

HOW TO SELECT EDITIONS OF RENAISSANCE MUSIC

by Carolyn Peskin

A glance at recorder ensemble listings in sheet music catalogs will reveal that the recorder today is much more than a Renaissance consort instrument. Recorder arrangements of various kinds of music ranging from Bach fugues to modern jazz are well represented, as are 20th-century pieces composed specifically for the recorder.

Nevertheless, the lion's share of music performed by recorder ensembles still dates from the Renaissance (*i.e.*, the period extending roughly from 1450 to 1600), and catalogs still list hundreds of ensemble pieces composed during that period. With all that Renaissance music available, how are we to know what to buy? What guidelines can we use to assure that the editions we purchase are good?

In an article entitled "What to Look for in Editions of Early Music," which appeared in the February 1978 issue of *American Recorder*, Dr. William Hettrick notes that most *performers* look for an edition that "communicates the composer's intentions in standard, modern notation" while *scholars* require one which "shows clearly what the composer wrote down, what principles have been followed in transforming this to modern notation, and what individual items have been changed by the editor." According to Dr. Hettrick, "knowledgeable musicians agree that the best and most practical editions of early music satisfy the needs of both performers and scholars."

Dr. Hettrick then describes the types of editorial changes and insertions that musicians can expect to find in good modern editions of early music. Much of the information in the present chapter is a more detailed discussion of material presented in his article, applied specifically to Renaissance music. The information presented here will help to make prospective buyers more knowledgeable in approaching the various editions of Renaissance music currently on the market.

Editorial Changes

The most frequently seen editorial changes in modern editions of Renaissance music are transpositions and note-value reductions. Transposition is necessary if the original key does not fit the ranges of the instruments for which the edition is intended. Transposition is also advisable when the original key fits the ranges of the intended instruments but presents certain technical problems and/or prominently includes notes that are weak on some of those instruments. Note-value reduction is not essential but is desirable because of the "white appearance," *i.e.*, the preponderance of half, whole, and double whole notes in original prints of Renaissance music. This white appearance is due to

the fact that a given note value in the Renaissance represented a shorter time interval than it does today. A Renaissance whole note, for example, was comparable to a modern half note in certain pieces and comparable to a modern quarter note in others. By halving or quartering the original note values, editors eliminate the white look, which might suggest to modern musicians a tempo slower than what the composer intended. Thus, an original whole note may be transcribed as a half or quarter note, depending upon the piece, and the other note values are reduced in the same proportion.

A concise way of showing editorial transpositions and note-value reductions is through the use of *incipits*, symbols placed to the left of the modern clefs at the beginning of a piece, as in Example 1. An incipit shows the original part name, clef, key signature, and time signature, as well as the original letter name and note value of the first note or first few notes on the line (omitting rests).

Ex. 1

The image shows a musical score for four parts: Cantus, Altus, Tenor, and Bassus. Each part begins with an incipit symbol indicating the original part name, clef, key signature, and time signature. The original note values are halved. The Cantus part starts with a C-clef on the first line, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/2 time signature. The Altus part starts with a C-clef on the second line, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/2 time signature. The Tenor part starts with a C-clef on the third line, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/2 time signature. The Bassus part starts with a C-clef on the fourth line, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/2 time signature. The music is written in a modern style with halved note values.

Ex. 1 shows the opening measures in a recorder transcription of a hypothetical Renaissance fantasia originally intended for unspecified instruments. The incipit clefs for the top three lines indicate the position of middle C. Observe that the original note values have been halved, and the piece has been transposed up a perfect fourth plus an octave to put it in a comfortable key for SATB recorders. (The octave transposition was necessary because SATB recorders sound an octave higher than SATB instruments in most other Renaissance families such as viols, krummhorns, and shawms.)

The use of incipits is not essential for a good edition, but in the absence of incipits, the editor needs to mention in a preface or other convenient location what editorial changes were made.

Editorial Insertions: 1. Bar-lines

Renaissance vocal music was printed in part books rather than in score form and had no bar-lines. Most Renaissance instrumental music was also unbarred. The addition of bar-lines by modern editors presents problems. When modern performers see bar-lines, they want to accent the first beat and other strong beats in each measure. However, much Renaissance music was not originally intended to have regularly spaced strong and weak beats. Factors such as note value, line shape, and (for music with text underlay) word accentuation determined what notes should be stressed.

