PART I

THE COMMENTARY
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Musica practica (Bologna 1482) of Bartolomeo Ramos de Pareia was one of the most controversial music theory treatises of the fifteenth century. Although many of Ramos's propositions were rejected by his contemporaries, few other fifteenth-century theorists had such a monumental impact upon their musical community and the subsequent development of Western music theory.

The Musica practica, even in its title, illustrates the transformation in the Renaissance from an emphasis on musica speculativa to that of musica practica. Ramos was not greatly concerned with the speculative or mathematical aspects of music theory that were represented in the medieval quadrivium; rather, he endeavored to provide an approach that would be readily applicable to the everyday demands of the practicing singer-musician. Ramos's attempt to meet the needs of the performer stand in direct contrast to many of his predecessors who, in contrast, viewed the practicing musician with disdain.

The Renaissance was an era in which the role of the speculative theorist was redefined by the need for an uncomplicated assimilation of theory and practice. Treatises that addressed practical issues appeared with increasing frequency in the late fifteenth century, and theorists
themselves openly admitted the necessity to integrate practice with theory:

A pure and simple singer is like a body without a mind, since no one can be a good singer without a thorough [knowledge] of counterpoint . . . .¹

. . . . for a practicing musician without [speculative] theory is like a blind man without a walking stick.²

The Musica practica of Ramos figures predominantly in the history of music theory because of Ramos's theoretical propositions that stand in direct opposition to Pythagorean-Boethian-Guidonian explanations of Western music. Although Ramos provides traditional explanations of such topics as the modes, counterpoint, musica ficta, and white mensural notation,³


² " . . . practicus enim sine theorica est tamquam caecus sine baculo." Letter dated May 6, 1535 from Giovanni del Lago to Lorenzo Gazio. See Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS 5318, ff. 85r-101v or Bologna, Liceo Musicale MS B107-1, 135-162.

³ The topics of the modes, counterpoint, and musica ficta are addressed in Part I of this dissertation; because Ramos subscribes to the traditional rhythmic concepts that were established by Franco of Cologne (ca. 1280), there is no need for a comparable discussion of rhythm. Although Ramos devotes an entire section of the Musica practica to the subject of rhythm, remaining true to his mission of practicality he avoids the detailed explanations of complex proportions that are typical of speculative treatises of the fifteenth century. Ramos concentrates upon only the fundamentals of rhythm that would be applicable to the everyday demands of a practicing musician, providing an overview of the essential elements of note and rest values, coloration, and the proportional signs. An examination of Ramos's discussion in the Musica practica,
he proposes new approaches to aspects of temperament, solmization, mutation, and to even the gamut itself. One of the most revolutionary concepts advanced by Ramos involves the determination of pitch proportions and their realization on the monochord. Ramos simplifies the Pythagorean ratios for the major and minor thirds from 81:64 and 32:27 to 5:4 and 6:5, respectively. This modification lays the foundation for Zarlino's dual system of harmony and contributes to the shift from a modal system to that of a tonal system.

Yet another innovative but controversial idea is Ramos's proposal for a new method of solmization and mutation. The application of Guido's system of solmization based upon the hexachords of C, F, and G had become a speculative encumbrance to the music of the late fifteenth century. With the rise in chromaticism and the general acceptance of hexachords on nearly every pitch--largely brought about by John Hothby's treatise Calliope legale--Ramos felt that the Guidonian system no longer served its original purpose of simplifying the task of the practicing musician. Ramos proposes a system containing eight notes, as opposed to six, based upon the syllables Psal-li-tur per vo-ces is-tas. This system, beginning on the note C, required only one mutation rather than the multiple mutations inherent in the Guidonian system. Because musicians had come to rely on the placement of

Part 3, Treatise 1, Chapters 1-3 will suffice.
mi-fa for the identification of the semitone's position, traditionalists were highly critical of Ramos's innovation. Despite the intense opposition to the new "octochordal" solmization method, Ramos's proposal was not overlooked by the theorists of succeeding generations; it provided the basis for the "fixed do" solfège of the Common Practice Period.

