Excerpt from *Dialogo Della Musica Antica e Della Moderna*: Vincenzo Gallilei

Music was numbered by the ancients among the arts that are called liberal, that is, worthy of a free man, and among the Greeks its masters and discoverers, like those of almost all the other sciences, were always in great esteem. And by the best legislators it was decreed that it must be taught, not only as a lifelong delight but as useful to virtue, to those who were born to acquire perfection and human happiness, which is the object of the state. But in the course of time the Greeks lost the art of music and the other sciences as well, along with their dominion. The Romans had a knowledge of music, obtaining it from the Greeks, but they practiced chiefly that part appropriate to the theaters where tragedy and comedy were performed, without much prizing the part which is concerned with speculation; and being continually engaged in wars, they paid little attention even to the former part and thus easily forgot it. Later, after Italy had for a long period suffered great barbarian invasions, the light of every science was extinguished, and as if all men had been overcome by a heavy lethargy of ignorance, they lived without any desire for learning and took as little notice of music as of the western Indies. And they persisted in this blindness until first Gafurius and after him Glarean and later Zarlino[10] (truly the princes in this modern practice) began to investigate what music was and to seek to rescue it from the darkness in which it had been buried. That part which they understood and appreciated, they brought little by little to its present condition, but from what can be learned from countless passages in the ancient histories and in the poets and philosophers, it does not seem to any who are intelligent that they restored it to its ancient state, or that they attained to the true and perfect knowledge of it. This may have been owing to the rudeness of the times, the difficulty of the subject, and the scarcity of good interpreters.

Strozzi.[11] May it please you to give me some further particulars, so that I may escape from my ignorance and also learn how to answer the practical musicians of today, who maintain that the music of the ancients was in comparison with their own a thing to be laughed at, and that the astonishment they caused with it in men's minds had no other source or origin than their coarseness and rudeness, but being proud of it, they afterwards made a great to-do over it in their books.

Bardi.[12] Observe how bold they are, these men who laugh at the effects of a thing without knowing what it was, or what its nature and properties were, or how its effects could have been produced! What better argument do you wish, in order to convince them, than the miracles, to give them that name, that this music performed, miracles related to us by the worthiest and most famous writers, outside the profession of music, that the world has ever had?

But, leaving this to one side, let us turn to a clear and reasonable example, which will be this:

[10] Gafarius (1451-1522) was an Italian composer and theorist who first printed a discussion of the use of the new just temperament in tuning thirds and sixths. Glarean (1488-1563) argued that Ionian and Aolian modes (now called major and natural minor) should be added to the traditional eight church modes. Gioseffo Zarlino (1517-1590) was the most eminent of Renaissance theorists. Zarlino was a contemporary of Palestrina, and his seminal work *Institutioni Harmoniche* (1558) is the source of many of Fux's insights. Vincenzo Galilei had been a student of Zarlino's in the 1560's

[11] Piero Strozzi, a fellow-member of the Camerata and author of the operas *Dafne* and *Euridice.*

[12] Giovanni de' Bardi, Galilei's patron and the founder of the Camerata; his essay "Discourse on Ancient Music and Good Singing" is available in Oliver Strunk (ed.), *Source Readings in Musical History* (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1950), pp. 290-301.

from what I have been able to gather, it is certain that the present manner of singing several airs together has not been in use for more than a hundred and fifty years, although I do not know that there exists an authoritative example of the modern practice that is that old or that anyone wishes to have one. And all the best practical musicians agree in saying and believing that between that time and this, music has reached the highest perfection that man can imagine, indeed that since the death of Cipriano Rore, a musician truly unique in this manner of counterpoint, it has rather declined than advanced. Now if in the hundred years, or a little more, that it has been practiced in this manner by people who are commonly of little or no worth, of unknown birthplace and parentage, so to speak, having no gifts of fortune or else few, and hardly able to read, it has reached the pitch of excellence that they say, how much more astonishing and marvelous it must have been among the Greeks and Romans, where it lasted for centuries and centuries, continually in the care of the wisest, most learned, most judicious, and most wealthy men and of the bravest and most princely commanders that the world has ever had!

