Musical Poetics by Joachim Burmeister. Translated by Benito Rivera. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

Review by Massimo Ossi

Although long recognized as a seminal work in the development of musical-rhetorical theory, and well known for presenting the first analysis of a complete composition (Lasso's motet "In me transierunt"), Joachim Burmeister's *Musica Poetica* (Rostock, 1606) has never been translated into English, and it has only been available in a facsimile edition.[1] With this translation, Benito Rivera remedies both *lacunae*: Burmeister's original Latin (with occasional editorial emendations) appears alongside Rivera's eminently readable translation, enabling the reader to consult and compare the two with ease. In addition, Rivera has gathered into Appendix B most of the repertoire to which the theorist refers without providing examples.[2] Although it runs counter to

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[1] Edited by Martin Ruhnke (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1955). For Burmeister's background and works, see Ruhnke, *Joachim Burmeister: Ein Beitrag zur Musiklehre um 1600* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1955). Claude Palisca discusses Burmeister's analysis of Lasso's motet in *"Ut oratoria musica*: The Rhetorical Basis of Musical Mannerism," in *The Meaning of Mannerism*, ed. Franklin W. Robinson and Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1972), 37-65. Burmeister was not the only theorist to be concerned with the criteria of analysis and criticism: Zarlino, as reported in Lodovico Zacconi's *Prattica di musica seconda parte* (Venice, 1622), put forth a number of elements for consideration when evaluating a composition, some of them derived from rhetoric. (The second part of Zacconi's *Prattica di musica* has been reprinted as the second volume of a two-volume set published in the series Bibliotheca Musica Bononiensis, Sezione II no. 2 [Bologna: Forni, 1983]). See James Haar, "A Sixteenth-Century Attempt at Music Criticism," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 36 (1983):191-209.

[2] It is not clear, aside from Palisca's comment that Rivera has gathered and edited those passages identified by Burmeister as "exemplary ... [and] worthy of study and imitation," what the rationale may have been for inclusion in Appendix B. For example, Burmeister refers to Lasso's "Missa super Veni in hortum" to illustrate a "peregrine cadence," and to his "Frölich zu sein ist mein Manier" as a case in which the composer, using poetic license, introduces a cadence that contradicts the sense of the poetic

Burmeister's own pedagogical reasons for not providing score
examples ("to urge and encourage the novice toward the
frequent practice of transcribing compositions" [157]),
Appendix B is especially useful when reading the section on
rhetorical ornaments (chapter 12), where Burmeister draws on
a wealth of works by a variety of composers, some of whom
are well-known, like Lasso, and others, like Ivo de Vento, are
relatively obscure.[3]   When he did provide examples from
polyphonic compositions, Burmeister used a system of letter
notation that enabled him to show several voices at once.
Since this shorthand tablature is rather cumbersome for the
modern reader, Rivera has transcribed these excerpts into
modern notation, preserving the originals as facsimiles within
the Latin text.   Finally, because Burmeister's system of
musical-rhetorical figures depends on the adaptation of the
jargon of classical rhetoric, his terminology conjures for the
non-rhetorician something closer to "fearful contagions," as
Claude Palisca has put it, than to musical devices.[4]   Rivera fills
in the background to the terminology of the *Musica Poetica*
with abundant, but not intrusive, references to classical authors
that clarify Burmeister's sometimes fanciful use of rhetorical
terminology.[5]

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text [148-49].   Neither is given in the appendix, although for both Rivera
provides references to the Lasso complete editions.

   [3]Although references to Appendix B are provided within the text, the
examples themselves are not accompanied by page numbers, so that a reader
who, while browsing the appendix, encounters Lasso's two settings of
"Benedicam Dominum" (Example B.11) has no easy way of locating
Burmeister's reference to the five-voice motet (it occurs on 127, within the
discussion of "harmonic span" [*harmoniorizomenum*]).   This problem is
compounded by the fact that neither the composers nor the titles of musical
works cited by Burmeister are listed in the index.   The table of rhetorical
figures on pp. xxxviii-xlv does list Burmeister's examples for them, but it is
limited only to the section on figures and does not cover the rest of the
treatise.

   [4]"*Ut oratoria musica*," 41.

   [5]A general bibliography of works cited would have been useful,
especially since, as Rivera himself notes [lxii], many of the texts on grammar

The introduction gives an overview of the principal subject matter of the treatise (mainly the rhetorical figures and Burmeister's treatment of modes and harmony) and traces the evolution of Burmeister's ideas through his three books on composition, *Hypomnematum musicae poeticae* (Rostock, 1599), *Musica autoschediastike* (Rostock, 1601), and *Musica Poetica*.[6] Each incorporates and expands on the contents of its predecessor: the *Hypomnematum* is a digest of a larger treatise, no longer extant, on musical composition (*Isagoge*); the *Musica autoschediastike* reprints the first twelve chapters of the *Hypomnematum* before dealing with the subject of musical figures in greater depth; and the essential outline of the *Poetica* is already present in the *Hypomnematum*.[7] As Rivera notes, however, in the last, rather than reprinting earlier material verbatim as he had done in 1601, Burmeister subsumed his original observations (*hypomnemata*) within chapters that, although they retain their original titles, have been entirely re-thought. In addition, the *Poetica* includes important new chapters on analysis and imitation.

