

VICENTINO AND HIS RULES OF TEXT UNDERLAY

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IN a recent study of mine entitled "New Light on the Question of Text Underlay Prior to Zarlino" the name of Nicola Vicentino is mentioned, though in passing. There my concern was with tracing the line of development from the early statements of Lanfranco (in his *Scintille di musica* of 1533) on the handling of text in polyphonic composition to those of Zarlino (in his *Istitutioni harmoniche* of 1558) and, ultimately, of Gaspar Stocker (in his *De musica verbali libri duo* of the 1570s) on the subject.¹ True, Vicentino shares in this development, yet in a number of his utterances he stands beyond its pale: he does not seem to have relied on Lanfranco, at any rate, for his theory of underlay in the same way Zarlino relied on him or Stocker did, in turn, on Zarlino. If we devote a separate study to the rules of Vicentino from his treatise of 1555,² the reason is, then, that its author reveals himself as considerably more of an individualist in their formulation than is generally reckoned.

As far back as 1908, Georg Schünemann, in his fundamental study on the beat and text underlay,³ reproduced the musical example of Vicentino's (from Book IV, chapter 30) headed "Regola universale di porre le parole sotto alle note." It was also included by Edward Lowinsky, more than fifty years later, in his writing on the Stocker treatise.⁴ The discussion of both was limited to the "uni-

¹ The article is published in *Acta Musicologica*, XLV/1 (1973).

² *L'Antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica*, facsim. ed. (= *Documenta Musicologica*, 1st series, XVII; Kassel, 1959), fols. 85^v-87.

³ "Zur Frage des Taktschlagens und der Textbehandlung in der Mensuralmusik," *Sammelbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft*, X (1908), 104.

⁴ "A Treatise on Text Underlay by a German Disciple of Francisco de Salinas," *Festschrift Heinrich Besseler* (Leipzig, 1962), p. 242. Still another to reproduce the example was Robert Haas in his *Aufführungspraxis der Musik* (= *Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft*, Vol. VI; Potsdam, 1931), p. 127.

versal rule" exclusively.⁵ Yet the rubric illustrates but a small number of the remarks which the theorist made on the alliance of music and speech in chapters 29 ("The way to adapt notes to the pronunciation of long and short syllables")⁶ and 30 ("The rule for writing words under notes so that they be manageable for the singer")⁷ of the treatise. These two chapters Henry Kaufmann described as representing Vicentino's ideas on the proprieties of diction and text underlay, respectively.⁸ But where to draw the line between his statements on the one and the other is not always clear. To all intents and purposes the two chapters constitute the theorist's views on text underlay as a whole, and considered as such, they enrich our knowledge of the subject immeasurably. A total of twelve rules may be tallied. Four of them correspond to four set by Lanfranco (and later restated by Zarlino) and one corresponds to one of Zarlino's only. Seven rules remain, and these seven are Vicentino's own.

As a general regulation (of interest not to singers, but to composers) preliminary to all but one (no. 5, below) of the twelve, Vicentino enounces the "like words like music" precept on which Zarlino expanded in Part IV, chapter 32, of his *Istitutioni* ("The way harmonies are to be adapted to the words below them"), to wit, music must be so written as to express the content of its text (folio 86):

perche la musica fatta sopra parole,
non è fatta per altro se non per
esprimere il concetto, & le passioni &
gli effetti di quelle con l'armonia; . . .

since music composed to words is
composed for no other reason than for
expressing their meaning and emo-
tions as well as the effects of the latter
with [proper] harmony. . . .

The precept reflects the impact of ancient theory on the writer. It should be remembered that Vicentino began the composition of his treatise in Ferrara where he was in contact, no doubt, with humanistic circles.⁹

⁵ So was that of Haas as well. Hugo Riemann dispenses with Vicentino's rules in one short sentence: cf. his *Geschichte der Musiktheorie im IX.-XIX. Jahrhundert* (2nd ed., Berlin, 1921; photographic reprint by Georg Olms, Hildesheim, 1961), p. 374. One of its clauses refers, though, to the rule we list as no. 10 (see note 15, below).

⁶ "Modo di pronuntiare le sillabe lunghe & brevi sotto le note" (fols. 85^r-86^r).

⁷ "Regola di scrivere le parole sotto le note che siano agevoli al cantante" (fols. 86^r-87).

⁸ *The Life and Works of Nicola Vicentino* (= Musicological Studies and Documents, XI; Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1966), p. 157.

