

**Gallus Dressler**

**Præcepta musicæ poëticae (1563-64)**

**(edited by Robert Forgács)**

Gallus Dressler (1533-c.1580/89) was a talented composer and one of the most important music theorists writing in sixteenth-century Germany. He was born at Nebra, Thuringia. The first documentary reference to him is dated July 1557, when he enrolled as a student at the Academy at Jena. Prior to this Dressler appears to have visited the Netherlands and gained a thorough musical training there. In 1558 or 1559, after only one year or so at Jena, he assumed the post of Cantor at the *Lateinschule* at Magdeburg. The ensuing fifteen years were of central importance to his career, since virtually all of his compositional activity and his theoretical writings date from this period. Of his three music treatises, the *Præcepta musicæ poëticae* is his most important and original contribution to musical, humanist thought, and stands firmly within the Neo-Latin German tradition of discourse on music. The present form of the treatise was delivered as a series of lectures at Magdeburg, between 21 October 1563 and 29 February 1564. It was intended for the more advanced students, the lectures being delivered on Thursdays, from midday to 1 P.M. The topic of *musica poëtica* (composition) was especially requested by some of his students, and Dressler notes that two years earlier he had drawn up precepts and lectured on this subject, but now welcomed the opportunity of revisiting them. The treatise survives only by means of this one copy and represents, through its copious annotations and emendations, the author's mature reflections on the subject.

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## **Præcepta musicæ poëticæ**

### **Caput X, De Pausis.**

Sicut in communi vita non parvæ est artis recto tempore tacere, ita etiam in musica silentium habet suum locum et laudem. Appellamus autem ista signa quibus silentium induitur pausas, de quarum definitione et numero in practica dicitur. Inventæ autem sunt pausæ propter quinque causas. Primo respirandi gratia tot enim notulæ contrapuncto inserantur quot uno anhelitu pronunciarj possunt ne propter spiritus defectum difficultas oriatur quæ plerumque vel confusionem vel asperitatem parit. Secundo textum applicandi gratia non raro pausæ interponuntur. Decorum enim est notulas verbis recte applicari et eiusmodi applicatio multum habet gratiæ. Tertio propter prohibita intervalla vitanda. Nonnumquam tamen ipsa necessitas postulat silentium ne contra regulas artis peccemus. Quarto propter fugas constituendas pausis carere non possumus. Oportet enim intervenire pausas quo fugæ ab auribus percipiantur et præsertim in initijs cantilenarum. Quinto elegantiæ et suavitatis causa inseruntur etiam pausæ et non raro omnes voces silent propter emphasin et vocabulorum significationem. Exemplorum infinitam copiam subpeditabunt probatorum musicorum compositiones.

## **The Precepts of Poetic Music**

### **Chapter X, Concerning Rests**

Just as in public life there is no small degree of art in being silent at the correct time, so also in music silence has its place and praise. We call those signs rests by which silence is introduced, whose definition and number is spoken of in practical music. Rests, however, were invented for five reasons. First, for the sake of taking breath: for as many notes may be inserted in counterpoint as can be pronounced in one breath, lest a difficulty should arise through failing breathing, which usually creates confusion or harshness. Second, rests are sometimes interposed for the sake of applying the text: for it is seemly for notes to be applied to the words correctly, and an application of this sort has much grace. Third, on account of avoiding prohibited intervals. Sometimes, nevertheless, necessity itself demands silence so that we do not sin against the rules of our art. Fourth, on account of the constitution of fugues, we are not able to do without rests. For it is proper for rests to intervene so that fugues may be perceived by the ears and especially at the beginnings of vocal works. Fifth, rests are also inserted for the sake of elegance and sweetness, and often all the voices are silent on account of emphasis and the meaning of the words. The compositions of proven musicians will supply an infinite abundance of examples.

### **Commentary**

**Line 3:** *in practica dicitur*: Dressler is no doubt here referring to lectures on the subject of practical music that he had given. Indeed, in the preface to this treatise he writes: *practica musica proxime a nobis explicata fuit* ('practical music was expounded by us a short time ago').

**Line 4:** *contrapuncto*: a contrapuntal style of composition, in which each voice is relatively independent in the overall musical fabric, is the basic texture treated by Dressler, as it was the dominant compositional style of his era.

**Line 8:** *propter prohibita intervalla vitanda*: these are harsh intervals forbidden and avoided in the compositions of Dressler's time: above all the tritone (the augmented fourth or its alternative musical spelling, the diminished fifth), and other augmented or diminished intervals, as well as the appearance of consecutive fifths between the same two voices, which produces a rather weak effect.

**Line 9:** *Nonnumquam tamen ipsa necessitas postulat silentium ne contra regulas artis peccemus*: this is basically an amplification of line 8, with the rules of the art of music being those concerned with the correct treatment of consonances and dissonances and the correct construction of the individual vocal lines.

**Line 9:** *propter fugas constituendas*: Dressler is really referring to contrapuntal imitation between the different voices, rather than strict fugues, which were rarely written during his life time. Strict fugues were viewed as old-fashioned and typical of an earlier generation of composers.

**Lines 11-12:** Dressler was one of the first theorists to apply the vocabulary of rhetoric to the composition of music, and here he nicely stresses the significance of a meaningful and decorous musical setting of a text, assisted by the use of rests.

**Lines 13-14:** In these lines Dressler offers advice similar to that given to students of literature

of the time, that good stylistic models can be found in the works of proven masters, and that these models should be learned and imitated by students.