For all the height of excellence of the practical music of the moderns there is not heard or seen today the slightest sign of its accomplishing what ancient music accomplished, nor do we read that it accomplished it fifty or a hundred years ago when it was not so common and familiar to men. Thus neither its novelty nor its excellence has ever had the power with our modern musicians, of producing any of the virtuous, infinitely beneficial and comforting effects that ancient music produced.

But observe this: if the practice of music—I mean now the true music which, as Polybius says, is useful to all men, and not that music which according to Ephorus, was invented to delude and deceive them—if the practice of music, I say, was introduced among men for the reason and object that all the learned concur in declaring, namely, if it arose primarily to express the passions with greater effectiveness in celebrating the praise of the gods, the genii, and the heroes, and secondarily to communicate these with equal force to the minds of mortals for their benefit and advantage, then it will be clear that the rules observed by the modern contrapuntists as inviolable laws, as well as those they often use from choice and to show their learning, will be directly opposed to the perfection of the true and best harmonies and melodies.

The present way of composing and singing several airs in consonance at the same time was derived, unless I am mistaken, from stringed instruments similar to the epigonion and the simicion, or from these very ones[13]. Seeing that the strings of these were in their number and arrangement and in the manner of their stretching such as has been shown above, the cithara players of those times began—either for the purpose of somehow surpassing those who sang to the cithara or of escaping the need of always having a singer with them for the sake of perfection of the melody that his voice and their instrument produced—they began, I say, with that little knowledge of music which they had and with no regard for the laws of Terpander

[13] The simicion is an ancient Greek lyre with 35 strings; the epigonion has 40 strings and was invented by Epigon of Ambraciota around the time of Socrates (according to Porphyry). It is said that Epigon was the firstlyre player to use his fingers (rather than a plectrum) thus allowing for the harmony of several strings sounding at once. Suetonius reports that Nero was skilled in just this technique of lyre-playing. See Ref. 1, pp. 356-360.

or of any other approved and authoritative legislator, to seek a way of somehow delighting the ear with the mere sound of the instrument, without the aid of the voice. And they decided that the variety of consonances and harmonies would be an effective means of coloring this design. Before this time the use of these for the purpose we have mentioned had not been approved by anyone of sound mind, but greatly and with just cause abhorred, for it was well known that consonance had the power of arousing discord in listeners whose minds were well-ordered.

Thus the cithara players, wishing to make up for their defect, introduced upon the artificial instruments this way of playing several airs together in consonance. Long practicing these, and looking always toward the prescribed end, they began, by long experience, to distinguish in them what displeased, what caused annoyance, and finally what delighted the ear. And to have a broader and more spacious field, they introduced not only the use of imperfect consonances (discreetly so called to make it seem rather that they were consonances) but also that of dissonances seeing that with only the five consonances that the ancients esteemed (those now called perfect), the matter became tedious and difficult to manage.

The practical players of those times therefore began to form, upon the instruments that I have mentioned to you above, their rules and laws.

It was from this way of playing in consonance, I say then, that practical musicians, a little before our grandfathers' time, derived the belief that it was also possible to compose and to sing in this manner, for the ancient and learned manner had been lost many, many years before as a result of wars or other circumstances. Of this ancient manner we shall speak a little further on, and we shall throw upon it, in addition to the light we have already thrown, the greatest light possible to our feeble powers, with the sole object of inciting great and virtuous minds to labor in so noble a science and to see to bringing it back to its first and happy state. This I do not consider impossible, knowing that it was not revealed by the stars to those who first discovered it and brought it to the height of perfection, but of a certainty acquired by industrious art and assiduous study. The ancient music, I say, was lost, along with all the liberal arts and sciences, and its light has so dimmed that many consider its wonderful excellence a dream and a fable.

After its loss they began to derive from the stringed and wind instruments and also from the organ, which was in use in those times, although somewhat different from ours, rules and a norm for composing and singing several airs together, just as they had played them on the instruments. And they adopted as laws the same practices that the cithara players and organists had previously been observing, excepting that of not using two perfect consonances of the same species when four or more voices were singing together; perhaps to make the matter more difficult, or to show that they had a more refined and delicate ear than their predecessors, or actually believing that the same conditions which govern the relations of two voices singing together do not also govern those of four or six or more.