⁹ Cf. Claude Palisca's entry on Vicentino in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, XIII (1966), col. 1583. Earlier contacts with humanism in Vicenza are mentioned by Kaufmann in *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

The rules that correspond to Lanfranco's are the first four given here.

1. *After a series of semiminims or fusae, not the first white note, but the second one may sustain a change of syllable* (folios 86^v-87; = Lanfranco Rule VI, according to my count).

che quando si correrà con una vocale sopra le semiminime, e sopra le crome; che non si proferisca la sillaba sopra la prima bianca doppò la nera subito, ma doppò la nera sopra la seconda bianca; . . .

that when one races with a vowel on [a group of] semiminims and fusae, one should not pronounce a [new] syllable on the first white note immediately after the black one, but on the second white note after the black one. . . .

To illustrate this as well as other rules below, we might turn to the first book of the theorist's madrigals *a 5* (printed in 1546).¹⁰

Ex. 1 *In quel ben nato*: A, mm. 8-10



(In all of our examples from this book the original note values have been halved.) Infractions of the rule are termed by Vicentino "barbarismi," an epithet usually reserved by the theorists for instances where the principle of having note values adapted to the length or shortness of syllables (cf. Zarlino Rule I and no. 5 of the rules below) was disregarded. Two exceptions to this prescript, equivalent to those that Lanfranco implied to his Rules VI and V, respectively (see *op. cit.*), form injunctions of their own (nos. 2 and 3, below).

2. *Before a rest or at the end of a phrase two minims that follow semiminims may on occasion be supplied with text* (folio 87).

& se qualche volta per necessità appresso le pause, ò appresso il fine, che l'occorresse sotto due minime, pronuntiare una sillaba sotto la seconda¹¹ minima (per bisogno) non sarà grande errore, . . .

and if at times by necessity near rests or towards the end [of a phrase], should it be required on two minims, it will not be so great an error to pronounce a syllable on the other minim (in case of need), . . .

¹⁰ The collection has been edited by Henry Kaufmann in *Nicola Vicentino, Opera omnia* (= *Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae*, XXVI; Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1963).

¹¹ To translate "seconda" literally as "second" makes little sense, for the rule is an exception ("by necessity") to Rule 1 and not, were it read with "second," its

Vicentino probably had the kind of situation in mind as is illustrated by the following hypothetical example:



Though frequent enough in the music of the early sixteenth century, such a situation seems, from what this writer has been able to determine, to be absent from the madrigals of Vicentino himself.

3. *The black note in a dotted figure may sometimes be set to text (ibid.).*

ne anchora doppò una minima con un punto, se si proferirà una sillaba sotto una nera seguente (non sarà gran fallo) . . .

nor, moreover, after a dotted minim, if one pronounces a syllable on the black note that follows (will it be a grave mistake) . . .

Ex. 3 *Se mai candide rose*: S, mm. 107-108



4. *Words should not be repeated, unless specified (folio 86^v = Lanfranco Rule VII).*

alcuni replicano le sillabe, et il nome della parola, anchora che non sia scritto: . . .

some [singers] repeat syllables or whole words, although they are not so written. . . .

He explains this further by the remark that if words do not convey a complete meaning, they should not be reiterated, regardless of whether they are written or not (*ibid.*):

e qualche volta il Compositore nella compositione farà ch'il Cantante dira due volte un nome che non si deve, perche quella replica non vuol dir niente: . . .

and sometimes the composer in his composition will have the singer utter a word twice that he ought not to, for such a repeat does not mean anything. . . .

restatement. By "seconda," rather the "first" of the two minims seems to be intended. "Seconda" is probably to be construed here as synonymous with "other."

Another statement of Vicentino's on what he designates as the ludicrous practice of repeating a single vowel to several notes occurs in chapter 18 ("Modo di comporre una parte sola di canto fermo"), again in Book IV (folio 80^v):

come fa brutto udire a sentir cantar molte note, sotto una vocale, con la replica di quelle in questo modo dette. a.a.a.a.a.a. e.e.e.e.e.e. i.i.i.i.i.i. o.o.o.o. o.o. u.u.u.u.u.u. che muoveno più gl'oditori alla risa, che a divotione.

how it makes for ugly listening to hear many notes sung to one vowel, their being repeated in the following manner: a-a-a-a-a-a, e-e-e-e-e-e, i-i-i-i-i-i, o-o-o-o-o-o, u-u-u-u-u-u, which moves the listeners more to laughter than to piety.