Invective and Repercussion:
Music at the End of the Fifteenth Century

Ramos himself predicted the reactions and (false) accusations that he was to receive from his contemporaries. Ramos was accused of both failing to read and of failing to understand the speculative concepts of Boethius and Guido; however, it is quite evident from his discussions of theoretical concepts and from his criticism of individual theorists, that the charges of his contemporaries were unsubstantiated. Ramos, in fact, was an extremely literate musician-theorist.

Although Ramos was a Spaniard residing in Italy at the time that he wrote his treatise, he elected to continue the academic tradition of writing in Latin as opposed to the vernacular Spanish or Italian. Because Ramos was an innovative man who concentrated upon the practical aspects of music, one might expect the Music practica to have been written in the vernacular. Ramos realized, however, that in order to refute the authority of his esteemed predecessors and exert any
authority of his own, he must address the musical-scholarly community according to the typical academic conventions. Thus, the choice of Latin as the language for the *Musica practica* was a conscious effort in an attempt to establish himself as a respected scholar.

Ramos's harsh, vitriolic manner stands in stark contrast to that of his predecessors. It was customary for theorists, when criticizing other authors, to merely allude to those who represented a differing point of view. Ramos, however, does not hesitate to criticize his colleagues by name, nor does he hesitate to malign a number of the most revered musicians in history; such attacks were directed toward St. Gregory the Great, Odo of Cluny, Guido d'Arezzo, Marchettus de Padua, Johannes de Muris, Ugolino of Orvieto, Johannes Tinctoris, Tristan de Silva, Pedro de Osma, Johannes de Santo Domingo, Robertus Anglicus, John Hothby, and Roger Caperon.

Ramos's disdain for the traditions of the past and his rejection of the authority of Guido and Boethius created a great deal of controversy in the musical circles of Italy. Although Ramos's criticisms are valid, the disrespectful manner in which he presented those criticisms resulted in the inability of his colleagues to objectively assess them.
Due to a reverence for the auctoritas of the past and a loyalty to their own teachers, the reactions of Ramos's colleagues were charged with emotion. Such an impassioned environment resulted in a series of polemic attacks and responses. Participants in this long-running quarrel include such figures as the Italian theorists Nicolaus Burtius, Franchinus Gaffurius, and Giovanni Spataro, as well as the English theorist John Hothby. As might be expected, Ramos had several faithful disciples who held him and his theories with the highest esteem. Ramos's most ardent supporter, Giovanni Spataro, defended the personal character and theoretical concepts of his teacher long after the death of his mentor.

The first published response to the Musica practica is the Musices opusculum (1487) of Nicolaus Burtius. Burtius, a former student of Ramos and a disciple of Johannes Gallicus of Mantua, vehemently attacks Ramos for his dissolution of the Guidonian hexachord system and for his proposal of a solmization system that is based upon the octave. Burtius not only criticizes Ramos's innovations, but insults Ramos personally, engaging in name-calling and highly emotional denouncements of Ramos's character.

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It would appear that Burtius's disapproving attitude toward Ramos runs deeper than his opposition to Ramos's controversial theories, which Burtius believed would undermine musical tradition. It is probable that Burtius's reactions are largely a result of a negative experience as a student under Ramos. In the *Honesta defensio* (1491) of Giovanni Spataro—which, for the most part, is a reaction to Burtius's attacks against Ramos—Spataro reminds Burtius of an occasion when he had presented a selection of his contrapuntal compositions to Ramos for examination; after examining them, Ramos advised Burtius to refrain from performing his compositions until he had learned more about counterpoint:

And do you not remember when you showed my very learned teacher some of your compositions, which were composed with such ignorance that you were not even able to match the contrabass with the soprano? For if the tenor was a fifth or a third from the soprano, the contrabass was a fifth below the tenor, which resulted in a ninth or a seventh with the soprano. And when my teacher humbly instructed you to refrain from showing those songs of yours to anybody before you had learned a little more, you became stupidly enraged against his paternal correction.5

5"E non ti ricorda quando al mio doctissimo maestro mostrasti certe tue compositione composte cum tanta ignorantia, che tu non concordavi il contra cum il soprano. Ma se el tenore era quinta o terza cum lo soprano, lo contra era quinta sotto il tenore, che veniva a essere una nona, o una septima cum lo soprano; e perchē il mio maestro humilmente te disse non mostrare questi toi canti fora finche non hai imparato un poco, te adirassi, come pessimo, a la paterna corectione." See Giovanni Spataro, *Johannis Spadarii musices ac Bartholomei Rami Pareie Honesta defensio in Nicolai Burtii Parmensis opusculum* (Bologna, 1491), facsimile edition ed. Giuseppe Vecchi, vol. I, *Opera Omnia Johannis Spatarii* (Bologna: Antiquae Musicae Italicae Monumenta Bononiensia, 1967), ff. 2v-3r.
In his numerous references to Ramos, Burtius generally refers to his former teacher as "the prevaricator of the truth." Compared to some of the other slurs that are directed toward the Spanish theorist by Burtius--"the author of paradoxes," "father of an ox," and "the dung of Spain"--this epithet appears to be quite complimentary. Further characterizations of Ramos, offered by Burtius in the *Musices opusculum*, employ a host of descriptive adjectives: ignorant, arrogant, conceited, impudent, insolent, mad, irrational, malicious, worthless, crass, contradictory, perverted, and depraved. It appears that Burtius and Ramos did not enjoy the most congenial of relationships; nevertheless, Burtius provides a nearly word-for-word reiteration of many of Ramos's explanations of counterpoint and rhythm in his own *Musices opusculum*.

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6See especially the Prologue of Burtius's *Musices opusculum*, ff. a2r-a4v.

7Nicolaus Burtius's discussion of rhythm in Chapters 1 and 2 of the *Musices opusculum* addresses many of the topics that Ramos discusses in Part 3, Treatise 1, Chapters 1-3 of the *Musica practica*. Burtius does not include all the variant prolational symbols that Ramos demonstrates, preferring to use only 0, C, O, and C. See Burtius's, *Musices opusculum*, Treatise 3, ff. f1r-f6r. For further discussion of Burtius's explanations of counterpoint which resemble Ramos's discussions in the *Musica practica*, see Chapter VIII of this commentary.
For the most part, Spataro's 1491 rebuttal to the *Musices opusculum* of Burtius ended Burtius's attacks upon Ramos. Most of the polemic debates in which Spataro engaged involved the Italian theorist and composer Franchinus Gaffurius. Much of what is known of these debates has been extracted from their respective published works, which also serve as an abundant source of information regarding the controversy between the Bolognese and Milanese schools.

Spataro launched his initial attack against Gaffurius in 1510 by way of an unpublished treatise entitled *Utile e breve regule di canto composte per Maestro Zoanne di Spadari da Bologna.*\(^8\) Spataro's *Utile e breve regule di canto* was largely a reaction to Gaffurius's marginal annotations on the "errors of Ramos" that Gaffurius had inscribed in a copy of the *Musica practica* loaned to him by Spataro.\(^9\) In a letter dated 27 November 1531, Spataro expresses his extreme displeasure for Gaffurius's unsolicited annotations:


\(^9\)Gaffurius's Latin annotations, with English translation, are provided in the endnotes to the translation of the *Musica practica* contained in Part II of this dissertation. Whenever possible, the annotations appear according to Gaffurius's placement in Spataro's copy (the A-80 edition).
I sent it—that is, the Musica practica of Bartolomeo Ramis—to Franchino in Milan. Sometime later he sent it back to me all spoiled and annotated with personal remarks against the author’s viewpoint. It is [in] such [poor condition] that I really do not care to show it [to anyone], because other people, who do not understand the objectives of the author could easily believe what was written by Franchino. If I were able to find another [copy], I would buy it; and in order not to have these annotations be read [by anyone], I would cast this one that I have into the fire.10

