

# The preservation of *stile antico* in the 18th century and the reception of *Gradus ad Parnassum*

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## Abstract

Johann Joseph Fux was not only one of the most prestigious composers of the first half of the 18th century, but also the author of one of the most read and studied music treatises of the period: *Gradus ad Parnassum*. Nevertheless, the fact that Fux defended the emulation of the *stile antico* led a significant part of musicologists to underestimate his importance for the development of music in the 18th and 19th centuries. Considering the controversies around *Gradus ad Parnassum*, the small attention devoted to it and its historical value, this article proposes a reassessment of the reception of this treaty and the preservation of the *stile antico*. Through this reassessment, it will be possible to expand our understanding of the musical and treatise production of the 18th century, as well as the influence of Fux's work on later generations of musicians and composers.

**Palavras-chave:** Johann Joseph Fux; *stile antico*; counterpoint; 18th century; Vienna.

## Introduction

The appointment of Johann Joseph Fux (Hirtenfeld, before 1660 – Vienna, 13 February 1741) – an Austrian of plebeian origin – to the post of imperial composer in 1698 was marked by the protest of Italian musicians who at that time dominated musical productions at the Viennese court. In contrast to the other composers employed at the Viennese court, such as Carlo Agostino Badia and Giovanni Battista Bononcini, who were only hired after the approval and personal recommendation of the chapel master, Fux was appointed to the position by Emperor Leopold I himself (Vienna, 1640-1705), despite the initial judgment of the chapel master Antonio Draghi and the other musicians employed in the imperial chapel.<sup>1</sup>

Because of this controversy regarding his nationality, a few years after Fux started working in the Viennese chapel, Emperor Leopold I decided to send him to Rome to study with the chapel

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master of the *Collegium Germanicum* Giuseppe Ottavio Pitoni (WHITE, 2015, p.574) and with Bernardo Pasquini (FEDERHOFER, 1980, p.160), famous for emulating Palestrina. This period of study was fundamental for Fux to assimilate the new compositional techniques in force in Italy, as well as for the mastery of the *stile antico*.

Back at the Viennese court, the success and recognition of Fux's work as an imperial composer led him to succeed Marc'Antonio Ziani as imperial chapel master, thus becoming one of the most prestigious and highest-paid composers in the German-Speaking world. This can be confirmed by his massive salary amounting to 3,100 guilders a year – 600 guilders more than Ziani (JONES, 2016, p. 20). As with his initial entry into the imperial chapel in 1698, the question of Fux's nationality is a factor that also draws attention to his appointment to the post of chapel master. This, because with the exception of a short period of 8 months in which Johann Heinrich Schmelzer needed to occupy the position of imperial chapel master on account of the Great Plague of Vienna (1679), this position was held for approximately 100 continuous years exclusively by musicians of Italian origin.

Despite this important historical position of Fux as the first Austrian to hold the main musical position of the Holy Roman Empire for a long period (25 years)<sup>2</sup> and despite the international prestige enjoyed by Fux throughout his life, music historiography not only did not pay the same attention to the figure of Fux as to other names in the German world of the first half of the 18th century – such as Johann Sebastian Bach, Georg Friedrich Handel and Georg Philipp Telemann –, as well as almost completely forgot the Austrian chapel master's work as a composer.

In general, the few references made to Fux by musicologists have a tone of disapproval and criticism of Fux's alleged exacerbated conservatism and his resistance to the new taste (*stile galante*) that was gaining strength in the 18th century. This article aims to reassess the reception of the treatise *Gradus ad Parnassum* and the role of Johann Joseph Fux in the development of Viennese music in the 18th and 19th centuries. For this, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, the discussion between Fux and Johann Mattheson about solmization and the number of modes, criticisms of Fux's conservatism and, finally, the influence of *Gradus* on the following generations of composers were examined.

## Preservation of tradition

Although the *stile galante* gained many adherents in the 18th century, the *stile antico* was by no means abandoned by all composers employed in the courts of Europe. In Vienna, in particular, the performance of polyphonic vocal sacred pieces remained closely associated

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to Johann Heinrich Schmelzer, the Austrian composer Christoph Strauss also held the post of chapel master of Vienna, but again only for a short period (less than 2 years).

with the undisputed power and authority of the House of Habsburg and the Catholic Church, causing composers employed in the imperial chapel to continue to produce new pieces in accordance with the *prima pratica*.

Because of this requirement, as a chapel master in Vienna, Fux devoted most of his time and energy to the composition of sacred pieces with a significant (for the time) number of contrapuntal sections. These pieces include approximately 100 masses, 70 Marian antiphons, 25 oratorios (or *sepolcri*), 40 works for the celebration of Vespers, and 116 motets, offertory and gradual (JONES, 2016, p. 39-40). Among some of Fux's main compositions for the *stile antico*, the *Missa Canonica* stands out. In the dedication to Emperor Charles VI present in the score of this mass, Fux makes his intention clear:

[...] to refute for that glorious art the unfounded view of some people, that in the course of time the substance of the old music has been so much reduced that gradually even its meaning has disappeared, and nothing has remained but the shadow of its name which has now been taken over by modern music. [...] I flatter myself that Your Majesty will see from this Mass that fortunately the old music has not vanished completely. (FUX apud WHITE, 2020, p. 73).