The deleterious effect of bar-lines is most noticeable when notes are tied over bar-lines, producing syncopations that were not intended by the composer. In the 1920s, Heinrich Bessler, a German musicologist, devised a way of dealing with this problem. He invented the *mensurstrich*, a bar-line placed between the staves rather than through them so that the melodic lines appear unbroken. Ex. 2a is an excerpt from a hypothetical edition of Renaissance music with conventional barring. Notes tied over bar-lines tend to produce false accents, indicated by > marks. Ex. 2b shows the same excerpt with mensurstrich barring. Since notes are no longer tied over the bar lines, false accents are less likely to occur. However, tradition-bound musicians were not happy with this type of barring, which they found hard to read, so it is no longer commonly used.

Ex. 2a



Ex. 2b



Another way of avoiding false accents is through irregular barring, placing bar-lines before notes of greatest natural stress. That method works well with homophonic music. Examples 3a and 3b show two ways of barring an excerpt from the top line of a vocal piece by Orlando di Lasso. Conventional barring is seen in Ex. 3a. Notes tied over bar-lines produce false accents. Irregular barring of part of the same excerpt is seen in Ex. 3b. The measures of unequal length might look confusing, but the note values are the same in both examples. Only the accentuation is different. While the *ends* of long notes tend to be accented in Ex. 3a, stresses fall on the *beginnings* of the same notes in Ex. 3b. (Try speaking the rhythms on a “la” syllable while tapping or clapping quarter-note subdivisions.) Only the top line of this four-voice piece is shown here, but the same bar-lines can be used for the other voices since the piece is homophonic.

Irregular barring of homophonic pieces can be found in some excellent editions of Renaissance music, including the *Schott Recorder Consort Anthology*. However, that type of barring would be impractical for contrapuntal music because the measure numbering would be different for the different voices so that they could not be lined up on a score.

Ex. 3a

S'io tive-des-si-u-na sol vol-tail gior-no, Con-
 ten-to ne-sta-ria, con-ten-to-ne-sta-ria
 tut-ta la-se-na. If I could see you only once a day, I'd
 be content through the whole evening.

Ex. 3b

The image shows two staves of handwritten musical notation in G major (one sharp). The first staff contains the melody for the first line of the text, with notes corresponding to the syllables 'Con-ten-to ne sta-ria, con-ten-to ne sta-ria'. The second staff contains the melody for the second line, 'tut-ta la se-ra.', with notes corresponding to the syllables. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). The notes are primarily quarter and eighth notes, with some rests.

Editorial Insertions: 2. Insertions Relating to Meter and Tempo

An extensive discussion of meter and tempo in the Renaissance is beyond the scope of this handbook. We will merely skim the surface here. For broader and more detailed coverage, please consult the relevant references in the bibliography.

Renaissance musicians did not have metronomes. The ensemble director would beat time by lowering and raising his hand. One downstroke plus one upstroke was called a complete *tactus*. According to theoretical treatises written in the late 15th century, the speed of the *tactus* was equal to the normal human pulse rate (60 to 80 beats per minute).

The time signature on a piece of music determined what note value received the *tactus*. There were a number of time signatures in the Renaissance, but we will limit this discussion to the two that are still used today: C and C with a vertical slash, both of which indicate duple meter. We will call the one with the vertical slash “C-slash.” In present-day usage, C means common time (4/4 meter), and C-slash means cut time (2/2 meter). They are vestiges of *mensural notation*, the system of notation used in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance.

In the early Renaissance, the C signature meant that the whole note received the *tactus*. There were 60 to 80 whole-note beats per minute. The C-slash signature meant that the double whole note received the *tactus*. The whole-note duration was then only half a *tactus*, i.e., 120-160 whole notes per minute. In other words, the time signature determined the tempo, and C-slash time was thus twice as fast as C time.

The above-mentioned 2:1 ratio held through most of the fifteenth century but broke down during the sixteenth. There was no longer a precise mathematical relationship between the two signatures, and some composers used them interchangeably.