Gaffurius responded to the Utile e breve regule di canto with a published treatise entitled De harmonia musicorum instrumentorum opus11 (1518), to which Spataro responded by means of eighteen personal letters. It is unfortunate that this particular correspondence between Spataro and Gaffurius is no longer extant; these letters would have provided subsequent generations with a glimpse of the private, informal discussions that took place

10“ Io la scilicet la Musica practica di Bartolomeo Ramis mandai a Milano a Franchino et lui dopo me la mando tuta sesquiternata et de sua mano appostilata contro lo auctore, in modo che non me curo che sia veduta, perche altri, che non intendono li termini de lo auctore, facilmente potrano credere a quello che fu scripto da Franchino; et se io ne trovasse un altra, io la compraria et, perche tale appostille non fussino vedute, io geteria questa che tengo nel foco." See Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS 5318, ff. 228r-229v, a compilation of over 100 letters of famous personages that were collected by Giovanni del Lago. A copy of this letter can also be found in the Bologna, Liceo Musicale MS B107-3, 368-377. The Bologna manuscripts are a collection of seventy-seven letters, forty-eight of which were written by Giovanni Spataro.

between two prominent music theorists of the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{12}

Gaffurius's second published attack against Ramos and his disciples appears in the *Apologia Franchini Gafurii Musici adversus Joannem Spatarium et complices musicos Bononienses* (1520).\textsuperscript{13} The title of this treatise is indicative of the type of invective that was exchanged between Spataro and Gaffurius. Here, Gaffurius implies that Spataro is the ringleader of a band of musical "accomplices" in Bologna, as if to suggest that a criminal act had been committed.

Spataro replies to Gaffurius's *Apologia* with his *Errori di Franchino Gafuria da Lodi, da maestro Joanne Spatario, musico Bolognese, in sua defensione, e del suo precettore maestro Bartolomeo Ramis hispano subtilmente dimostrati*\textsuperscript{14} and with his *Dilucide et probatissime demonstratione de Maestro Zoaanne Spatario musico Bolognese contra certe frivole et vane excusatione da Franchino*.

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\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 20.


Gafurio (*Maestro de li errori*) in luce aducte (both 1521), completing his criticism of Gaffurius in his final treatise, entitled *Tractato di musica* (1531).

In addition to Spataro, Ramos found an enthusiastic supporter in the famous Italian theorist and composer Pietro Aaron who, in his *Thoscanello* of 1523, referred to Ramos as "a most estimable musician, truly worthy of veneration by every learned person." Aaron's first treatise, *Libri tres de institutione harmonica* (1516), entangled him in the on-going controversy between Gaffurius and Spataro. During the course of their debates with Gaffurius, Spataro and Aaron developed a close friendship; the amiable letters that were exchanged between Spataro and

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Aaron provide invaluable insight on the nature of the disputes between Spataro and Gaffurius.\(^1\)

Ramos's proposal of a solmization system that contained a single mutation was not only a reaction to the Guidonian hexachord but was a response to the theoretical propositions of the English theorist John Hothby. In the treatise *Calliope legale*, Hothby advocates the placement of hexachords on all twelve pitches of the chromatic scale. In principal, Ramos concurs that hexachords are indeed possible at other locations than those established by Guido on C, F, and G; however, Ramos criticizes Hothby's insistence upon the employment of Guidonian solmization with the twelve hexachords due to the excessive number of complicated mutations that ensue from such arrangements. Hothby defends his theory, citing the authority of the ancients, in three treatises: *Dialogus Johannis Ottobi Anglici in arte musica*, *Excitatio quaedam musicae artis per refutationem*, and the *Epistola*.\(^2\)