After defending the *stile antico* in the brief dedication of the *Missa Canonica*, Fux was able to develop more extensively in his counterpoint treatise *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725) his criticism of the tendency of new composers to completely abandon the *prima pratica* in favor of the new taste that was gradually dominating European music production. In fact, despite the rigorous adaptation of compositions such as the *Missa Canonica* to the *stile antico*, it was mainly on account of the publication of the treatise *Gradus ad Parnassum* that Fux entered the history of Western music as one of the main advocates of the preservation of the *stile antico* in the 18th century.

To a large extent, it is possible to say that the main objective behind the elaboration of the *Gradus ad Panassum* was to present to young composers compositional rules based on the authorities of the *stile antico* and, with that, to oppose the modern stile and the *stile galante*, criticized by Fux for lack of temperance and observance of the laws of nature. In the preface to the treatise Fux writes:

Some people will perhaps wonder why I have undertaken to write about music [...] just at this time when music has become almost arbitrary and composers refuse to be bound by any rules and principles, detesting the very name of school and law like death itself. (FUX, 1971 [1725], p. 17-18).

Supported by the nostalgia for the days when compliance with musical grammar defended by the authorities of sacred music was practically absolute and when good taste was understood essentially as a direct product of following the rules of nature, Fux set out to recover the "dignity" of polyphonic music of the 15th and 16th centuries. Fux does not dispute that talent and personal taste should be considered as desirable skills for good musicians, but at the same time he considers that the exaggerated trust in the judgment of one's own ears to

the detriment of the teachings of the authorities of the past and the laws of nature were corrupting the music of his time. For him this corruption and distortion of taste was growing to such an extent that even a young composer endowed with both talent and diligence and devotion to his studies “cannot go against the tide except to the detriment of his reputation and success” (FUX, 1992 [1725], p. 217). In another excerpt from the treatise Fux writes:

[...] several modern composers are to be found who, thinking they show taste and novelty, turn away from the normal use of consonance and dissonance, and invert the laws and institutions of accentuation, and they believe they are creating admirers for themselves (which is in God's power alone) [...] One would not deny that a very large part of good taste depends on the genius and talent of a particular composer. But these same influences, not without attraction in their own right, should be confined within the limits of nature, order and laws, so that they may deserve to be considered in good taste. (FUX, 1992 [1725], p. 216-17).

In order to make explicit the importance and usefulness of the study of mathematical proportions for the complete mastery of the art of composition, Fux devoted the first entire book of his treatise to theoretical music,<sup>3</sup> as the investigation of which intervals could be classified as consonances and which should be classified as dissonances. For Fux, only the help of numbers would allow a musician who is not limited to judging solely through his own ears to make such classifications based on reason<sup>4</sup>.

Regarding the classification of the fourth, for example, Fux argues that although this interval clearly sounds less “repulsive” (*widrig*) and is more bearable to the ears than the other dissonances, mathematical science would prove that the interval of the fourth cannot be compared to the same level of perfection as the unison, the fifth, the octave, and even the thirds and sixths, and it is therefore a mistake to include it alongside the consonant intervals (FUX, 1725, p. 38-39).

This ability to classify intervals properly according to the laws of mathematics was defended by Fux as an indispensable foundation for composers to be able to compose properly, even in the case of the composition of works that came to depart completely from the *stile antico*. According to Fux, the intervals “are the elements from which all the agreement (*Zusammenstimmung*) of the music is produced. Your ultimate goal is delight” (FUX, 1725, p. 60)<sup>5</sup>. Thus, Fux states that with the mathematical base exposed at the first book of the *Gradus*,

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<sup>3</sup> “Von der ersten, der theoretischen, werde ich in diesem ersten Theile handeln, und nur das kürzlich vortragen, so zur völligen Ausübung nöthig zu seyn scheint, die practische werde ich im andern Theile weitläufiger abhandeln. Da aber die Musik mit dem Klange, als ihrem Unterwurffe, zu thun hat, so muß von selbigem am ersten gehandelt werden” (FUX, 1725, p. 2).

<sup>4</sup> “Dahero folget, daß iedwede Bewegung der Luft keinen Klang ausmache, sondern die hervorbringende Ursach desselben in einem andern Körper ausser ihr stecke, welcher solche zusammen drücket, und in gewisse Schranken einschliesset. Dieses gehöret eigentlich in die Naturlehre, denn der Musikus betrachtet den Klang nicht abstract, sondern nur in Ansehung anderer Klänge, wie nemlich ein Klang vom andern der höhe und Tiefe nach unterschieden ist. Weil aber diese Vergleichung hauptsächlich durch Hülffe der Zahlen geschiehet, so sey [...]” (FUX, 1725, p. 2-4).

<sup>5</sup> “Dieses sind die Elemente, aus welchen alle Zusammenstimmung der Musik gemacht wird. Der endzweck derselben ist zu ergötzen.”

the reader could “sate his desire to know” (FUX, 1725, p. 51)<sup>6</sup> and from the light provided by this new knowledge, move away from the vices and imperfections that, according to Fux, were corrupting music in the early 18th century.

In the second book of *Gradus*, written in the form of a dialogue between a master and a disciple, the figure of Palestrina appears as the ultimate symbol of perfect observance of the laws and rules of nature and, therefore, as the main model to be emulated by the musicians and composers committed to fighting trends considered harmful in the musical production of the period. Palestrina’s praise in this second book of *Gradus* is made explicit in the choice of the names of the two characters in the treatise: Josephus for the disciple’s character and Aloysius for the master. The choice of these names is a clear allusion to Johann Joseph Fux himself on the one hand and Palestrina on the other – who, despite being better known by the name Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, was referred to in Latin texts as Joannes-Petrus-Aloysius Praenestinus.

