

What Does Mersenne Owe to Bacchius? On the Revival and Reception of Late Ancient Theories of Harmony in Seventeenth-Century French Discourse

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Abstract

French polymath Marin Mersenne (1588–1648) was a prominent figure in the development of early Enlightenment music theory in France. As a mathematician, he belonged to a line of music scholars who sought to apply the natural sciences to the concepts of music theory and, above all, to early classical harmony. If this concept does not appear novel, that is not accidental. Similar ideas not only existed among ancient theorists but were quite prevalent well into the early Eastern Roman Empire, ranging from Pythagoras to figures such as the enigmatic Bacchius. It is precisely this figure that caught Mersenne's attention, to the extent that he edited and supervised the publication of some of Bacchius's theoretical works in the original Ancient Greek. Despite multiple attempts to study Bacchius, musicologists have still been unable to define his persona. It remains possible that he lived at any point between late Hellenism and the thirteenth century, given that some of his most notable works survive only in late Byzantine copies. While the revived interest in ancient theories during the Renaissance and Baroque periods is not surprising, what is particularly striking is that, seemingly under the influence of Bacchius, Mersenne largely disregarded the medieval discourse on scales and counterpoint. This paper seeks to explain how Mersenne, by using Bacchius as a model, may have laid the foundations for theories that emerged only in later decades, without explicitly naming the emerging tonal referential system or recognizing the chord as an independent entity.

Keywords: Marin Mersenne, Bacchius, Music harmony, Ancient theories, Renaissance