrigals of Giovanni da Cascia

Voice-leading norms have flipped since the development of polyphonic music. In the earliest two-part compositions, voices were expected to move in parallel fifths or octaves, whereas now that is precisely the sort of motion that is forbidden, and acceptable voice-leading is based upon contrary motion, as well as parallel thirds and sixths. In Italy, the switch in practice occurred largely during the 14th and 15th centuries. However, the exact mechanics and chronology of this shift in voice-leading practice remain poorly known. The trecento madrigals of Giovanni da Cascia offer insights into the way in which voice-leading norms changed and also where they stood during the early 1300's. In particular, Giovanni had a surprisingly advanced penchant for contrary motion and parallel sixths, despite a lingering tolerance for parallel fifths.

Giovanni da Cascia (also known as Giovanni da Firenze) is a composer of the early trecento whose extant corpus consists of sixteen madrigals and three cacce.¹ The madrigals are all two-voice compositions and are thus especially clear indicators of how the composer felt voices should move relative to one another.

¹ Kurt von Fischer and Gianluca D'Agostino, "Giovanni da Cascia," in *Grove Music Online*. <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>>. Accessed 10 November 2010.

Giovanni shows in his madrigals clear preferences for certain types of motion. Appendix A catalogs the occurrence patterns of different types of motion (contrary, similar but non-parallel, parallel second, parallel third, etc.), where a “motion” consists of any simultaneous movement of both voices. In the table, parallel ninths have been grouped with parallel seconds, parallel tenths with parallel thirds, and so on.²

Contrary motion

Giovanni employs contrary motion significantly more often than he uses similar motion. In the six madrigals shown in Figure 1, instances of contrary motion make up between 56 and 75 percent of the total instances of motion. This proportion reveals that Giovanni’s madrigals were in some ways avant-garde. Contrary motion between voices is a relatively advanced device in discant, and it took centuries for it to supplant the early reliance on similar motion.

A number of figures occur across madrigals and evidently form Giovanni’s compositional palette. The most obvious figure is the cadence, which almost invariably involves the tenor rising by step and the cantus declining by step, so as to achieve a unison (see Figure 1). This type of cadence prefigures the modern use of the leading tone.

² Leo Schrade ed. *Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century* (Monaco: Editions de L'Oiseau-Lyre, 1956), vol. 6, pp. 1-39.

Figure 1 *De' come dolcemente* (measures 58-59);

the accidental is suggested as ficta



In many madrigals, Giovanni includes passages (some a measure or longer) in which the voices move in inverse relation to each other – one going up when the other goes down. Such passages invariably end with the voices achieving an octave or perfect fifth. Figure 2 shows one such passage, which occurs both in *Anghel son bianco* and, transposed up a step, in *Fra mille corvi*. Figure 3 shows another figure involving continued contrary motion. Here, the tenor moves steadily upwards while the cantus moves steadily downwards, and the two voices eventually stop an octave apart.

Figure 2 *Anghel son bianco* (measures 42-43) and *Fra mille corvi* (94-95)

Figure 3 *Appress' un fiume* (measures 38-39)

Parallel fifths and octaves

When Giovanni does use similar motion, it is almost always parallel motion. His four preferred types of parallel motion are - in rough order of decreasing abundance - fifths, octaves, thirds, and sixths. Parallel fifths are abundant in all madrigals, with *Fra mille corvi* having a total of sixteen. Evidently, in Giovanni's time, parallel fifths were still perfectly acceptable, even if polyphony was coming to be dominated by contrary motion.

A potential difficulty here arises in the consideration that early trecento madrigals are believed to have made significant use of improvisation in the highly melismatized first and penultimate syllables of each line. Thus, much of the voice-

leading behavior of the melismatic sections that has come down to us in manuscripts may be due to the whim of performers, rather than the deliberations of the composer. In an article analyzing how improvisation may have shaped the madrigal, Brooks Toliver claims that the forms, tonalities, and intervallic relations in the melismatic parts are strongly influenced by their improvisational quality.³ Most relevantly here, Toliver believes that parallel fifths were particularly favored in the improvised sections because these intervals enabled the performers to tune with each other and keep together. He further claimed that tuning was particularly likely to occur at the midpoint of an improvised section.

Giovanni's madrigals offer material both to support and contradict Toliver's theses. In keeping with Toliver's predictions, there are several cases in which parallel fifths could have been used in tuning. Figure 4 shows one such example. This example occurred at the midpoint of a melismatic (improvised) section, just at the optimal point for tuning.

Figure 4 *Anghel son biancho* (measures 65-66)



³ Brooks Toliver, "Improvisation in the Madrigals of the 'Rossi Codex'," *Acta Musicologica* 64 (1992), pp. 168, 176.

However, parallel fifths occurred not merely in places of improvisation, but throughout the madrigals. Consider for instance the section of *Fra mille corvi* shown in Figure 5. It is syllabic and we can therefore assume that it was written by Giovanni, rather than improvised. Such a chain of parallel fifths indicates that this motion had not yet been demonized by Giovanni's time and that vestiges of the earlier polyphonic tradition remain, not only with performers but also with composers.