In order to clarify the development of Burmeister's lexicon of musical-rhetorical figures, first introduced in chapter 12 of the *Hypomnematum*, Rivera organizes in a comparative table the catalogs contained in each of the three treatises. Table 2 [xxxviii-xlv] shows not only the expansion of the list from twenty-two figures in 1599 to twenty-six in 1606, but also an increasing refinement in the theorist's conception of his subject. Whereas the original figures were presented in an undifferentiated list, by 1601 Burmeister had established three different categories: "ornaments of harmony," "ornaments or figures of melody," and "ornaments of both harmony and melody." Moreover, the

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and rhetoric to which he refers are sufficiently obscure not to have been translated into English.

[6]The prefatory material for the earlier treatises is included in Appendix A.

[7]Rivera lists the chapters of the *Hypomnematum* on p. xv.

chart illustrates the expansion of the repertoire from which
Burmeister drew his examples, from some fifty works cited in
the *Hypomnematum* (many unattributed) to over seventy in
the *Musica Poetica* (of which only a small number were
unattributed). In the course of writing his treatises, Burmeister
modified his views of some of the rhetorical figures. Rivera
traces some of these changes, noting that they reveal the
development of the author's thinking and help to elucidate
confusing passages in the final version [xxiv-xxxvi].

Burmeister emphasized the study of real examples as the
alternative to imparting abstract rules on the formation and
use of rhetorical "ornaments." Analysis, therefore, was an
essential tool for composition students, and Burmeister's
precepts for how it should be approached provide some
insight into the process of imitative composition.[8] The
Musica Poetica identifies two types of *imitatio*: general, based
on common patterns for setting a text of a certain character;
and specific, in which the student selects as a model a
particular setting of a text that is of interest. [159] Analysis of
the model then follows a five-step process. The first, second,
and fourth steps are concerned with the mode, the species of
fourths found within it, and its quality (*durus* or *mollis*). Step
three is concerned with determining the particular polyphonic
type of the piece, which could be

> simple, in which all the notes coincide in equal
> values; fractured, in which the notes combine in
> diverse values, and specifically only a few are
> colored black while most are not; colored, in which a

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[8]Although imitation is the subject of the last chapter, it is a recurring
thread throughout the treatise: the section dealing with rhetorical figures or
ornaments, for example, is founded on the principles of imitation. For
recent studies of *imitatio*, see Howard Mayer Brown, "Emulation,
Competition, and Homage: Imitation and Theories of Imitation in the
Renaissance," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 35
(1982):1-48; and Michele Fromson, "A Conjunction of Rhetoric and Music:
Structural Modelling in the Italian Counter-Reformation Motet," *Journal
of the Royal Musical Association* 117 (1992):208-246.

greater number of colored notes are combined with few uncolored ones. [201]

In addition to these basic categories dealing with texture alone, Burmeister also defined four stylistic *genera* to describe the intervallic content of a composition:

> (1) lowly [*humile*], (2) grand [*grande*], (3) middle [*mediocre*], (4) mixed [*mixtum*]. In the lowly style closely neighboring intervals follow one another by adjacent steps, and the composition consists purely of consonant combinations. The grand style is that in which wider intervals are introduced, and there is a large mixture of dissonances hidden among consonances. The middle style is that in which a balance between the lowly and the grand is seen to be maintained. The mixed style is that which adopts the other three styles at random, not simultaneously but at different times, according to the nature of the text .... [209]

To aid the beginner in choosing the most appropriate model, Burmeister provides a list of composers associated with each of the styles, and recommends that one should begin with the lowly, which is the simplest, and work up to the mixed, which is the most sophisticated and which he identifies with Lasso.[9]

Finally, in step five, the analyst parses the work into its "affections or periods," which are closed with cadences. Most broadly, a composition consists of three periods: *exordium* (the opening up to the first cadence), main body (or *confirmatio*), and conclusion. The main body itself generally comprises several periods, whereas the conclusion consists of the last section leading up to the final cadence (although sometimes the final cadence can be extended with another brief period called a *supplementum*, in which two or more

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[9]Burmeister's list is on 209-211; Rivera reproduces it on 1.