Here he is referring to the "barbarisms" of plainsong, not to part music. His words might be extended, though, to cover the excessive use of melismata in the latter. A glance at his music reveals that Vicentino does indeed indulge in figurative writing but sparingly. To his mind, the clear projection of the text takes primacy over the ornamenting of melody; one would expect as much from the musical humanist he was.

The one rule absent from Lanfranco yet corresponding to a teaching of Zarlino's is the one listed next.

5. *In setting texts, the composer must take the length and shortness of syllables into account* (= Zarlino Rule I). He goes on to explain that the rule holds for each and every language (folio 85^v):

Hora il compositore avvertirà quando comporrà sopra parole Franzese, dè osservare i suoi accenti, et sopra parole latine osservare l'uso latino, & sopra Toscane attendere alla pronuntia Toscana; & così sopra parole d'ogn'altra natione, . . .

Now the composer ought take note, when composing to French texts, to observe their accentuation, and to Latin texts, to observe Latin usage, and to Italian, to give heed to Italian pronunciation, and likewise to texts of every other nationality. . . .

Vicentino's original contribution to clarifying the practices of text underlay consists in the seven rules that follow; of these, only one has been mentioned (no. 10, below), to my knowledge, in scholarly writings on the subject to date.¹²

6. *In Italian verse, the vowels at the end of a word and at the beginning of the next are elided.* To this he draws an exception for

¹² Kaufmann does refer to three of them (nos. 10, 11, 12) without comment, however, in his monograph on Vicentino. (see note 8, above), pp. 157-58.

This and the many other passages in the madrigals that illustrate the rule could be supplemented by almost as many where it is openly violated, as here:

Ex. 5 *La pastorella mia*: A, mm. 11-14



The rule stands nevertheless (“*exceptio probat regulam de rebus non exceptis*”), and if Vicentino did not uniformly enforce it, the reason lies in the flexible approach of the theorist who, as Palisca noted, “considered practical theory not as a complex of sanctified rules and procedures, but as an adaptation of means to ends and to conventions.”¹⁴

Two additional rules on elision (nos. 8 and 9, below) may be discerned.

8. *Elisions are to be avoided in Latin (ibid.).*

Poi nella lingua latina non si farà mai collisione alcuna, quando due vocali saranno una appresso dell'altra, . . .

Furthermore, in Latin, elisions are never made when two vowels appear one after the next. . . .

9. *When two vowels are separated by rests, no elision occurs (ibid.).*

et così quando si ritrovano appresso un sospiro, & appresso una pausa, perché ivi si ritiene il procedere del parlare, & si ha come per fine tal intertenimento del sospiro e della pausa: . . .

and likewise when they [= two vowels] are located near rests of a minim or a semibreve, for there one retains the procedure of speech, having as an ending that stop of the minim rest or semibreve rest. . . .

He probably had such a situation as this in mind:

Ex. 6 *In quel ben nato*: S, mm. 18-25



Another rule concerns the underlay of text to notes forming the leap of an octave. Vicentino prefaces it, however, with “& à me pare

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, col. 1584.

che. . .,” which suggests that the rule is more the expression of an opinion than the description of a general practice:

10. *In octave leaps, the first syllable of a new word should be placed on that note on which the leap ends* (folio 87).

& à me pare che quando il Compositore vorrà saltare un salto di una ottava, non si dè nel salto di quelle due note proferire una sillaba, della ditione nella nota di sotto; e unaltra sillaba nella nota disopra del salto, che tal pronuntia non fa buono udire, perche il salto è troppo lontano, ma si dè principiare il verbo, ò il nome, ò il participio, ò sia il pronome nel fine del salto, . . .

and it seems to me that whenever the composer wants to jump a leap of an octave, the two notes forming the leap ought not to be uttered so that one syllable of the word falls on the lower note of the leap and another syllable on its upper note. Such a pronunciation does not sound well, as the leap lies too far away. One ought rather to begin the verb or noun or participle or pronoun at the end of the leap. . . .