Figure 5 *Fra mille corvi* (measures 88-89), with suggested ficta accidental

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 2/4 time. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. Both staves show a chain of parallel fifths. The lyrics "ve - si ad ar - te" are written below each staff. A sharp sign is placed above the second note of the top staff, and a flat sign is placed below the second note of the bottom staff, indicating suggested ficta accidentals.

Like parallel fifths, parallel octaves abound in Giovanni's madrigals, and, in comparison, are much more likely to occur in chains. Giovanni favored chains of parallel intervals, using, at different points, thirds, fifths, sixths, and octaves. The phrase in Figure 5 is the only chain of parallel fifths to be found in the six madrigals I studied. However, there are five chains of parallel octaves, distributed over four of the six madrigals. Figure 6 shows an example.

Figure 6 *Donna gia fu' leggiadra* (measures 12-13)



Other parallel intervals

In his madrigals, Giovanni da Cascia used all types of parallel intervals – parallel seconds, thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths, sevenths, and octaves. While fifths and octaves are the most common, parallel thirds and sixths are also abundant. Fourths occur somewhat less frequently, while seconds and sevenths are rare.

The bounty of parallel thirds and sixths is particularly noteworthy. Polyphony relying on parallel thirds and sixths was to be popularized in Italy a century later, thanks to the influence of English composers. It is remarkable that such early trecento music as Giovanni's included quite long chains of parallel thirds and sixths. I identified three chains of parallel thirds (see Figure 7) and two chains of parallel sixths (see Figure 8). These figures are further evidence of a subtle progressivism in Giovanni's madrigals.

Figure 7 *Fra mille corvi* (measures 58-60)

Figure 7 shows a musical score for two voices in 2/4 time. The upper staff (treble clef) and lower staff (bass clef) both contain the lyrics "bec - co". The melody in the upper staff begins with a dotted quarter note on G4, followed by eighth notes A4-B4, and a quarter note C5. The lower staff begins with a dotted quarter note on G3, followed by eighth notes A3-B3, and a quarter note C4. Both parts end with a half note on C5 and C4 respectively, with a long horizontal line under the "co" syllable in both parts.

Figure 8 *Fra mille corvi* (measures 29-30)

Figure 8 shows a musical score for two voices in 2/4 time. The upper staff (treble clef) and lower staff (bass clef) both contain the lyrics "Fa". The melody in the upper staff begins with eighth notes G4-A4, followed by quarter notes B4-C5, and eighth notes D5-E5. The lower staff begins with eighth notes G3-A3, followed by quarter notes B3-C4, and eighth notes D4-E4. Both parts end with a half note on C5 and C4 respectively, with a long horizontal line under the "Fa" syllable in both parts.

Giovanni in perspective

It is instructive now briefly to compare the discant of Giovanni da Cascia with that of other composers – his contemporaries, predecessors, and successors. To this end, Appendix A summarizes the extent of parallel and contrary motion in six other works of two-voice a cappella polyphony. Two of these works are madrigals by Giovanni's contemporary Magister Piero,⁴ while two more are madrigals by Francesco Landini, an Italian composer of the mid-trecento.⁵ The remaining two

⁴ Schrade, *Polyphonic Music*, vol. 6, pp. 4-5, 18-19.

⁵ Leonard Ellinwood ed. *The Works of Francesco Landini*, 2nd ed. (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1970), pp. 3-6.

pieces are the (only) two-voice motets preserved in the Bamberg codex.⁶ These motets probably date from the mid-13th century, and were written in France, though they were compiled and circulated in Italy during the trecento and may have influenced Giovanni. (It is impossible to compare Giovanni's work with Italian madrigals of an earlier date, since Giovanni's were among the first of the genre.)

The madrigals of Piero appear slightly more archaic in discant style than those of Giovanni. Piero appears to write more parallel fifths and octaves than Giovanni, while writing fewer parallel thirds and sixths. Piero also uses contrary motion to a lesser degree than Giovanni. In *Si com'al canto*, contrary motion is only slightly more common than similar motion, making up only 51 percent of instances of motion. The particular discant figures and patterns used by Giovanni are largely absent from Piero.

Landini's madrigals are to Giovanni's as Giovanni's are to Piero's. Landini has, compared with Giovanni, fewer parallel fifths and octaves and, perhaps, more parallel sixths and thirds (in *Fa fa, metter bando et commandar*, there are as many as twenty parallel thirds, though in *Lucea nel prato* there is only one). Contrary motion is slightly more abundant than it is in Giovanni's madrigals. Landini's style is not, however, radically different from Giovanni's or even Piero's. Figure 9 shows Landini using parallel octaves and parallel fifths – in the same measure! Evidently, even by Landini's time, such motion was not yet absolutely outlawed.

⁶ Gordon A. Anderson ed. *The Compositions of the Bamberg Manuscript*, (American Institute of Musicology, 1977), pp. 142-144.