\(^{2}\)See Albert Seay, ed., *Johannis Octobi tres tractatuli contra Bartholomeum Ramum*, vol. X, *Corpus Scriptorum de Musica* (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1964). The *Excitatio* is of special interest to the present study; this treatise contains quotations that have been extracted from the *Musica practica* followed immediately afterwards by Hothby's opposing viewpoints.
In the *Dialogus*, Section V, Hothby takes Ramos to task for his assumption that one can determine the mensuration of a composition without the assignment of a time signature. Hothby's reaction to Ramos's rebuke concerning the "errors of excess" has been repeated by other theorists and musicologists in subsequent centuries; it is a reaction that has resulted from a misunderstanding of Ramos's intentions, derived from an extraction of the following statements from the *Musica practica*:

> For there is no real purpose for things to be done by many means which can be done by fewer means. \(^{21}\)

> Therefore, just as those who, lacking foresight, err by defect [when they] decide that the species without any sign is perfect, thus also, those who add another [sign] err by excess, since the perfect can be distinguished by one [sign]. For example, if a rest of a long occupies three spaces within a song, they err who add this sign \(\text{\textcircled{2}}\); likewise also if two rests of a semibreve are found in this way \(\text{\textcircled{2}}\), [then] this \(\text{\textcircled{2}}\) or this \(\text{\textcircled{2}}\) is placed superfluously if minim rests are arranged in this way; especially if both are found, since otherwise, anyone could say it was placed for the purpose of indicating that which was lacking. \(^{22}\)

Hothby assumes from these statements that Ramos is advocating the abolishment of mensuration signs. Hothby argues that, if time signatures were really unnecessary, it would follow that all other musical symbols upon which

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\(^{22}\)Ibid., 70.
musicians have come to rely upon might likewise be abolished! Hothby concludes his discussion in the *Dialogus* with a rhetorical question, asking if a musician could actually understand an entire composition without any written symbols whatsoever.  

Clearly, Ramos was not advocating an abolishment of all the symbols that clarify the perfection and imperfection of a composition. As a theorist with a proclivity for *musica practica*, Ramos demonstrates that one could determine the mensuration by examining merely the values of the rests in a composition, rather than by relying on a multitude of symbols that only complicate matters of mensural notation. Clearly, Hothby's criticism that Ramos sought to abolish all notational symbols is quite absurd and cannot be taken seriously.

**Conclusion**

The *Musica practica* of Bartolomeo Ramos de Pareia has long been recognized as a significant and controversial cornerstone in the history of music theory. Ramos's innovations with regard to tuning and his proposal that musicians use the octave, rather than the Guidonian hexachord, as a basis for theoretical organization have had a profound and long-lasting impact upon the development of

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Western music. Ramos's more "radical" theories served as the source of polemic debate for decades to come, and his disciples--loyal and persistent--succeeded in preserving and transmitting his ideology to future generations.

Several respected twentieth-century musicologists have dismissed Ramos as an inconsequential figure in the development of music theory. This attitude can be attributed primarily to two factors: the lack of an English translation and critical evaluation of the Musica practica, and out-of-context translations of fragments that have resulted in both accidental and willful misrepresentations of Ramos's intent.

Upon investigation of the Musica practica, it is clear that many of Ramos's contemporaries "borrowed" his ideas without giving him due credit. Ramos's ideas appear, without proper attribution, in the treatises of the most celebrated music theorists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, including Nicolaus Burtius, Pietro Aaron, Ludovico Fogliano, and Gioseffo Zarlino. While it is beyond the scope of this study to thoroughly investigate all the innovations proposed by Ramos, to assess their impact upon the discipline of the history of music theory, and to decipher the real and invented quarrels that ensued among Ramos's supporters and opponents, it is hoped that
this translation and critical evaluation of Ramos's Musica practica will facilitate future studies in the history of theory discipline.