By pointing to Palestrina’s music as a model to be emulated by young students, Fux highlights the fundamental importance of finding a balance between the search for the new and individual talent on the one hand and adaptation to the laws of nature on the other, which in turn could only be discovered through the study of theoretical music and the imitation of the main authorities of the past. In the last pages of the treatise, when asked about the composition of arias, Aloysius (that is, Fux) answers:

What fixed advice would I give about an arbitrary kind of music which is subject to constantly changing taste? I by no means disapprove of this cult of novelty, but give it the greatest praise. For if a middle-aged man were to enter today in dress worn fifty or sixty years ago, he would certainly expose himself to the risk of being laughed at. Thus, also music is to be adapted to the age. But I have never seen or heard someone tell of a tailor so enthusiastic about novelty that he put the sleeves of a tunic at the thigh or knees: nor is there any architect so stupid that he put the foundations of a building in the roof. This we do see and hear in music from time to time, not without causing sadness to the intelligent; and to the shame of the art: where, when the rules of nature and art have been upturned, the foundation has been taken from its proper place and forced above, to the detriment of the remaining parts, left without proper foundation. Therefore, you will have enthusiasm, Joseph, for novelty and originality in its time, as much as you can; but not at all debasing the rules of art, which imitates and perfects nature, by no means destroying it. (FUX, 1992 [1725], p. 241).

## Controversy between Fux and Mattheson

In spite of all the prestige that Fux enjoyed throughout his career in Vienna, many of his contemporaries berated him for his resistance to the new compositional trends of the period

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<sup>6</sup> “Dieses wird geneigter Lese zu meinem Endzweck zureichend seyn, womit du gleichsam als mit einem Licht das Finstere dieser sehr weit läufigen Wissenschaft vertreiben, und durch Hülffe dessen, deine Begierde zu wissen sättigen kanst.”

and for his unwavering support for compositional systems that were quickly being abandoned by most musicians in Europe.

It is a curious fact, however, that one of the most heated discussions around Fux's conservatism emerged precisely after the publication of a dedication to the Austrian composer present in the treatise *Das Beschütze Orchestre* from Johann Mattheson (1681-1764). Published in 1717, this was the second major treatise to be written by the young Hamburg composer and writer. Nevertheless, although it was still one of Mattheson's first publications, the notoriously critical and, in many cases, polemical character of his writing is already presented here as biting and incisive as in his subsequent treatises.

One of the main targets of Mattheson's rapturous critique in this youthful treatise was precisely the insistence of some composers of the period on continuing to defend the usefulness of solmization and ecclesiastical modes. On the frontispiece of the *Beschütze Orchestre*, for instance, Mattheson included an undiplomatic engraving (figure 1) of a memorial erected in honor of the definitive death of Guido de Arezzo (c.992 – c.1050) and, together with him, of solmization and authentic and traditional plagal modes. This allusion, however, did not please Johann Joseph Fux at all, named by Mattheson as one of the thirteen composers to whom the treatise was dedicated.

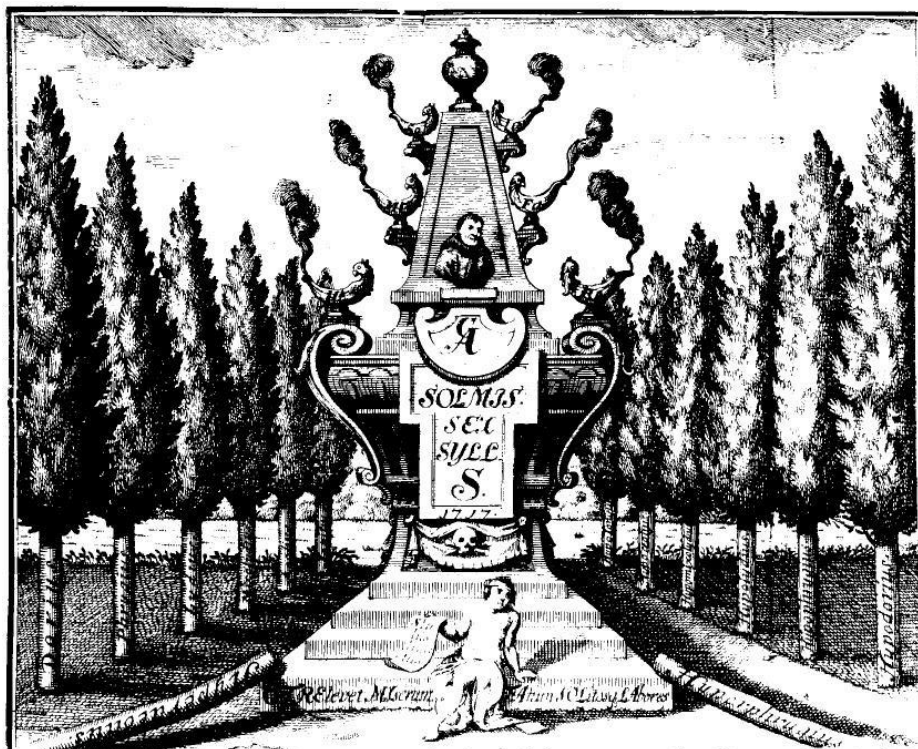


Figure 1. Frontispiece. *Das Beschütze Orchestre*. Hamburg 1717.

From these thirteen composers honored in the preface to *Das Beschütze Orchestre*, Mattheson asked for a “completely impartial, free and sincere opinion” (LESTER, 1977, p.