Figure 9 *Lucea nel prato* (measures 18-19), with ficta accidental added

The image shows a musical score for two parts: a vocal line (top) and a lute line (bottom). Both are in 4/2 time. The vocal line has lyrics 'suo pia - cer con - ten - [to]' and includes two triplet markings. The lute line has lyrics 'suo pia - cer con - ten - [to]' and includes a ficta accidental (a flat) under the note 'con'.

While the madrigals of Piero and Landini exhibit no great surprises given the music of Giovanni, the style of the Bamberg motets is quite unexpected. Almost all the discant of the two motets is in contrary motion. Contrary motions make up 86 percent of all motions in *Dulcis Ihesu memoria*. This is a greater percentage of contrary motion than in any of the trecento madrigals here discussed, and in a piece of music written a century earlier. Nor are parallel thirds absent from the motets; *Dulcis Ihesu memoria* uses twelve of them (out of a total of only sixteen instances of similar motion). Parallel fifths and octaves are present in the motets, but less so than in the trecento madrigals.

In only two kinds of motion do the Bamberg motets appear less “advanced” in discant style than madrigals: they contain no parallel sixths, and one motet (*Alma redemptoris mater omnium*) contains a very large number of parallel fourths, an interval which was later to go out of style. (None of the trecento madrigals use

parallel fourths to any significant degree.) Chains of parallel intervals do not occur in the motets, except for parallel fourths in *Alma redemptoris mater omnium*, of which there are three large chains, one of which is shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10 *Alma redemptoris mater omnium* (measures 54-56)

[fi]li - um fac pro - pi - ci - um

Also noteworthy in the motet *Alma redemptoris mater omnium* is the extensive and consistent use of similar, but non-parallel, motion. In all cases of such motion, the upper voice moves by step, while the lower voice moves by third. Three examples of such motion are present in the excerpt shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11 *Alma redemptoris mater omnium* (measures 48-50)

[piisi]ma do-mi - na, pre-sta au - xi-li[um]

Scholars have suggested that the predecessors of the trecento madrigal were possibly conductus or harmonized troubadour songs. Whichever styles were influential in the development of the madrigal, the discant of the Bamberg codex is sufficiently dissimilar to that of Giovanni that these French motets may be discounted as the precursors to the voice-leading style of the trecento madrigal.

Conclusion

Giovanni da Cascia reveals in the early trecento madrigal an intermediate stage in the progression from early parallel-fifth polyphony to our current discant practice. Contrary motion, parallel thirds, and parallel sixths are slowly supplanting parallel octaves and fifths, but the latter are still acceptable.

The style of Giovanni betokens the path of Italian trecento music. It should be noted, however, that French polyphony took a different path, one in which parallel fifths were, if not obliterated, at least regulated and hidden by the time of Machaut.⁷ Based on the Bamberg codex, French music also made extensive use of contrary motion by the 13th century. The French and Italian traditions proceeded in parallel, with some influence upon each other, until the development of a common European style in the later Renaissance and Baroque, a style based upon contrary motion and parallel thirds and sixths.

⁷ Kurt von Fischer, "On the Technique, Origin, and Evolution of Italian Trecento Music," *Musical Quarterly* 47 (1961), p. 46.

APPENDIX A

	Contrary	Similar									TOTAL
		Non-Parallel	Parallel								
			Total	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	
Giovanni da Cascia											
<i>Anqnel son bianco</i>	69	8	15	1	1	1	6	0	0	6	107
<i>Appress' un fiume</i>	54	3	15	0	4	2	3	4	0	2	87
<i>De' come dolcemente</i>	44	4	20	1	2	1	5	4	2	5	88
<i>Donna gia fu' leggiadra</i>	70	4	39	0	7	4	9	7	3	9	152
<i>Fra mille corvi</i>	62	3	46	2	11	4	16	5	3	5	157
<i>In sulla ripa</i>	47	5	27	1	6	2	7	3	0	8	106
TOTAL	346	27	162	5	31	14	46	23	8	35	697

	Contrary	Similar									TOTAL
		Non-Parallel	Parallel								
			Total	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	
Magister Piero											
<i>Chavalcando con un giovine</i>	29	3	10	0	2	0	3	1	1	3	52
<i>Si com'al cando</i>	30	7	22	0	1	5	9	1	0	6	81
TOTAL	59	10	32	0	3	5	12	2	1	9	133

	Contrary	Similar									TOTAL
		Non-Parallel	Parallel								
			Total	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	
Francesco Landini											
<i>Fa fa, metter bando et commandar</i>	65	5	30	1	20	0	3	3	2	1	130
<i>In sulla ripa</i>	66	7	15	0	1	2	3	6	1	2	103
TOTAL	131	12	45	1	21	2	6	9	3	3	233

	Contrary	Similar									TOTAL
		Non-Parallel	Parallel								
			Total	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	
Bamburg Codex											
<i>Alma redemptoris mater omnium</i>	61	9	24	1	4	13	4	0	1	1	118
<i>Dulcis Ihesu memoria</i>	102	0	16	0	12	0	3	0	0	1	134
TOTAL	163	9	40	1	16	13	7	0	1	2	252

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21M.220 / Early Music
Fall 2010

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