



Review of *Syntagma musicum III*, by Michael Praetorius, translated and edited by Jeffery T. Kite-Powell (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

Tim S. Pack



KEYWORDS: Kite-Powell, Praetorius, Syntagma, thoroughbass

ABSTRACT: The third volume of *Syntagma musicum* by Michael Praetorius is one of the most important treatises on musical forms, terminology, and performance practices of the early seventeenth century; it is also one of the earliest sources to discuss thoroughbass theory. Due to the complexity of its prose, which incorporates German, Latin, and Greek, more than three centuries passed before the first English translation was completed. Jeffery Kite-Powell successfully confronts Praetorius's highly technical and intricate language and in so doing makes *Syntagma musicum III* tangible to a wider audience of performers, students, and educators.

Received September 2006

[1] The third volume of Michael Praetorius's *Syntagma musicum* (1619) provides a wealth of information on musical forms, notation, terminology, and practices of the early seventeenth century and contains one of the earliest discussions of thoroughbass theory. The first twelve chapters of the treatise focus on sacred and secular vocal music and cover a wide range of genres, including motets, madrigals, arias, and quodlibets. Praetorius also describes several instrumental genres, such as fantasias, fugues, sonatas, toccatas, and various dance forms, including the galliard, courante, and allemande. In the second part of *Syntagma musicum III*, Praetorius defines and explains principles of notation, such as ligatures, coloration, and proportions in duple and triple meters. His guidelines for recognizing the mode of a composition are influenced by Glarean and Calvisius; he gives the range of all twelve modes and reorders them to begin with C-Ionian. In the last chapter of part two, which concerns the use of unisons and octaves, Praetorius stipulates that the bass is "the foundation of all parts," and he says that it "must be more clearly and convincingly heard than the other parts."⁽¹⁾

[2] This precept sets up the major topic of the treatise's third part: thoroughbass. Relying on compositions and remarks of Ludovico Viadana and Agostino Agazzari, Praetorius states that thoroughbass is the principal part, because it contains within itself the entire composition.⁽²⁾ Unlike some later discussions on thoroughbass, Praetorius's discussion includes instructions for both keyboardists and musicians who play plucked instruments; he says that the rules are the same for both groups of musicians, except that plucked instruments should not play thoroughbass when used for melody. Another topic preoccupying later thoroughbass theorists is unfigured bass lines; evidently, this was a problem even in the early seventeenth century, because Praetorius specifies that "it is absolutely essential that signs be notated above the notes."⁽³⁾ He adds that this rule applies to untrained and experienced musicians alike.

[3] Providing encyclopedic coverage of principles of the early baroque period, *Syntagma musicum III* was and remains “a prime source concerning turn-of-the-century (1600) performance practices.”⁽⁴⁾ Jeffery Kite-Powell points out that the volume was referred to and quoted throughout the remainder of the seventeenth century and well into the next.⁽⁵⁾ Despite the importance of this source, more than three centuries passed before the first English translation was completed.⁽⁶⁾

[4] Kite-Powell’s edition is a welcome publication that makes Praetorius’s treatise much more tangible to the academic community. In addition to an introduction that provides biographical information about Praetorius, Kite-Powell gives a clear overview of all three volumes of *Syntagma musicum*, the first two of which have never been translated or edited. He explains that the early chapters of the third volume contain a comprehensive glossary of musical terms and instruments known in Praetorius’s time. Subsequent chapters discuss ornamentation practices, thoroughbass theory, and arrangements of concertos and motets for multiple choirs.

[5] Later in the introduction, Kite-Powell points out that his edition is “first and foremost” a translation.⁽⁷⁾ Although he has edited the original text by correcting errors and simplifying complex sentences and terms, Kite-Powell explains that his most challenging objective was to make *SMIII* a useful, accessible source in our time while preserving the meaning behind Praetorius’s discourse. By focusing on the original text rather than digressing into discussions of instruments and performance practice, analyses of pieces mentioned in the treatise, and lists of authors and composers cited by Praetorius, Kite-Powell avoids “cluttering the text” with material that is widely available in reference sources. He refers his readers to nine sources that provide information on performance practice and five other sources that give information on the life and music of Praetorius. Although footnotes elaborating on definitions and names mentioned in the treatise are not included, the edition does contain an index of authors along with their dates.