37-39) about the publication. Among these composers, twelve responded positively, praising the quality of the treatise and thanking the tribute. Fux, however, not satisfied with Mattheson's attack on solmization and not seeing the meaning in the existence of 24 modes (tonalities) classified in just two distinct groups (major and minor), chose to send a letter to Mattheson in December 1717 questioning the positions taken in *Das Beschützte Orchestre*. Despite the disagreements between Fux and Mattheson, all the letters exchanged between them between December 1717 and February 1718 were later published by Mattheson – together with the responses of the other honored composers – in the second volume of the *Criticae Musicae* (1725).

In the first letter written by Fux, the Austrian composer (already anticipating some of the main criticisms of the new generation of composers that would later be exposed in the *Gradus ad Parnassum*) chided Mattheson for his lack of appreciation for the great authorities of the past. This is due both to the alleged injustice against Guido de Arezzo and to Fux's understanding that Mattheson's defense of the 24 modes was linked to his ignorance of Aristotle's teaching that "everything of a specific nature always maintains that nature wherever it is placed" (FUX, [1717] 1725, p. 187)<sup>7</sup>. In Fux's words:

That my lord wanted to place me among those for whom *Das Beschützte Orchestre* has been dedicated, I hereby retribute owe thanks [...] but I'm very surprised that the poor, but never sufficiently praised Guido Aretinus, as he owes his *musica practica* more than any author in the world, is so ridiculously blasphemed; I have to confess that I wasn't a little annoyed about it [...] I'm not at all an adorer of the superstitious antiquity, but I will venerate what has been considered good and right by so many centuries by the foremost masters, until nothing better is invented. The 24th new modes also have no reason at all, because tone or mode is nothing but a circling modulation inside the limits of an octave. (FUX, [1717] 1725, p. 185-186)<sup>8</sup>.

This questioning by Fux was seen by Mattheson, in turn, as a personal attack on his work and as a demonstration of a radical and uncompromising conservatism on the part of the imperial chapel master. This disagreement between the two composers can be clearly seen in the following note included in the *Criticae Musicae* on this first letter written by Fux:

[...] it is no wonder that we offer the more delicate, more gallant music to those people who throw away all the gracefulness and refined means, even though they have been fooling around in the common and lukewarm way of teaching for too long. They also do not want to be told better by those who do not hold with their art,

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<sup>7</sup> "Juxta Axioma Aristot, omne tale est semper tale, ubicunque ponatur."

<sup>8</sup> "Daß meinem Herrn hat belieben wollen, mich unter die jenigen zu setzen, dennen das Beschützte Orchestre ist dediziert worden, erstatte hiemit schuldigen Danck [...] aber wohl mich höchst verwundern, das der arme, doch niemallen sattsamb gepriffene Guido Aretinus, als deme *Musica practica* mehr schuldig als keinem Authori in der Welt, so lächerlich durch die Hächl gezogen wirdt, ich muß bekennen, das ich mich hürüber nit ein wenig geörgert habe. [...] Ich bin gar kein Anbeter der superstitieusen Antiquitet, doch waß durch so velle saecula von vornembsten Maistern für gutt und recht behalten worden, biß nit waß bessers erfunden wirdt, venerire ich auf alle weiß. Die 24. neue Modi haben auch gar keinen Grundt, dann weillen Tonus oder modus nichts ist, als eine circolirende modulation intra limites octavae, als folg notwendig, daß so uill toni und nit mehr sein können, als offt gedachte modulation vermög deß Simitonii kann verändert werden, welchen nur 6. Mahl geschehen kann."

especially by young people. It is difficult for them to set aside in old age what they learned with great difficulty as boys at school and to admit that they have misspent their time. (MATTHESON, 1725, p. 188)<sup>9</sup>.

Already in his first response to Fux, Mattheson admits that if he were to strictly follow the main authorities of the past he would inevitably end up having to agree with Fux's conclusion regarding the existence of only 12 modes (considering both authentic and plagal modes). Mattheson, however, goes on to say that most of these authorities had an "unjustifiable metaphysic" as their epistemological basis and, therefore, questions whether 18th century musicians and writers really should continue to follow the positions presented by these thinkers even if they entered into contradiction with empirical evidence. Commenting on the defense of ecclesiastical manners, for example, Mattheson says:

I know well that it is believed to be so by tradition since the time of Boethius, for it was heard at that time. But this belief and this tale give me little satisfaction: I want to have reasons based and proven by actual experience. (MATTHESON, [1717] 1725, p. 193)<sup>10</sup>.

The excerpt above displays one of the central reasons for the contrasting positions defended by Mattheson and Fux, namely the epistemological bases adopted by each of the composers. This is because while Mattheson identifies empiricism as the main adequate method to correctly analyze and judge which practical and theoretical positions should be followed, Fux, as a typical Jesuit, adopts a position that is much closer to a kind of rationalism with a strongly traditionalist character. Mattheson himself came to recognize this epistemological difference, as is evident in the following quote present in one of the letters written to Fux: "one must have more trust in the ear than in the fragile *raisonnement* [reason]" (MATTHESON, [1717] 1725, p. 196)<sup>11</sup>.

