THE COMMEMORATIVE MEDAL OF THE COMPOSER/THEORIST
NICOLA VICENTINO AND THE QUESTION OF ITS ATTRIBUTION

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The literature concerning the Italian composer/theorist Nicola Vicentino is not extensive. This is not surprising as his extant works are not large in number, and his theoretical contributions, while extremely interesting and significant in terms of the humanistic involvement of music in the late Renaissance, are framed within a single treatise. As a result, contributions by twentieth-century scholars have been largely focused on specific aspects of his works or how they reflect and contribute to stylistic changes taking place in the second half of the sixteenth century. The single large-scale monograph devoted to Vicentino and his works is by Henry W. Kaufmann and dates from 1966.1 Summary accounts of his life and creative contributions are provided by music history texts devoted to the Renaissance period and by scholarly music encyclopedias and biographical dictionaries.

In regard to the commemorative medal executed in his honor (Figs. 1 and 2), the entry by H. Pearson in the fifth edition of Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians acknowledges that a “medal was coined in his honor as ‘perfectae musicae divisionisque inventor’” and that “his opponents said the medal was his own device” (766).2 There is no attribution or speculation of attribution as to the executor of the medal, nor is there a reproduction of it. Moreover, no source is cited for the observation that “opponents said the medal was his own device.”

The entry in the sixth and latest edition of this same encyclopedia (entitled The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians) written by Henry W. Kaufmann reproduces the woodcut of Vicentino (Fig. 3) from his treatise issued in 1555 but does not mention that a commemorative medal was executed in his honor (699–701). The entry on Vicentino by Claude Palisca in the scholarly German encyclopedia Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart includes the woodcut of 1555 but also makes no mention of the commemorative medal. The previously mentioned monograph devoted to the life and works of Vicentino by Kaufmann
includes on the frontispiece the obverse of the medal that shows the musician’s portrait (Fig. 1). However, no attribution is cited and there is no discussion of the medal within the text of the monograph.

The Italian composer and theorist Nicola Vicentino was born at Vicenza in 1511. Although virtually nothing is known concerning his early years, he undoubtedly came under the influence of the humanist scholar Gian Giorgio Trissino in his native city.3 It was probably the proximity of Vicenza to Venice that provided the opportunity for Vicentino to have personal contact with the theoretical concepts and instruction of the celebrated “father of the Venetian school,” Adrian Willaert. This association was recognized on the title page of his first book of madrigals (1546),4 where he refers to himself as a “student of the one and only Adrian Willaert.” 5 Sometime during this period he was ordained in the priesthood, but there is no doubt his primary interest was directed toward the theoretical examination of the Greek genera and their employment in musical practice.