It “does not sound well,” Vicentino appears to be saying, when two syllables of the same word (*ditione*) are heard on an octave leap (“one syllable of *the word* . . . on the lower note . . . another syllable on its upper note”). One is led to infer that the leap may, however, be fit with text when two syllables from different words are involved, as here:¹⁵

Ex. 7 *Fin che m'amasti*: T', mm. 1-5



Yet Vicentino sometimes did what he suggests should not be done, as in the following passage:

Ex. 8 *Se mai candide rose*: T', mm. 8-11



¹⁵ It might be added that Lowinsky and Kaufmann failed to make this distinction. They seem to read “ditione” as text, not word, hence to construe the rule as a prohibition of any two syllables in succession on an octave leap. Musical examples do not bear out such an interpretation. That Riemann sensed Vicentino’s meaning may be assumed from his remark about “neue Silben möglichst nur bei Sprüngen” (*loc. cit.*, as in note 5, above).

More often than not, though, his madrigals go to confirm our interpretation of the rule as proscribing the placement of syllables from the same word on an octave leap.¹⁶

Another rule specifies the vowels to be employed in vocalizing.

11. *Depending on the register of the voices, certain vowels are better for melismas than others: in the lower voices, a, o, and u; in the middle ones, a, e, and o; and in the top ones, a, e, and i.* About these he says further (folio 86-86^v):

dico ch'il compositore gioverà assai al cantante, quando avvertirà à queste vocali; & così come la vocale i. è mal'agevole di pronuntia nelle parti basse, così il medesimo verrà alla vocale u. nelle parti alte & acute: . . .

I maintain that the composer will be of great help to the singer if he pays attention to these vowels. Just as the vowel *i* is not easy to pronounce in the lower parts, so the same holds for the vowel *u* in the high and highest parts. . . .

Vicentino's criteria here revolve about the acoustical properties of vowels at different pitch levels. Ease of execution and the ability to sustain the purity of a vowel sound are the considerations he has foremost in mind.

The next rule of his own is perhaps the most striking of them all.

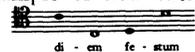
12. *Syllables should not be placed under notes that are dissonant with other parts* (folio 86^v).

& anchora s'avvertirà di non porre sillaba alcuna sotto le note che non hanno consonanza, perche troppo si senteno le note che discordano con la pronuntia della sillaba sotto, . . .

and, further, one should be careful not to place any syllable on notes that are not consonant, for with the pronunciation of a syllable on them, notes that dissonate are heard too much. . . .

The reason for the prohibition, as he says, is that the combination of a syllable and a dissonance throws the latter into too great a prominence. A dissonant note is to be set, then, to the same syllable as the note that precedes it.

¹⁶ In his "Regola universale . . ." Vicentino offers an example of how such a leap should *not* be handled; it is headed "non buona pronuntia":



Schünemann omitted the negative caption in his reprint of the example in *op. cit.* (see note 3; above) and, in fact, misread the rule to mean something else than that intended ("Further, if leaps appear in composition . . . one gives each note a syllable and not one syllable for two such notes"). The same holds true for the example as it appears in Haas, *op. cit.* (see note 4, above).

Ex. 9 *Madonna che per voi*: T', B, mm. 28-30

mi - nor ma - - - le
on - de per mi - nor ma -

That Vicentino alluded in the main to syncopated dissonances may be deduced from the one exception he admitted to the above:

ma sotto la quarta si tollerà, perche si ha quella quasi per consonanza, e principalmente se sarà sincopata.

but on a fourth it [= a syllable] is allowed, for that interval is accepted almost as a consonance, especially when it is syncopated.

The following clausula might serve as example:

Ex. 10 *Quando'l desir*: S, B, mm. 32-34

di sua na - tu - - ra
et fuor di sua na - tu - ra

The rule is one not found in Lanfranco and Zarlino. Nor is it often confirmed by the investigation of Vicentino's own madrigals. (There, if anything, the exception [concerning the fourth] becomes the rule.) Stocker seems to refer to it in chapter 23 of his *De musica verbali* in these words: "First place in a sentence have those notes that come on the odd beat of a measure, the others are often not reckoned and are tied together with them in some manner. The same situation obtains when the first note that takes the syllable is not found in isolation, but joined to another one of double its value as it occurs in formal clausulae, mostly in the superius. In this case the second note is regarded as accessory to the first in that it completes the measure and receives there the same syllable together with it."¹⁷ Lowinsky suggests that Stocker had a passage such as the following in mind:

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 240.