Furthermore, the tactus itself became somewhat variable during the sixteenth century. A lively dance piece with simple rhythms might have been played somewhat faster than 80 beats per minute, and a fantasia with complex rhythms might have been played somewhat more slowly than 60 beats per minute. Also, the tempo of a vocal piece might have depended to some extent on the mood expressed by the text.

Because of the above-mentioned ambiguities, we cannot use the C and C-slash meters as reliable indicators of tempo in modern transcriptions of 16th-century music. Nor can we consider a metronome marking of 60 to 80 beats per minute correct for all 16th-century music. It works for many 16th-century pieces, but not for all.

We look to the editor for guidelines concerning proper tempos in transcriptions of Renaissance music. Sometimes editors include suggested metronome markings. For example, a suggested tempo for a dance piece based upon the editor's knowledge of the dance steps would be helpful. Such metronome markings should be placed in brackets or parentheses, and the editor should mention in a preface or other convenient spot that they are editorial insertions. Editors can also give us some idea of proper tempos for vocal pieces by underlaying the text and including English translations of foreign texts.

Another topic that needs to be discussed in connection with time signatures concerns meter changes within pieces. In the sixteenth century, composers indicated a change from duple to triple meter within a piece by a signature such as "C3," meaning that there is a proportional relationship between note values in the duple and triple sections. The editor is expected to express that relationship in a way that is understandable to modern musicians. Ex. 4 shows how this should be done. The proportional relation is printed above the staves in brackets or parentheses. In this case, the half note in the 2/2 section is equal in duration to the dotted half in the 3/4 section. In other words, half a measure in the duple section is equal to a full measure in the triple section. The editor should also mention the original source from which the transcription was derived so that anyone who questions his judgment can consult the primary source.

With reference to Ex. 4, a meticulous editor might also include a helpful statement such as the following in the preface: "Choose a tempo for the 2/2 section that will result in a dance-like character for the 3/4 section. A metronome marking of 72 for the half note in the duple section will produce the desired result."

Ex. 4

The image shows a musical score for four staves, likely representing a four-part setting. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a 2/2 time signature. The music is written in a style characteristic of the Renaissance. In each staff, there are two measures of music followed by a repeat sign. Above the first measure of each staff, there is a bracketed editorial insertion: [d = d.] This indicates that the editor has added a flat accidental to a note that was originally written as a natural. The notes in question are D notes in the soprano, alto, tenor, and bass parts. The score concludes with a double bar line and a first ending bracket (1.) in the final measure of each staff.

Editorial Insertions: 3. Musica Ficta

The term *musica ficta* refers to accidentals added by an editor to a transcription in order to bring it into agreement with the rules of early-music performance practice. Since rules of Renaissance performance practice were well known to Renaissance musicians, composers didn't always bother to write in the needed accidentals. Renaissance musicians would have known, for example, to raise certain notes a half step before a cadence or to alter a note in order to avoid outlining a melodic tritone, which was a forbidden interval. Since modern performers might not be familiar with those rules, the editor should supply the missing accidentals.

There are two customary ways of indicating *musica ficta*. The most commonly used way is to place the added accidental above the note to which it refers, as in Ex. 5a. The other way is to enclose the accidental in brackets and place it to the left of the note to which it refers. The editor should mention in the preface that the added accidentals apply to only one note, not to the whole measure.

Ex. 5a



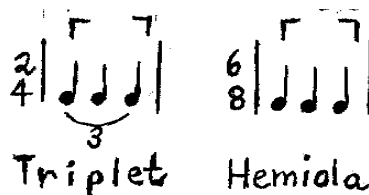
Ex. 5b



Editorial Insertions: 4. Ligatures and Coloration

Scholarly performing editions show where *ligatures* occurred in the original sources. A ligature is a group of notes joined together in a special way. It is a holdover from Medieval notation and is not used in modern notation. In Renaissance vocal music, all the notes in a ligature are sung on the same syllable. In the absence of text underlay, ligatures can, therefore, help us with proper phrasing. Wind players should not take a breath between the notes in a ligature. Editors place the symbol above notes that originally appeared in a ligature.

Scholarly editions also show where *coloration* occurred in the original source. Coloration refers to the filling-in of customarily white note heads with black or red ink to show certain rhythmic groupings such as triplets and hemiolas. Editors use the symbol to indicate coloration, as shown below.