After a few months of correspondence, neither of them managed to convince the other. While Fux continued to refute the meaning of the 24 modes (tonalities) and to support the desirability of solmization, berating Mattheson for his contempt for the authorities of the past, Mattheson went on to reproach him for blindly relying on tradition and a purely metaphysical rationalism. In fact, with each new letter exchanged, the language used by these two great figures in the history of German music became more aggressive and less diplomatic, as can

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<sup>9</sup> "Daher ist es kein Wunder, daß wir die zierlichere, galantere Musik umsonst solchen Personen anbieten, die alle Zierlichkeit und auserlesene Hülfsmittel von sich werffen, maßen sie sich in der gemeinen und lausichten Lehr-Art schon alzu lange Zeit herumgeweltzet habe. Sie wollen sich auch keines bessern berichten lassen, von denen die es nicht mit ihren Künsten halten, insonderheit leiden sie es nicht von Jüngern. Es gehet ihnen schwer ein, dasjenige, so sie als Knaben in der Schule, mit vieler Mühe erlernen, im Alter auf die Seite zu setzen, und zu bekennen, daß sie ihre Zeit übel angewandt haben."

<sup>10</sup> "Ich weiß wohl, daß es per traditionem, von des Boethi Zeiten her, so geglaubert worden, daß es sich auch damals hat hören lassen. Aber dieser Glaube und dieses Märlein geben mir gar kein Genügen: ich will rationes in experientia hodierna fundatas & approbatas haben."

<sup>11</sup> "Man muß dem Gehör in diesem Stück mehr trauen, als dem zerbrechlichen *raisonnement*."



be seen in the following excerpt from the last letter written by Mattheson after a few months of heated debate:

Your Excellency dealt in this correspondence with one who is anything but a slave, whether of his own opinion or of any other unfounded opinion; who was born free, lives free and serves a nation that is so free that slavery and bohemian villages are equally unknown, foreign to him. [...] I don't want to discuss the facts here any longer, but I save my thoughts until a more comfortable opportunity, when if not the whole, at least half of the musical world – that is, the German – will judge which of us is a true slave to his old opinion. (MATTHESON, [1718] 1725, p. 202-203)<sup>12</sup>.

## Criticisms of Fux in the 19th and 20th centuries

Despite the disagreements between Mattheson and Fux regarding solmization and modes, the Hamburg writer never questioned the talent and quality of Fux's work. In the treatise *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739), for example, Mattheson praised Fux's fugal writing, as well as his mastery of Italian vocal style, his mastery of instrumental music, and recommended to his readers Fux's choirs as exemplary models of the oratorical style.

On the other hand, from the 19th century onwards, the figure of Fux came to be severely judged by most musicologists as one of the main examples of an extremely conservative composer, incapable of understanding and adapting to new times. This is largely due to the fact that as bourgeois aesthetic principles – eventually synthesized in the French slogan *L'art-pour-l'art* – started to be disseminated and diffused around the European continent, less and less value came to be attributed to works with well-defined social functions, as is the case with practically the entire production of Johann Joseph Fux.

In this way, as the autonomy of art defended by Kant, or in other words the independence of works of art from any external external determination, came to be considered as one of the central qualities for judging and evaluating not only new works, but also the history of art as a whole, a large part of bourgeois thinkers began to see in the treatises and compositional production of a figure like Fux, whose entire career was directly linked to the Catholic Church and the House of Habsburg, nothing more than an exacerbated conservatism generated by his servile position.

If, on the one hand, however, names such as Bach and Handel ended up being spared by German musicology due – among other reasons – to the interest of nationalist intellectuals in claiming that “the German spirit” (*der deutsche Geist*) would have been the main engine

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<sup>12</sup> “Mein Hochgeehrter Herr hat sonst in dieser Correspondenz mit einem zu thun gehabt, der nichts weniger, als eine Esclave, weder seiner eignen, noch andrer ungegründeten, Meynung ist; der so frey geboren, so frey lebet, und einer solchen freyen Ration dienet, daß bey ihm Esclavern und Böhmisches Dörffer, im gleichen Grad, unbekante, fremde Dinge sind. [...] Ich will demnach weiter nichts von der Sache an diesem Orte berühren, sondern meine Gedancken biß auf eine bequeme Gelegenheit versparen, da wenigstens, wo nicht die ganze, doch die halbe, und zwar deutsche musikalische Welt urtheilen soll, wer eigentlich von uns ein würcklicher Sclave seiner alten Meinung sey.”

behind the history of European music, on the other hand, the unquestionable influence of Italian music on Austrian soil in the 17th and 18th centuries ended up generating great discomfort for Austrian nationalists. This negative assessment of the appreciation of foreign music by the monarchs of the Holy Roman Empire can be seen, for example, in the following excerpt from the famous article *Was ist Deutsch?* from Richard Wagner:

It was the incalculable misfortune of Germany that, about the time when the German spirit was ripening for its task upon that high domain, the legitimate State-interests of all German peoples were entrusted to the counsels of a prince to whom the German spirit was a total stranger, to the most thoroughpaced representative of the un-German, Romanic State-idea: Charles the Fifth, King of Spain and Naples, hereditary Archduke of Austria, elected Romish Kaiser and Sovereign of the German Reich [...] What good and world-significant thing might here have come to life, we can scarce approximately measure; but we have before us the results of the disastrous conflict of the German spirit with the un-German spirit of the German Reich's supreme controller. [...] Yet Bach's spirit, the German spirit, stepped forth from the sanctuary of divinest Music, the place of its new-birth. [...] Whoso would seize the wondrous individuality, the strength and meaning of the German spirit in one incomparably speaking image, let him cast a searching glance upon the else so puzzling wellnigh unaccountable figure of Music's wonder-man Sebastian Bach. [...] And while this was happening with great Bach, sole harbourer and new-bearer of the German spirit, the large and little Courts of German princes were swarming with Italian opera-composers and virtuosi, bought with untold outlay, too, to shower on slighted Germany the leavings of an art that nowadays cannot be accorded the least consideration. (WAGNER, 1878, p. 33-38).<sup>13</sup>