voices remain stationary while the others continue to move
against them). [151]   Periods are characterized by the
presence of one or more figures or ornaments, deployed with
particular attention to the text. [159]

Burmeister's analysis of Lasso's "In me transierunt"
illustrates these precepts, beginning with a discussion of the
modal characteristics of the motet, then going on to parse it
into nine periods, seven of them within the main body, and
identifying the rhetorical figures within them.[10] As Palisca
notes, the ten figures that Burmeister identified in the motet
are not all that are present, and the theorist himself was aware
that his work represented merely the beginning in the process
of finding and cataloging ornaments.[11]

Most importantly, perhaps, Burmeister did not conceive
his catalog of rhetorical figures as a prescriptive method, a
kind of paint-by-the-numbers pattern book. This may well
have resulted from the recognition that his task could only be
an open-ended one. His advice to beginning composers is
quite explicit on this point:

> I hope that the novice composer is not expecting to
> find rules for forming musical ornaments or figures.
> Their variety is known to be so wide and great
> among composers that it is hardly possible for us to
> determine their number. Furthermore, even if we
> should attempt to define some of them, we would
> not come up with anything new or different from
> the syntactical rules of music. We would only
> observe that each one of them bears a particular

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[10]Chapter 12, 205-207. The parsing of the work is not the analyst's
first step, as Palisca suggests, but the last. Burmeister did not identify the
periods by their text, but only by the rhetorical figures that appear in them.
Rivera, following Palisca, "*Ut oratoria musica*," lists the periods by their
text in the introduction [xlviii].

[11]See, for example, Palisca's discussion of the evaded cadence in
measures 6-7, and its description in Francis Bacon's *Advancement of
Learning* (1605), in "*Ut oratoria musica*," 42-46.

characteristic similar to examples found among
master composers. They may not be made up of
exactly the same intervals and sonorities, but they
will be similar. [157]

In approaching a chosen model, the student should

carefully examine the text of a master composer's
harmonic work, especially a work which evidently
uses the elegance and sophistication of a particular
ornament. Then let him think to himself that a
similar text should be adorned with the same figure
with which the text of that master composer was
adorned. If the ... student does this, the verbal text
itself will serve him in place of rules, and he will be
unencumbered by a bothersome host of precepts.
[159]

The text provides the fundamental model for the
composer to follow, and the task at hand is to match his
understanding of the text to the style conventions observed in
the works of recognized masters. This is done not by copying
figures exactly, but by grasping those essential characteristics
that make them truly imitative of the text.[12]
    In spite of the attention that his chapters on rhetorical
figures, analysis, and imitation have attracted, the *Musica
Poetica* is first and foremost a composition treatise. As such,
it concerns itself with all aspects of instruction, from the most
practical to the theoretical. Burmeister devotes chapters to
"Notation," in which he covers the basics of the staff, clefs,
durations, rests, and the letter notation used in his own
examples; "Combination of Consonances into a Harmony,"

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[12]The primacy of the text as the determinant of a work's structure,
both large and small, and of its character, recalls Johannes Lippius's
characterization of the relationship between the text and its setting. See
John Brooks Howard, "Form and Method in Johannes Lippius's *Synopsis
musicae novae*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38
(1985):531.

in which he discusses chord structures; "The Musical Modes" and "The Transposition of Modes"; and "The Ending of Melodies and Harmonies," on cadential structures. He even addresses such mundane matters as "Orthography." His pedagogical method is worth noting: he does not teach counterpoint, but focuses instead on chords (voice leading is introduced as part of the discussion of chord combinations); and he introduces the principles of chord formation and combination before having established a theory of the modes.[13] The latter is particularly awkward, as Burmeister himself explains:

> The syntax of conjugate consonances would be undertaken in vain if one had no knowledge of the theory of modes, because it is the theory of modes that guides the building of the structure and keeps it within bounds. ... Nevertheless we prefer to refrain from discussing mode at this point, because we have to deal with it in a special chapter as thoroughly as is required by this special art of composition. [69]

The student is then given ten rules of good voice leading and a list of "torturous twisting of two consonances" ("solecisms") to avoid.

   As Rivera argues, Burmeister radically transformed the language of music theory, forging "new and sustained ways to harness" the "vast communal resource" of connections between music, rhetoric, grammar, logic, and poetics [l-li]. He did so with his sights set upon eminently practical ends. This long overdue edition and translation gives modern readers the full measure of his method, as well as uncluttered access to

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[13]On Burmeister's presentation of harmony and modal theory, see Rivera, li-lvi; Ruhnke, "Burmeister, Joachim," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 3, 485-487; and Joel Lester, *Between Modes and Keys: German Theory 1592-1802* (Stuyvesant, New York: Pendragon Press, 1989), 26-27 and 30-31.

one of the fundamental documents of early Baroque aesthetics.