This way of composing and singing, by the novelty which it introduced, along with the ease of quickly becoming a musician, pleased the generality of people, as usually happens, thanks to their imperfection and the little knowledge they always have of what is good and true, and gave opportunities for the artisan to indulge in wild fancies and to introduce further novel

doctrines, for the latest comers were unwilling to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors and wholly to approve their work, lest they should seem to be almost confessing by silent consent their inferiority to them in industry and talent; all this with the aim of bringing music to the ruin in which we find it. For this reason they added to the rule that it was permissible to use two imperfect consonances, that these must necessarily be of different species, and further, that in proceeding from imperfect to perfect consonance the progression should always be to the nearest, always meaning in compositions for two voices.

Now you see how, little by little, lured by ambition, they went on without at all perceiving it, making reason subject to sense, the form to the material, the true to the false.

There is no one who does not consider these rules excellent and necessary for the mere delight the ear takes in the variety of the harmonies, but for the expression of conceptions they are pestilent, being fit for nothing but to make the concentus varied and full, and this is not always, indeed is never suited to express any conception of the poet or the orator. I repeat, therefore, that if the rules in question had been applied to their original purpose, those who have amplified them in modern times would deserve no less praise than those who first laid them down, but the whole mistake is that the purpose today is different, indeed directly opposed to that of the first inventors of this kind of music, while what the true purpose is has long been evident. It was never the intention of the inventors that these rules should have to serve for the use of those harmonies that, combined with words and with the appropriate passion, express the conceptions of the mind; they were to serve for the sound of the artificial instruments alone, both stringed and wind, as may be gathered from what we have said thus far of their first authors. But the matter has always been understood in the opposite way by their successors, and this belief has endured so long that I think it will be most difficult, if not impossible, to remove and dispel it from men's minds, especially from the minds of those who are mere practitioners of this kind of counterpoint, and therefore esteemed and prized by the vulgar and salaried by various gentlemen, and who have been informing others about this practice, by them called music, down to the present day.

Consider each rule of the modern contrapuntists by itself or, if you wish, consider them all together. They aim at nothing but the delight of the ear, if it can truly be called delight. They have not a book among them for their use and convenience that speaks of how to express the conceptions of the mind and of how to impress them with the greatest possible effectiveness on the mind of the listeners; of this they do not think and never have thought since the invention of this kind of music, but only of how to disfigure it still more, if such a thing be possible. And that in truth the last thing the moderns think of is the expression of the words with the passion that these require, excepting in the ridiculous way that I shall shortly relate, let it be a manifest sign that their observances and rules amount to nothing more than a manner of modulating about among the musical intervals with the aim of making the music a contest of varied harmonies according to the rules stated above and without further thought of the conception and sense of the words.

If the object of the modern practical musician is, as they say, to delight the sense of hearing with the variety of the consonances, and if their property of tickling (for it cannot with truth be called delight in any other sense) resides in a simple piece of hollow wood over which are

stretched four, six, or more strings of the gut of a dumb beast or of some other material, disposed according to the nature of the harmonic numbers, or in a given number of natural reeds or of artificial ones made of wood, metal, or some other material, divided by proportioned and suitable measures, with a little air blowing inside them while they are touched or struck by the clumsy and untutored hand of some base idiot or other, then let this object of delighting with the variety of their harmonies be abandoned to these instruments, for being without sense, movement, intellect, speech, discourse, reason, or soul, they are capable of nothing else. But let men, who have been endowed by nature with all these noble and excellent parts, endeavor to use them not merely to delight, but as imitators of the good ancients, to improve at the same time, for they have the capacity to do this and in doing otherwise they are acting contrary to nature, which is the handmaiden of God.

Beyond the beauty and grace of the consonances, there is nothing ingenious or choice in modem counterpoint excepting the use of the dissonance, provided these are arranged with the necessary means and judiciously resolved. For the expression of conceptions in order to impress the passions on the listener, both of them are not merely a great impediment, but the worst of poisons. The reason is this: the continual sweetness of the various harmonies, combined with the slight harshness and bitterness of the various dissonances (besides the thousand other sorts of artifice that the contrapuntists of our day have so industriously sought out to allure our ears, to enumerate which I omit lest I become tedious), these are, as I have said, the greatest impediment to moving the mind to any passion. For the mind, being chiefly taken up and, so to speak, bound by the snares of the pleasure thus produced, is not given time to understand, let alone consider, the badly uttered words. All this is wholly different from what is necessary to passion from its nature, for passion and moral character must be simple and natural, or at least appear so, and their sole aim must be to arouse their counterpart in others.

