



Review of Rebecca Herissone, *Music Theory in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

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[1] How fortunate we are to have within a few short years three outstanding book-length studies of seventeenth-century musical thought in England. Penelope Gouk's *Music, Science and Natural Magic in Seventeenth-Century England* (1999) and Jamie Kassler's *The Beginnings of the Modern Philosophy of Music in England* (2004) greatly enrich our understanding of the influence of the British empiricist movement on speculative theory, while Rebecca Herissone's *Music Theory in Seventeenth-Century England* (2000) draws our attention to the practical aspects of theoretical writings as they reflect contemporary practice. Herissone's study is particularly welcome because of the depth and breadth of her research on many matters that have previously been approached in piecemeal fashion or limited to the ideas of a few major figures, such as Morley, Campion, Butler, Purcell, and North.

[2] As is often the case with book titles, Herissone's title is too succinct to give a proper feel of the inquiry that follows; it understates the time span of the study and overstates its scope. Opening with the word "practical" might have helped—I'm sure the author considered this—but that qualification of theory would probably trouble some present-day readers much as it seemingly did Samuel Pepys, when in 1668 he undertook to read "music theory." As Hollander points out (1970, 387), the works Pepys sought out were philosophically oriented treatises by Mersenne (1637) and Descartes (1618). Needless to say, the precise nature of Herissone's study is amply described in her preface.

[3] In the preface, Herissone carefully details the scope of the study and the importance of its contribution relative to research conducted in the past half century. Her objective is to document and interpret certain practical ways of thinking that evolved between the 1590s and 1720s in an inclusive set of writings ranging from Thomas Morley's *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* to the manuscript essays of Roger North. The late sixteenth-century treatises of Morley (1597) and Bathe (c.1592) serve to benchmark the Renaissance constructs that were in vogue at the start of a radical transformation of theory and practice. The early eighteenth-century writings of North (c.1700–1728) and Malcom (1721) are needed "to encompass early writings" (vii). As we see in the chapter on Sources, Herissone's inclusive set of writings comprises approximately 100 treatises—notably a dozen scholarly treatises with practical content, 27 "rudiments manuals" designed for the amateur, 42 instrumental tutors, and sundry vocal tutors, thorough-bass manuals, and miscellaneous items such as prefaces and instructions inserted in collections. Fludd's mystical works and the output of scientists following in Francis Bacon's footsteps are given short shrift, but three English translations of foreign works—Dowland's 1609 translation of the *Micrologus* of Ornithoparchus (1517), Brouncker's 1653 translation of Descartes' *Compendium* (1618), and Birchensha's 1664 translation of Alstedt's *Templum musicum* (1610)—are included to amplify native ideas.

[4] All in all, this is an enormous amount of source material to organize and digest, but by limiting the scope of the inquiry and by organizing the presentation so that some of the burden is shifted to appendices, Herissone achieves a considerable success. Through a close reading of these largely pedagogical sources by approximately 70 writers, she is able to establish, one by one, an impressive chronology of concepts about rhythm, pitch, and form, and of changes in terminology and notation practice that obtained during this puzzling era of style change. She can confidently identify “first mentions” of various developments and also note the absence of reference to ideas needed to explain features of contemporary practice.

[5] One should note, however, that Herissone’s strategy of containment does require a fair amount of expertise from her readership. To maintain control of the intricate zigzagging developments of the period, she narrows the range of topics by eliminating from consideration the speculative aspects of theory that are the main focus of some of the major treatises. Thus she gives short shrift to topics such as temperament, theories of consonance and dissonance, musical acoustics, and the affective properties of music—topics that are not entirely speculative and do impinge on practical theory. Moreover, at the close of the preface we find this rather startling statement:

With the exception of one or two particularly pertinent references, I have not addressed the difficult and tremendously important issue of the relationship between musical theory and contemporary practice. This avoidance derives partly from lack of space, as ever, but principally due to the fact that I aim to produce a companion book to this volume, one which will also derive from my thesis, in which this complex area is assessed through analysis of the major seventeenth-century sources (ix).

The reader of the book in hand must either possess a considerable familiarity with the repertoire and practices of the day or must accept the assumption that statements and examples provided in manuals intended as how-to-do-it books for non-professionals do indeed reflect actual practice. One should also note that Herissone’s careful attention to chronology is compromised by a surprising lack of reference to the tumultuous political and social events of seventeenth-century England and especially to the changes brought about by the Restoration in 1660. Here again the reader is expected to bring a specialized sort of knowledge to the enterprise. In sum, Herissone’s choices regarding temporal boundaries, the inclusion of rudimentary sources, the limitation of topics, etc., while seemingly, appropriate and judicious, inevitably raise issues that some could find annoying.

[6] Such considerations aside, one must applaud the effective manner of presenting and analyzing the data. Herissone surveys the sources first and then explores the discussions of constructs according to a logical set of topic areas. In this way she enables the reader to get a sense of the individual writers and their texts before shifting attention to the issues of time, pitch structure, harmony, compositional rules, tonality, texture, and form. The last 20% of the book is given over to four appendices that provide the reader with additional information about individual treatises and their interrelationships. Appendix A is an alphabetical list of treatises with bibliographic annotations; B is a chronological list of treatises and editions; C surveys each edition and reprinting of Playford’s *Introduction to the Skill of Music* with detailed commentary on changes and additions; and D surveys the sources, duplications, borrowings and plagiarism of theoretical ideas in 65 treatises and tutors. The generous allotment of plates, figures, tables, and musical examples from the treatises effectively enhances the highly technical presentation. Figure 1.1, a diagram of the complex web of textual relationships among certain instrumental tutors, is a particularly meritorious example.