[6] Another helpful contribution of the edition involves Kite-Powell’s handling of the multiple languages of the original text. Streamlining Praetorius’s use of Greek, Latin, and German has been one of the most daunting tasks and most likely explains why only one English translation had been attempted prior to Kite-Powell’s edition. In order to let his readers know which language Praetorius uses throughout the treatise, Kite-Powell uses italics to indicate Latin phrases and words originally written in a plain roman font. Greek words in chapter headings are retained, transliterated, and translated, whereas Greek terms in the body of the treatise are translated and written in italics.⁽⁸⁾ German words originally written in *Fraktur* are rendered in plain roman font. In addition, the editor briefly explains Praetorius’s reasons for using multiple languages. Passages covering complex issues targeted for scholars are in Latin and Greek; those intended for wider audiences are in German.

[8] Although Kite-Powell describes his translating and editing procedures clearly, having his translation alongside the original text would have been very useful to his readers, especially since the edition purports to be first and foremost a translation and since the editor states that he has taken certain liberties with the original text for purposes of simplification. Including the original text would have made the edition much longer and more expensive and thus possibly less accessible. However, given the importance of this treatise and the audience, which consists mostly of readers who are members of the academic community, including the original text would have been worth the added expense.

[9] Throughout his edition Kite-Powell provides excellent footnotes explaining various passages, and he meticulously corrects errors and typos contained in the original treatise. In chapter three of part two, for example, Kite-Powell points out that the paragraphs on signs for b-natural and b-flat underwent major revision in Praetorius’s *Errata* list.⁽⁹⁾ Later in chapter five, the editor informs the reader that Praetorius refers to a previous chapter incorrectly.⁽¹⁰⁾

[10] Chapter three contains the treatise’s first musical examples. The format of the editor’s examples and figures could be improved by greater consistency and clarity. Examples are transcribed into modern notation, but the figures are not. Again, showing the original text with examples and figures alongside of the translation with transcribed examples and figures would have been more helpful to readers. Also, rendering the original C-clefs as F- and G-clefs would allow readers to interpret the examples more efficiently. In chapter 6, figures 2.1 through 2.5 would be clearer if transcribed into modern notation with a footnote clarifying Praetorius’s distinction between common and new Italian views of the modes.⁽¹¹⁾ Figures elsewhere in the edition, such as Figure 2.20 in chapter seven, would also be easier to read if transcribed or edited.⁽¹²⁾

[11] Figure 2.20 raises another observation, namely that there is inconsistency regarding edited material and material pasted directly from the facsimile. The time signatures in Figure 2.20, for example, are pasted from the facsimile; however, the examples have been edited so as to be more legible. Moreover, Praetorius’s discussion of the Italian approach to proportions in chapter seven would have been clearer had his table been preserved instead of having its contents incorporated into the

paragraph.⁽¹³⁾ Kite-Powell *does* preserve a later table dealing with proportions, though he labels it “ex. 2.6”.⁽¹⁴⁾

[12] The most troublesome problems of the edition are errors and inconsistencies among the examples and figures. Readers studying the examples would be wise to consult a facsimile of the treatise, because about three-eighths of the examples have at least one error. In Examples 2.7 and 2.8, there are incorrect pitches and an incomplete measure.⁽¹⁵⁾ The bassus of Example 2.10 has incorrect rhythmic values in the second and last measures. The transcriptions of Examples 2.10 and 2.12 are cluttered and confusing; readers would benefit greatly from cleaner and simpler transcriptions.

[13] Other examples could be made clearer for readers. Example 2.12 is ambiguous, because filled note heads without stems are shown to be of varying rhythmic values. Several examples between chapter nine of part two and chapter seven of part three contain gamma clefs that are unclearly and inconsistently notated. Using “T” instead of a customized graphic would make these clefs much easier to interpret. Moreover, some of the gamma clefs are placed on the wrong line; in Example 3.20, the gamma clef should be on line two instead of line three.⁽¹⁶⁾ Example 3.18 has a CC-clef, which should be positioned on the first line, not on the ledger line below the staff. In Examples 3.7 and 3.9, the lower portion of the bottom staff is cut off; some of the pitches are missing; in Example 3.38, part of the C-clef is cut off.