Ex. 11



(The example might serve as well to illustrate Rule 8, above.) If my reading of Vicentino is correct, then we have here a corroboration from an earlier period (the fifties) of one of the more subtle rules of text underlay. What gives Vicentino's words an extra ring of credibility is the comment of Stocker's that the rule was disregarded by composers of later generations: "the modern composers give syllables to all minims reckoning them as entities complete in themselves."¹⁸ Indeed, that seems to be the reason why the madrigals of Vicentino's exemplify the rule rather in its breach than in its application: as did later composers, Vicentino tended to supply all minims (and in his fifth book of five-voice madrigals of 1572, all semiminims) and larger values with separate syllables. Vicentino reported the rule as he knew it often at work in music of the generation of his teacher Willaert.

The differences between its formulation by Vicentino and the later theorist Stocker are three: (1) where Stocker speaks of syncopations as a melodic process, Vicentino characterizes them as deriving from vertical dissonances; (2) where Stocker appears to delimit the application of the rule to cadential clausulae, Vicentino implies a broader application at any point within the phrase; (3) where Stocker leaves one to infer consistency in the handling of syncopated dissonances, Vicentino singles out the fourth as forming an exception thereto. Though never stated as such by theorists prior to Vicentino, the rule might be surmised to have been in force in the early years of the century from the following remark of Aron's (in his *Toscanello in Musica*):¹⁹

Ma quegli che sincoperanno la semi-breve doppo la pausa di breve o di longa: & una minima doppo la pausa di breve: sono ripresi da la comune oppenione de gli musichi per la difficile pronuntiatione.

But those who would have a semi-breve syncopate after a rest of a breve or long or have a minim syncopate after a rest of a breve are reproved by musicians, concurring in their opinion, for the difficulty of pronuntiation.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ From Book I, chap. 37: "Che cosa sia sincopa" (facsim. of 1529 edition in the series *Bibliotheca Musica Bononiensis*, Section II, no. 10; Bologna, 1969), fol. E iv.

The difficulty in uttering their syllables, then, is the reason for ruling out syncopations after rests of a breve or long. Though this may be begging the question, I take for granted that Aron is talking about the pronunciation of words, not the performing of notes. If difficult of pronunciation at the opening of a phrase, it could be inferred that a syllable on syncopated dissonances was equally difficult, hence to be avoided, in the middle of phrases as well.

Taken together, the seven new rules of Vicentino's would seem to apply to the Willaert style as do those of Lanfranco's (see the aforementioned article on Lanfranco) and Zarlino's. One may gather as much from the theorist's claim on the title page of his book of five-part madrigals dated 1546 that he was a "disciple" of Willaert ("Del Unico Adrian Willaerth Discipulo"). That he revered his master to the same degree as did that other pupil of Willaert's, Zarlino, may be discerned from the tribute he pays him in the preface to the treatise: ". . . having spent a good amount of time in the presence of the divine Mr. Adrian Willaert (— divine, I say, for lack of a better word whereby I might honor him as fully as he deserves). . . ." ²⁰ As Lowinsky wrote about his treatise in general, "They [i. e., counterpoint, treatment of dissonance, modal theory, and the traditional styles] are treated in full and their discussion proves, if proof were needed, that Vicentino was indeed a disciple of Willaert — and an excellent one at that." ²¹

It is safe to assume, then, that his rules of text underlay hark back to an earlier period than the fifties. Receding in time, 1546 — the year of his first collection — might well serve as *terminus ante quem* for their applicability, a presumption that, by and large, is not belied by the examination of its contents. As is known, Vicentino was preoccupied with various aspects of his treatise several years in advance of its publication. He began writing it, on his own admission, "at the age of forty, in the year 1550, the Holy Year in the most happy pontificate of Pope Julius III . . ." (folio 10-10^v). Dancckerts, on folio 385^v of his treatise of ca. 1549: *Trattado . . . sopra una differentia musicale* (in the manuscript Vallicelliana R 56 B), wrote that the composer had been engrossed in the theoretical problems that attached to the use of the genera for at least fifteen years, which

²⁰ ". . . dispensato alquanto di tempo appresso il divino M. Adriano Vuillaert (divino dico per non me occorrere nome con che possi piu & meritamente honorarlo) . . ." (fol. [a 1^v]).

²¹ From the postface of his to the facsimile edition of the treatise.

might push the origins of the treatise back to the first part of the thirties. Anywhere from that time until the forties Willaert may have instructed his pupil in the fundamentals of composition. Like the rules of counterpoint, so Vicentino's rules for text underlay, learned from his teacher, reflect back to his years of apprenticeship. As mentioned, eight of them represent additions to the Lanfranco canon, seven to that of Zarlino. They both clarify and supplement, then, our knowledge of text underlay in the first part of the sixteenth century.