[7] A synopsis of the topical chapters may usefully show the range of ideas covered. *Time* begins by detailing the shift from mensural notation to a context-independent notation suitable for score form. Additional topics include meter and metrical accent, proportion, changing concept of tactus and time-beating, notation of meter and rhythm, mensuration and proportion signatures, time signatures, and the bar line. *Pitch Structure* reviews the decline of the hexachordal system, alterations to gamut diagrams and to the solmization procedure, the development of major and minor scales, the notation of accidentals, chromaticism, the natural sign, and the clefs. *Harmony* discusses the intervals [dyads] of two-part writing and the theory of triadic inversion. *Compositional Rules* reviews the writing of note-against-note and florid counterpoint, the treatment of concords and discords, and the cadences. *Tonality* discusses the issues of modal theory, the development of harmonic tonality, modulation, transposition, related keys, and key signatures. *Texture and Form* provides instruction regarding imitative and other textures, and discusses the forms and structural principles of movements and large-scale formal schemes.

[8] Throughout the book, Herissone supplements the discussion with quotations from the original texts, thereby giving the reader a sense of how these authors expressed—perhaps grappled with—difficult ideas.

[9] Overall, the quality of interpretation and argument is uniformly very fine, although I must admit that the author’s policy

of depending only on musical illustrations taken from the primary sources made the going a bit tedious in the discussion of “Succession of Concorde” (146–54). Some illustrations of the various part-writing moves would have been helpful. Overall, however, the writing is clear and accessible.

[10] Through the use of extensive and often voluminous footnoting, Herissone manages to impart an impressive amount of information, not only for the purpose of documenting primary and secondary sources, and cross-referencing, but also for recommending further reading. Occasionally, when issues arise that could stand explaining in greater detail, she attempts to assuage the curmudgeon’s pique by footnoting extensive sets of references. It is, of course the author’s right to judge what can and should be relegated to footnotes. As a troublesome example, however, consider her treatment of a discussion by Daniel Robinson dating from 1715. She remarks:

He singled out the voice and violin because neither is a fixed pitch instrument, so they are not subject to the restrictions imposed by temperament. In England at this time, although equal temperament was usually used for fretted instruments, keyboards were still predominantly tuned using meantone temperament which rendered keys with more than about three flats or sharps unusable (190).

While this statement may well be true, it deserves a specific citation and clarification of the type of meantone temperament intended. (Are we to assume the English were still using the old 1/4-comma tuning?) Instead of this, the appended footnote (n.88) lists seven general references regarding tuning and temperament, and in effect, dismisses the need to consider the importance of temperament in the move toward the 24-key, closed circle of fifths conception of harmonic tonality that became the norm in the early eighteenth century.

[11] Readers will greatly appreciate Herrissone’s concluding chapter, because in it she neatly summarizes and organizes into a unified narrative the massive amount of data that has been presented in the body of the work. There is no need here to relive the Locke-Salmon controversy about systems of clefs or to review the idiosyncrasies of the large cast of characters that has been paraded before us. What is needed is precisely what appears: a chapter-by-chapter distillation of main ideas and developments.

[12] Somewhat surprisingly, Herissone puts the big finish—what I would call the “Hollywood Ending”—at the beginning of the chapter:

Music theory underwent an enormous transformation in the seventeenth century, a change which—through its rejection of traditional ideas going back in some cases to medieval times—saw theory being brought closer to musical practice than it had been for some considerable time. English theorists were at the forefront of the modernization process for two important reasons: first, there was no strong tradition of theoretical writing from the sixteenth century in England, which meant that seventeenth-century writers had few models on which to base their ideas; second, the great majority of English theory books were practical instruction books, aimed at the musical amateur. Whereas in Continental theory great emphasis was placed on speculative issues, such as the origins of music, English writers concentrated instead on concise, clear teaching of rules an amateur musician would need to understand in order to be able to play or write music (224).

Here, we find the return of a theme that figures prominently in the book—that the practical-minded English writers found it easier to cast off old ways (for example, modal thinking in favor of the key system) because they either rejected or were largely unaware of Continental developments. The notion of an English isolation creating a separate path to the key-based, harmonic style of eighteenth-century tonality has been noted by other scholars, as well. Harold Powers speaks of an “English innocence of Continental modal theory” (1998, 334 n.2) and alludes to “the separate route from psalmody to tonality” taken by English theory (1998, 275). Joel Lester speculates that the separate path had a religious origin:

English theorists in general had never gotten involved in the intricacies of Continental modal theory, and the political and religious upheavals in England of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries certainly did not encourage scholarship into the modes associated with Catholic music. As a result, English theorists did not have to overcome entrenched habits of modal thinking, as did their Continental counterparts (1989, 101).

Similarly, Jessie Ann Owens, observing the “significant difference” of English theory (1998, 230), and Gregory Barnett, reflecting on the “wholly different case” in English musical thought (2002, 435–6), suggest that religious issues were a cause of the separation. So there you have it. These writers see theological differences at bottom; Herissone prefers to stress

English empiricism and practicality. Thanks to her keen insight and hard work, this highly sympathetic and favorable account of English practical theory will serve us well in our quest “to put each writer’s ideas into context properly” (viii).

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