[14] Apart from a few minor typographical and editorial errors, the translation is well done and very easy to follow. Kite-Powell simplifies yet preserves Praetorius’s style and meaning. The editor also provides helpful footnotes to help explain the text when needed. In a discussion on meter and tactus, Kite-Powell includes a footnote that clarifies the original text.⁽¹⁷⁾ In chapter six of part three, he gives another handy footnote, which shows how Praetorius’s numbering of Viadana’s thoroughbass rules coincides with those in Frank Arnold’s *Art of Accompaniment from a Thorough-Bass*.⁽¹⁸⁾

[15] Moreover, tables in the original treatise are corrected, refined, and re-formatted as needed for greater clarity. Kite-Powell’s rendering of Table 2.2 into a vertical format is much easier to interpret than the horizontally branched format of the original.⁽¹⁹⁾ He also gives a very useful footnote explaining Table 2.6, which shows the relationship between the length of a piece and the number of breves it contains. In the first chapter of part three, Kite-Powell has corrected errors in addition to those contained in Praetorius’s *Errata* list.⁽²⁰⁾

[16] The edition includes appendices featuring Praetorius’s list of authors and a brief discography of his works. Kite-Powell also provides a thorough bibliography, which would be more useful if categorized according to primary sources, secondary sources, and works.

[17] Translating and editing *Syntagma musicum III* is a formidable task for many scholars, even some who are relatively comfortable with German and Latin. Capturing the spirit, style, and meaning of the treatise and bringing it into our time requires not only an excellent command of the languages used, but also close familiarity with the historical context in which the treatise was written. My history-of-theory students and I are very grateful to Professor Kite-Powell for making this invaluable source widely available to English-speaking readers.

Tim S. Pack
University of Oregon
School of Music and Dance
1225 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-1225
tpack@uoregon.edu

Works Cited

Kite-Powell, Jeffrey, trans. and ed. 2004. *Syntagma musicum III*. Oxford University Press.

Lampl, Hans. 1957. “A Translation of *Syntagma musicum III* by Michael Praetorius.” D.M.A. diss., University of Southern California.

———. 2001. *The Syntagma musicum of Michael Praetorius, Volume Three: An Annotated Translation*. American Choral Directors Association.

Footnotes

1. [Kite-Powell 2004](#), 104.

[Return to text](#)

2. [Ibid.](#), 133.

[Return to text](#)

3. [Ibid.](#), 136.

[Return to text](#)

4. [Lampl 2001](#), xvii.

[Return to text](#)

5. [Ibid.](#), xx.

[Return to text](#)

6. [Lampl 1957](#).

[Return to text](#)

7. [Kite-Powell 2004](#), xxii.

[Return to text](#)

8. In parts one and two of the treatise, Praetorius uses Greek terms occasionally; however, in part three, Greek terms are much more prevalent. Footnotes briefly explaining these terms would be helpful.

[Return to text](#)

9. [Kite-Powell 2004](#), 50, n.13.

[Return to text](#)

10. [Ibid.](#), 53, n.20.

[Return to text](#)

11. [Ibid.](#), 55–59.

[Return to text](#)

12. [Ibid.](#), 72.

[Return to text](#)

13. [Ibid.](#), 72.

[Return to text](#)

14. [Ibid.](#), 74.

[Return to text](#)

15. I consulted both facsimiles of the treatise when checking for incorrect pitches.

[Return to text](#)

16. [Ibid.](#), 165.

[Return to text](#)

17. [Ibid.](#), 68.

[Return to text](#)

18. [Ibid.](#), 143.

[Return to text](#)

19. [Ibid.](#), 68.

[Return to text](#)

Copyright Statement

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for Music Theory. All rights reserved.

[1] Copyrights for individual items published in *Music Theory Online (MTO)* are held by their authors. Items appearing in *MTO* may be saved and stored in electronic or paper form, and may be shared among individuals for purposes of scholarly research or discussion, but may *not* be republished in any form, electronic or print, without prior, written permission from the author(s), and advance notification of the editors of *MTO*.

[2] Any redistributed form of items published in *MTO* must include the following information in a form appropriate to the medium in which the items are to appear:

This item appeared in *Music Theory Online* in [VOLUME #, ISSUE #] on [DAY/MONTH/YEAR]. It was authored by [FULL NAME, EMAIL ADDRESS], with whose written permission it is reprinted here.

[3] Libraries may archive issues of *MTO* in electronic or paper form for public access so long as each issue is stored in its entirety, and no access fee is charged. Exceptions to these requirements must be approved in writing by the editors of *MTO*, who will act in accordance with the decisions of the Society for Music Theory.

This document and all portions thereof are protected by U.S. and international copyright laws. Material contained herein may be copied and/or distributed for research purposes only.

Prepared by Brent Yorgason, Managing Editor and Andrew Eason, Editorial Assistant