Considering, therefore, the fact that Fux repeatedly highlighted his mastery of the compositional styles present in Rome, Mantua and Venice and publicly defended the superiority of Italian music – even going so far as to recommend to one of his students to “go to Italy and clear your head of all superfluous things here” (FUX apud WHITE, 2020, p. 16), it is not surprising that German nationalists of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century did not give much value to the production of the Vienna chapel master. In 1898, for example, Hugo Riemann (1849-1919) accused the *Gradus ad Parnassum* of being “already

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<sup>13</sup> “Das unermeßliche Unglück Deutschlands war, daß um jene Zeit, als der deutsche Geist für seine Aufgabe auf jenem erhabenen Gebiete heranreifte, das richtige Staatsinteresse der deutschen Völker dem Verständnisse eines Fürsten zugemuthet blieb, welcher dem deutschen Geiste völlig fremd, zum vollgültigsten Repräsentanten des undeutschen, romanischen Staatsgedanken's berufen war: Karl V., König von Spanien und Neapel, erblicher Erzherzog von Österreich, erwählter römischer Kaiser und Oberherr des deutschen Reiches. [...] Welches Gute und Weltbedeutungsvolle hier in das Leben hätte treten können, läßt sich, wie gesagt, kaum nur annähernd ermessen, während wir dagegen nur die Ergebnisse des unseligen Widerstreites des deutschen Geistes mit dem undeutschen Geiste des deutschen Reichsoberhauptes vor uns haben. [...] Doch Bach's Geist, der deutsche Geist, trat aus dem Mysterium der wunderbarsten Musik, seiner Neugeburtsstätte, hervor [...] Will man die wunderbare Eigenthümlichkeit, Kraft und Bedeutung des deutschen Geistes in einem unvergleichlich beredten Bilde erfassen, so blicke man scharf und sinnvoll auf die sonst fast unerklärlich räthselhafte Erscheinung des musikalischen Wundermannes Sebastian Bach. Er ist die Geschichte des innerlichsten Lebens des deutschen Geistes während des grauenvollen Jahrhunderts der gänzlichen Erlöschenheit des deutschen Volkes. [...] Und während sich dieß mit dem großen Bach, dem einzigen Horte und Neugebärer des deutschen Geistes, begab, wimmelten die großen und kleinen Höfe der deutschen Fürsten von italienischen Opernkomponisten und Virtuosen, die man mit ungeheuren Opfern dazu erkaufte, dem verachteten Deutschland den Abfall einer Kunst zu Besten zu geben, welcher heut' zu Tage nicht die mindeste Beachtung mehr geschenkt werden kann.”

outdated at the time it was written”<sup>14</sup>. And even the Swiss-Austrian musicologist Ernst Kurth (1886-1946), a former student of Guido Adler, also questioned Fux for having relied on melodic compositional procedures and for having resisted the hegemony of the harmonic scope in compositional organization<sup>15</sup>.

### **Acknowledgment of *Gradus ad parnassum***

Despite the criticism that the *Gradus ad Parnassum* was already obsolete since its year of publication, the treatise was recognized in the 18th century as one of the main compositional treatises of the period and, consequently, became one of the most used pedagogical materials for the training of young composers, both professionals and amateurs. In fact, even in the first half of the 18th century, the publication of *Gradus ad parnassum* was an unquestionable commercial success, which can be attested by the sold out of the first edition of the book in about a year (MANN, 2017, p. 57).

In addition to Fux’s direct disciples – notably Gottlieb Muffat, Georg Christoph Wagenseil and Jan Dismas Zelenka (FEDERHOFER, 1988, p. 11-12), one of the best-known figures of the first half of the 18th century to have appreciated Fux’s work was Johann Sebastian Bach. In a letter sent to Johann Nikolaus Forkel (1749-1818) in January 1775, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1744-1788) reported that “in his last days he [J. S. Bach] held in high esteem: Fux, Caldara, Handel, Kaysern, Hassen, both Graun, Telemann, Zelenka, Benda, and in general all that were particularly appreciated in Berlin and Dreßden” (BACH, 1775, p.109)<sup>16</sup>.

We can confirm through this account that J. S. Bach was not only well acquainted with the work of the Vienna chapel master, but also got very interested into Fux’s works mainly in his last years of life, that is, precisely in the period when Bach began to study Palestrina’s works more actively, as well as the period in which Bach composed pieces such as *The Art of the Fugue* (BWV 1080), *Mass in B Minor* (BWV 232) and *Goldberg Variations* (BWV 988). In fact, more than simply a connoisseur of Fux’s compositions, Bach was probably one of the first

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<sup>14</sup> “Bedenkt man, daß der *Gradus ad Parnassum* drei Jahre nach dem ersten Teile von J.S. Bach Wohltemperiertem Klavier erschien (1725), so kann man sich der Einsicht nicht verschließen, daß er schon zur Zeit seiner Abfassung veraltet war.”