Strozzi. From what you have said thus far may be gathered, it seems, among other important things, that the music of today is not of great value for expressing the passions of the mind by means of words, but is of value merely for the wind and stringed instruments, from which the ear, it appears, desires nothing but the sweet enjoyment of the variety of their harmonies, combined with the suitable and proportioned movements of which they have an abundance; these are then made manifest to the ear by some practiced and skilled performer...

Bardi. Finally I come as I promised to the treatment of the most important and principal part of music, the imitation of the conceptions that are derived from the words. After disposing of this question I shall speak to you about the principles observed by the ancient musician.

Our practical contrapuntists say, or rather hold to be certain, that they have expressed the conceptions of the mind in the proper manner and have imitated the words whenever, in setting to music a sonnet, cansone, ramanso, madrigal, or other prose in which there occurs a line saying, for example:

Bitter heart and savage, and cruel will,

which is the first line of one of sonnets of Petrarch, they have caused many sevenths, fourths,

seconds, and major sixths to be sung between the parts and by means of these have made a rough, harsh, and unpleasant sound in the ear of the listeners.

The sound is indeed not unlike that given by the cithara of Orpheus in the hands of Neantius, the son of Pittacus, the tyrant of the Greek island of Lesbos, where flourished the greatest and most esteemed musicians of the world, in honor of whose greatness it had been deposited there, we read, after the death of the remarkable cithara player Pericletus, the glorious winner in the Carneian festival of the Lacedaemonians. When this Neantius played upon the cithara in question, it was revealed by his lack of skill that the strings were partly of wolfgut and partly of lambgut, and because of this imperfection—or because of the transgression he had committed in taking the sacred cithara from the temple by deceit, believing that the virtue of playing it well resided in it by magic, as in Bradamante's lance that of throwing to the ground whosoever she touched with it—he received, when he played it, condign punishment, being devoured by dogs[14]. This was his only resemblance to the learned poet, sage priest, and unique musician who as you know was slain by the Bacchants.

At another time they will say that they are imitating the words when among the conceptions of these there are any meaning "to flee" or "to fly;" these they will declaim with the greatest rapidity and the least grace imaginable. In connection with words meaning "to disappear," "to swoon," "to die," or actually "to be extinct" they have made the parts break off so abruptly, that instead of inducing the passion corresponding to any of these, they have aroused laughter and at other times contempt in the listeners, who felt that they were being ridiculed. Then with words meaning "alone," "two," or "together" they have caused one lone part, or two, or all the parts together to sing with unheard-of elegance. Others, in the singing of this particular line from the sestinas of Petrarch:

And with the lame ox he will be pursuing Laura,

have declaimed it to staggering, wavering, syncopated notes as though they had the hiccups. And when, as sometimes happens, the conceptions they have had in hand made mention of the rolling of the drum, or of the sound of the trumpet or any other such instrument, they have sought to represent its sound in their music, without minding at all that they were pronouncing these words in some unheard-of manner. Finding words denoting diversity of color[615], such as "dark" or "light" hair and similar expressions, they have put black or white notes beneath them to express this sort of conception craftily and gracefully, as they say, meanwhile making the sense of hearing subject to the accidents of color and shape, the particular objects of sight and, in solid bodies, of touch. Nor has there been any lack of those who, still more corrupt, have sought to portray with notes the words "azure" and "violet" according to their sound, just as the stringmakers nowadays color their gut strings. At another time, finding the line:

He descended into hell, into the lap of Pluto;

[14] Bradamante was the maiden warrior with white armor and an invincible lance in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso,* as in VIll, xvii and XXX, xv.

[15] This refers to a device beloved of certain madrigalists, who would use "black" notes (e.g. eighth or sixteenth notes) to set the word "dark," etc.

they have made one part of the composition descend in such a way that the singer has sounded more like someone groaning to frighten children and terrify them than like anyone singing sense. In the opposite way, finding this one:

This one aspires to the stars,

in declaiming it they have ascended to a height that no one shrieking from excessive pain, internal or external, has ever reached. And coming, as sometimes happens, to words meaning "weep," "laugh," "sing," "shout," "shriek," or to "false deceits," "harsh chains," "hard bonds," "rugged mount," "unyielding rock," "cruel woman," and the like, to say nothing of their sighs, unusual forms, and so on, they have declaimed them, to color their absurd and vain designs, in manners more outlandish than those of any far-off barbarian.