Editorial Insertions: 5. Octave Relationships

As we mentioned earlier, SATB recorders sound an octave higher than SATB ensembles of most other instrument families. SATB recorders also sound an octave higher than SATB singers. The lowest tone on a soprano recorder is notated as middle C but actually sounds an octave higher. Therefore, editors of recorder music usually place a little 8 above the treble clef on soprano lines. Similarly, the lowest tone of the bass recorder is notated as the space below the

bass staff but actually sounds an octave higher. Therefore, editors of recorder music usually put a little 8 above the bass clef on bass lines.

Recorder players can also read from vocal editions and generic editions intended for most other instrument families. Such editions, if correctly edited, will have a little 8 under the treble clef on tenor lines. When using such editions, soprano, tenor, and bass recorder players treat them like recorder editions, but altos have to play up an octave. Even if those little eights are missing, you can figure out the correct instrumentation by looking at the individual lines on the score. Find the highest and lowest note in each line to determine whether you need a C-fingered or F-fingered recorder. A line written in treble clef with notated pitches below middle C indicates an alto part that must be played up an octave.

The Importance of Using Good Editions

If you want your consort to play in a historically-informed manner, you will need to use editions that clearly distinguish between original and editorial material. Except for obvious insertions such as bar-lines and obvious alterations such as round note heads substituted for the original diamond-shaped ones, the editor should indicate on the music itself and/or in a preface or other convenient place what editorial changes and insertions have been made.

Why is this necessary? I will answer by citing an actual incident. About 30 years ago, one of my recorder ensembles performed a set of Renaissance dances in an ARS chapter concert. We used an edition whose editor was unfamiliar with Renaissance performance practice. The music was peppered with dynamics, Baroque ornaments, articulation marks, and descriptive tempos and expression indications. Since the editor neglected to mention that he had added all those markings, and since we were quite naïve in those days, we tried to obey all of them. We blew hard in loud sections and gently in soft ones, ruining intonation and tone quality. We played every slur and every trill, turn, and mordent, and used plenty of vibrato in passages marked “*espressivo*.” As might be expected, we ran out of breath in the middle of phrases in the pavane marked “*lento*,” and our tongues and fingers were horribly out of sync in the bransle marked “*presto*.” Afterwards we received polite applause. Were we to perform that way today, our anachronistic rendition would surely be considered a joke, and the appropriate response would be laughter.

Of course, most editions of Renaissance music available today are not nearly as bad as the one just described, but we still need to know what the editor has done, for editors are not infallible. If we don't agree with certain facts, for example, it is helpful to know that they are editorial insertions rather than original accidentals. We can then feel free to reject them if we believe, on the basis of our own knowledge of Renaissance performance practice, that they are wrong.

In addition to mentioning editorial changes and insertions, the preface should include information about the composer(s) and musical genre(s) represented and should also cite the source(s) from which the edition was derived. If we are confused about any of the editorial procedures, we can then consult the original sources for clarification.

While good editing does not guarantee the intrinsic worth of a piece of music, good editing *does* enable us to play it in a historically-informed manner, which should increase the pleasure that listeners derive from it.

Good editions of Renaissance music need not be unduly expensive. London Pro Musica, for example, has issued many excellent, relatively inexpensive editions. These publications are user-friendly in that they have few awkward page turns, and many of them provide a separate score for each member of the ensemble.

Another good buy is the *Schott Recorder Consort Anthology*, a six-volume set (ED 12387 to ED 12392). One volume is devoted entirely to 15th-century music and another entirely to dance music. The other four volumes, featuring French and Spanish, Italian, German and Dutch, and English music respectively, include various vocal and instrumental genres.

For those of you who would enjoy the challenge of playing from early notation, a number of facsimile-type editions are available. We especially recommend *Four Duets* by Paolo Fonghetti (Sweet Pipes SP 2311), *Two Carmina à 3* by Heinrich Isaac (Sweet Pipes SP 2312), and the various Ogni Sorte RS editions, each of which contains settings by a number of composers of a popular Renaissance tune. Along with part books in original notation, these recommended editions include scores in modern notation and detailed instructions for reading early notation.

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