<sup>15</sup> “Fux greift auf die (von der aufdämmernden Erkenntnis über Wesen und Begriff des Akkordes noch unbeeinflusste) Satzlehre von Zarlino zurück, und so offenbart sich hinter einem äusserlichen Vorstellen melodischer Grundzüge der Stand eines noch nicht überwundenen Ueberganges, der den Entwicklungsprozess der Vocalmusik vom sechszehnten Jahrhundert kennzeichnet, und der sich theoretisch als noch nicht durchgebrochene Differenzierung von melodischer und von harmonischer Anlage charakterisierte. [...] So ist in den Grundlagen der Fux’schen Darstellung weder eine horizontale noch eine vertikale Anlage klar ausgeprägt, Züge aus beiden Einstellungen fluten zu jenem ungeklärten theoretischen Uebergang ineinander, der kein Bild von dem wirklichen lebendigen Ineinanderwirken der beiden Satzelemente geben kann” (KURTH, 1917, p.128).

<sup>16</sup> “[...] in der letzten Zeit schätzte er [J.S. Bach] hoch: Fux, Caldara, Händeln, Kaysern, Haßen, beyde Graun, Telemann, Zelenka, Benda u. überhaupt alles, was in Berlin u. Dreßden besonders zu schätzen war. Die erstgenannten 4 ausgenommen, kannte er die übrigen persönlich.”

owners of the first original edition of the *Gradus* in the Reformed world, as evidenced by the handwritten copy of the treatise signed by Bach (CLEMENT, 2013, p. 56).

Regarding this possible influence of the *Gradus ad Parnassum* on Bach's later musical production, Alfred Mann was particularly audacious in declaring that "Fux's work aided him in his growing preoccupation with the *stile antico* which led to a decisive metamorphosis of the style of his later Years" (MANN, 2017, p. 58). Although this statement can be considered a risky speculation, it is unlikely that Bach's interest in Fux's compositional and treatise production in the same period when the German composer began to study the works of 16th century composers was a mere coincidence.

Furthermore, the first translation of the *Gradus ad Parnassum* into German was made by one of Bach's students, Lorenz Christoph Mizler (1711-1778), currently known mainly for having rebutted the criticisms of Johann Adolf Scheibe (1708-1776) for the lack of clarity and the intricate counterpoint present in Bach's compositions. Similar to the way Bach's pupil defended him in the case of the Scheibe controversy, in the preface to his translation of the *Gradus* Mizler countered the accusations that Fux's treatise would have little practical use by claiming that Fux had exposed nothing more and nothing less than the laws of nature and the immutable principles of music. In this way, Mizler comes to the conclusion that the accusations of obsolescence of compositional prescriptions defended by Fux would be the result of the excessive attachment of the new generations of writers and composers to the ephemeral and to empiricism to the detriment of rational truths found through mathematics. According to Mizler:

The principles of harmony and pure composition are immutable in music; fashion in music may morph and change as it pleases. The author, however, has presented only those teachings that must always remain and must be in music, because such are based on the unchangeable laws of nature, and Fux will therefore remain an Auctor Classicus in the composition as long as there is harmony, and a regular music is made among the people. [...] It is folly if some, out of ignorance, want to pretend that Fux's form of composition is now out of fashion and that his book is therefore no longer as useful as it used to be. [...] Fux presented the first principles of harmony and compositional art, which have always been, which still are, and which will also always be and will always remain, as long as this world is structured in its cohesion and the rules, according to which it is there, do not change. The little things that always change in music, so that a different outfit becomes fashionable almost every ten years, as a secondary thing has no influence at all on the essence of the composition. The basis of the art of composition remains unmoved, taste may change at will. That is why the author paid little attention to the manners, nor did he want to teach how that and this type of composition should be dressed up, but merely presented the first principles of the art of composition, which are unchangeable (MIZLER, 1742)<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> "Die Grunde der Harmonie, und der reinen Composition sind unveränderlich in der Musik, es mag die Mode in der Musik werden und sich verändern, wie sie will. Der Verfasser aber hat lauter solche Lehren vorgetragen, welche in der Musik allezeit bleiben und seyn müssen, weil sich solche auf die unveränderliche Gesetze der Natur grunden, und wird daher der Fux ein Auctor classicus in der Composition bleiben, so lange eine harmonie ist, und eine

Adept at the rationalism of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff, Mizler saw music as part of the set of scientific knowledge to be investigated and taught through mathematics and not simply a purely sensorial entertainment devoid of rational rules and laws. Within this context, more than merely a new compositional method, *Gradus* was seen by writers such as Mizler as a successful link between musical praxis and the mathematical and philosophical principles defended by a considerable portion of the thinkers of the period. On the occasion of the controversy with Scheibe, for example, Mizler – agreeing with the arguments presented by Fux in the first book of *Gradus* – wrote: “if we want to be completely convinced of musical truths, mathematical knowledge, as the highest level of human wisdom, must also be added” (LORENZ, 1738, p. 56)<sup>18</sup>.

In addition to Mizler’s German translation, Fux’s treatise translations into Italian in 1761<sup>19</sup>, English in 1768<sup>20</sup> e French in 1775<sup>21</sup> played a key role in ensuring that *Gradus* remained one of the most read and studied compositional treatises not only in Austria and Germany, but also in most of the West for a long time. In the preface to the fourth edition of his treatise on counterpoint, for example, Heinrich Bellermann (1832-1903) rebutted criticisms from musicologists such as Hugo Riemann, pointing to the fact that at that time (1901) – that is, more than 175 years after his elaboration – new editions of the treatise were still being published and that hundreds of young composers continued to study counterpoint through the prescriptions exposed by Fux<sup>22</sup>.