Unhappy men, they do not perceive that if Isocrates of Corax or any of the other famous orators had ever, in an oration, uttered two of these words in such a fashion, they would have moved all their hearers to laughter and contempt and would besides this have been derided and despised by them as men foolish, abject, and worthless. And yet they wonder that the music of their times produces none of the notable effects that ancient music produced, when, quite the other way, they would have more cause for amazement if it were to produce any other, seeing that their music is so remote from the ancient music and so unlike it as actually to be its contrary and its mortal enemy, as has been said and proved and will be proved still more, and seeing that it has no means enabling it even to think of producing such effects, let alone to obtain them. For its sole aim is to delight the ear, while that of ancient music is to induce in another the same passion that one feels oneself. No person of judgment understands the expression of the conceptions of the mind by means of words in this ridiculous manner, but in another, far removed and very different.

Strozzi. I pray you, tell me how.

Bardi. In the same way that, among many others, those two famous orators that I mentioned a little while ago expressed them, and afterwards every musician of repute. And if they wish to understand the manner of it, I shall content myself with showing them how and from whom they can learn with little pain and trouble and with the greatest pleasure, and it will be thus: when they go for their amusement to the tragedies and comedies that the mummers act, let them a few times leave off their immoderate laughing, and instead be so good as to observe, when one quiet gentleman speaks with another, in what manner he speaks, how high or low his voice is pitched, with what volume of sound, with what sort of accents and gestures, and with what rapidity or slowness his words are uttered. Let them mark a little what difference obtains in all these things when one of them speaks with one of his servants, or one of these with another; let them observe the prince when he chances to be conversing with one of his subjects and vassals; when with the petitioner who is entreating his favor; how the man infuriated or excited speaks; the married woman, the girl, the mere child, the clever harlot, the lover speaking to his mistress as he seeks to persuade her to grant his wishes, the man who laments, the one who cries out, the timid man, and the man exultant with joy. For these variations of circumstance, if they observe them attentively and examine them with care they will be able to select the norm of what is fitting for the expression of any other conception

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whatever that can call for their handling.
Every brute beast has the natural faculty of communicating its pleasure and its pain of body and mind, at least to those of its own species, nor was voice given to them by nature for any other purpose. And among rational animals there are some so stupid that, since they do not know, thanks to their worthlessness, how to make practical application of the faculty and how to profit by it on occasion, they believe that they are without it naturally.

When the ancient musician sang any poem whatever, he first considered very diligently the character of the person speaking: his age, his sex, with whom he was speaking, and the effect he sought to produce by this means; and these conceptions, previously clothed by the poet in chosen words suited to such a need, the musician then expressed in the tone and with the accents the gestures, the quantity and quality of sound, and the rhythm appropriate to that action and to such a person. For this reason we read of Timotheus, who in the opinion of Suidas was a player of the aulos and not of the cithara, that when he roused the great Alexander with the difficult mode of Minerva to combat with the armies of his foes, not only did the circumstances mentioned reveal themselves in the rhythms, the words, and the conceptions of the entire song in conformity with this desire, but in my opinion at least, his habit, the aspect of his countenance, and each particular gesture and member must have shown on this occasion that he was burning with desire to fight, to overcome, and to conquer the enemy. For this reason Alexander was forced to cry out for his arms and to say that this should be the song of kings. And rightly, for provided the impediments have been removed, if the musician has not the power to direct the minds of his listeners to their benefit, his science and knowledge are to be reputed null and vain, since the art of music was instituted and numbered among the liberal arts for no other purpose.

Source: Robert H. Herman, *Dialogo della Musica Antica e della Moderna of Vincenzo Galilei: Translation and Commentary,* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, North Texas State University, 1973), pp. 35-43, 467-470, 474-483, 487-489, 491-492, 501-512, 531-545; we express our thanks for permission to print these passages.
Vincenzo Galilei (c1520-1591) was the father of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) and was a central member of the Florentine Camerata, which sought to revive classical Greek drama in the new form of opera.