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INTABULATIONS FOR THE RENAISSANCE LUTE
Improvisational practice in vocal and instrumental music
during the Renaissance

DLA dissertation Thesis

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The subject of the dissertation

The primary subject of my research was the arrangements of Renaissance vocal works for the Renaissance lute, and the practice by which an instrumentalist could popularise vocal compositions by their contemporaries. Since it is indispensable to discuss the techniques of diminution in the arrangements, the secondary subject of my paper is to demonstrate the history of this improvisational practice. A further objective of the dissertation is to offer help to the instrumental musicians of today through the analysed works about how they can perform Renaissance vocal works in such a manner that they do not suffer much, but remain faithful to the style, and work well on the instrument. Beyond all this, I also wish to illustrate with the presented examples an early practice of improvisation, whose application in modern instrumental education may also prove fruitful.

Reasons for choosing the subject, earlier research

The lute was the most popular instrument of the Renaissance, and it was by the beginning of the 16th century that it had become possible that – similarly to keyboard instruments – polyphonic vocal pieces could be arranged for it, due to its range of three octaves. Even the numbers give evidence of the importance of the instrument. There are 150 composers to be found in the 16th century who left performable works to posterity, and 70 percent of these roughly 30.000 works are intabulations. It is clear that the central portion of the repertoire for the lute consists of this material. It is important to emphasise that lutenists arranged frottolas, madrigals, chansons, motets, and excerpts from masses (not to mention the hundreds of arrangements of psalms) by the most eminent composers of the period.

In the music education of the period, learning the techniques of improvisation was an organic component of the practice of intabulation, which, unfortunately, is not part of our music education anymore. I have had the privilege to study at the Department of Early Music at the Royal Conservatoire, the Hague, for seven years, and I was able to learn this period practice to a certain degree myself, too. I would like to pass it on to my colleagues in Hungary and the next generation of lutenists.

Since no works are available in Hungarian which would introduce and summarise the modes of intabulations in the 16th century and the knowledge of the preceding two centuries, I thought it was important to outline them in my dissertation, as well as to present the most important sources and literature of this body of knowledge.

The methods and process of the research

Since there is no categorisation of the types of the intabulations for the lute available in foreign literature, either, it was attempted to group the repertoire according to certain criteria. As a result of lengthy consideration, 31 works for the lute were selected through the analysis of which the most typical forms of this enormous material were possible to be presented to a certain degree. It was also attempted to categorise the works in an elementary, if not all-encompassing, manner. In order to make this musical practice visible, it seemed indispensable to present the relevant portion of the original vocal material in score, and to give the mensural transcription of the intabulated lute works in different types of tabulature underneath. This is how the works can be really compared to each other. It was also considered important to use several works of the two lutenist-composers coming from Hungary, Bálint Bakfark and Hans Newsidler, as illustration, since both of them were among the most excellent lutenist-composers of the period, and they were widely known across Europe already in their lifetime.

Comparing the lute intabulations to those for keyboard instruments, it is clear that the possibilities of the lute are much more limited with respect to voice-leading, thus, for the arrangements, playability and authenticity were the primary criteria.

The intabulations are analysed from the following aspects:

- how many remained from the original three–four–five voices, and which are they
- the material of which voices was merged
- how and up to what point voice-leading in the inner voices was feasible
- where and how new inner voices “were born”
- what happened to sustained notes, what solutions were created instead (halving of note values, syncopation, shifting of stress, coloratures)
- which voices were diminished and in what proportion
- cadential solutions, cadential ornaments, colorations
- “musica ficta”, the use of altered notes, the application of dieses
- the treatment of dissonances
- if the original work is present all throughout in the intavolation or only in a part thereof
- when comparing works, differences and congruences of harmony, consonant and dissonant realisations of diminution, and the rhythmic changes in melodies were examined

Ten chapters are dedicated to introduce the different types of intabulations. They are arranged so as to start with simpler works and work toward the more complex ones. The simplest type is when a monodic melody is arranged for the lute, such as arrangements of folk songs and psalms, since the composer harmonises, creates variations, employs diminutions on the monodic material to their own taste and skills. The case of Spagna variations is similar, where the composer composes counterpoint (in more than one voice in the best cases) to the monodic cantus firmus dance.

There is a separate chapter for the lute songs which are arrangements of a polyphonic work in such a fashion that the top voice is left to the singer and the bottom voices are arranged or intabulated.

There are works of three–four voices for the lute whose originals fit the lute without complications, that is, without any “truncation”, and they work very well on the instrument. In the majority of the arrangements, diminutions can be found. Perhaps the most interesting and informative chapters of the dissertation are the ones in which intabulations of the same vocal composition by several lutenists are compared to each other. This is where differences, the courage of who treats the work in what manner can be appreciated the most markedly; however, the audible differences of which arrangement makes it possible to recognise the original work come out best by playing them.

The results and conclusions of the research

One of the most surprising results of my research is that the earliest lute intabulations are not necessarily the easiest works. Linear evolution could not be observed. The arrangements from the end of the 16th century are not more complex than the works found in the first publication of 1507. Another surprising finding is that there seems to have been no set of rules either for the practice of diminutions or the manner of intabulation in the Renaissance, as opposed to the rules of counterpoint, to which lutenists, on the other hand, kept themselves as much as they could. In light of all this, it seems impossible even based on sources from the period to compile a set of rules to use as a basis when arranging a vocal work from the period for the lute or another instrument. It is only possible to rely on the numerous examples and the knowledge of the musical style of the Renaissance.

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