Among the generations of musicians after Fux, the composers of the First Vienna School, in particular, found in the *Gradus ad Parnassum* a source of great learning. Despite all the changes in taste in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Fux’s treatise continued to be considered one of the most valuable study materials both for the teaching of amateurs and beginners and among already trained composers who were looking to improve their

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Regelmässige Musik unter den Menschen gemacht wird. [...] Es ist eine Thorheit, wenn einige aus Unverstand vorgeben wollen, Fuxens Art zu setzen sey nun aus der Mode gekommen, und dahero sein Buch aus nicht mehr so brauchbar, als vor diesem. [...] Fux hat die ersten Gründe der Harmonie und Setzkunst vorgetragen, die allezeit gewesen sind, die noch sind, und die auch allezeit seyn und bleiben werden, so lange dieses Weltgebäude in ihrem Zusammenhang und die Regeln, nach welchen solches da ist, sich nicht verändern. Die Kleinigkeiten, die in der Musik immer sich ändern, so, dass fast alle zehn Jahr eine andere Einkleidung Mode wird, hat als ein Nebending gar keinen Einfluss in das Wesen der Composition. Der Grund der Setzkunst bleibet unverrückt, es mag sich der Geschmack ändern, wie er will. Drum hat der Verfasser sich um die Manieren wenig bekümmert, auch nicht lehren wollen, wie jene und diese Art der Composition einzukleiden sey, sondern blos die ersten Gründe der Setzkunst, die unveränderlich sind, vorgetragen.”

<sup>18</sup> “Wollen wir von den musikalischen Wahrheiten vollkommen überzeugt seyn so muss auch die mathematische Erkenntnis, als die höchste Stufe menschlicher Weisheit, hinzukommen.”

<sup>19</sup> Traduzido por Alessandro Mandredi e publicado como *Salita al Parnasso, o sia Guida alla regolare composizione della musica con nuovo, e certo metodo non per anche in ordine sì esatto data alla luce*.

<sup>20</sup> Traduzido por J. C. Heck e publicado como *Practical Rules for Learning Composition*.

<sup>21</sup> Traduzido por Pietro Denis e publicado como *Traité de composition musicale, fait par le célèbre Fux*.

<sup>22</sup> “Considering the opinion that the *Gradus ad Parnassum* by Joseph Fux was already obsolete in 1725, it seems especially rewarding to me that in its new garb the work requires a fourth edition in 1901, and I hope it will continue to give sure and authoritative guidance to many students of vocal” (BELLERMANN, 1901, p.xvi).

contrapuntal compositional skills. Indeed, the contents of the treatise were adapted by several composers to suit the changing times, but the core of Fux's work remained essentially intact.

This connection between Fux and the composers of the First Viennese School begins, of course, with Haydn, who not only read and analyzed the *Gradus* thoroughly, but also began his musical career at St. holding the post of imperial chapel master. Haydn was thus very likely well acquainted with Fux's sacred works from an early age, and as a choir boy in Vienna he was certainly trained through Fux's vocal treatise *Singfundament*.

Although Haydn's original copy of the *Gradus ad Parnassum* was destroyed during World War II, Haydn's notes have been preserved thanks to transcripts made by the Austrian historian and composer Carl Ferdinand Pohl. These annotations – now part of the archive of the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreude* – demonstrate that Haydn did examine Fux's treatise in its entirety numerous times, having elaborated critical comments on certain positions held by Fux and reformulating both parts of the text and some of the examples provided by the author of the treatise (MANN, 1970).

It was mainly on the advice of Haydn that Mozart and Beethoven came into contact with the *Gradus ad Parnassum*. According to Alfred Mann (1970, p. 720), although Leopold Mozart also possessed a copy of the *Gradus*, the affinity between Haydn's notes and the exercises given by Mozart to his pupil Thomas Attwood indicates that it was essentially in the light of Haydn's interpretation that Wolfgang Mozart assimilated the prescriptions presented by Fux. Furthermore, most of the *Materialien zum Kontrapunkt* elaborated by Beethoven as a basis for the instruction of Archduke Rudolph of Habsburg – one of Beethoven's few pupils – are based almost entirely on the prescriptions presented by Fux in the *Gradus ad Parnassum*, in addition to Haydn's considerations (MANN, 1970, p. 725).

## Final considerations

The present article shows the prestige of Johann Joseph Fux throughout his professional career in Vienna, as well as the importance and influence of his main treatise, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, in the compositional development of some of the leading names in the history of 18th and early 19th century music.

From the information collected in the letters exchanged between Fux and Mattheson between 1717 and 1718, it was possible to draw an overview of some of the main musical divergences of the period and the main causes behind these divergences. With this information, it is clear the epistemological and philosophical foundation on which the *Gradus ad Parnassum* was elaborated, which allows to contextualize and better understand the preservation of the *stile antico* and the resistance to the *stile galante* in the last decades of the Modern Age.

The criticisms and defenses of Fux's work, gathered and presented in this article, are rich sources for understanding the way in which the compositional prescriptives proposed by

Fux were evaluated by musicians and writers in a period of great paradigm shifts in taste and in the meaning of making music, especially with regard to the artists' relationship with tradition and the new.

Finally, it is possible to say that despite the mostly negative evaluation or simply the complete omission by musicologists of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries of Fux's contributions to the history of Western music, only after a substantial deepening of research on figures such as Johann Joseph Fux we will truly be able to properly understand the musical production and treatises of the first half of the 18th century, as well as the development of music at the turn of the 18th century to the 19th century, especially in Austria.

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