The Psalms of Siena Ms K.I.2: Evidence on the Origins of Falsobordone
(1997)

With the exception of three isolated settings of "In exitu Israel," no polyphonic settings of psalms survive until around 1480. In the period 1480-1500 no fewer than four collections of Vespers psalms appeared, preserving 108 unique settings of polyphonic psalms. These psalms represent the first extant falsobordone.

Two theories have emerged to account for the sudden appearance of polyphonic psalmody in the late fifteenth century. One theory, the "evolution theory," is that these falsobordoni were the result of an evolutionary process with fauxbourdon as the immediate ancestor. The other theory, the "cadence theory," is that falsobordone did not evolve from fauxbourdon, but as the result of new cadences that developed in the period of transition to four-part composition taking place at the end of the fifteenth century. This study examines the four psalm collections for evidence of either theory.

The psalms in the four collections provide evidence of a tradition of improvised counterpoint built upon the framework of the tenor and cantus duet. This tradition, described by Guilielmus Monachus under the heading "the rules of English counterpoint" in his treatise De preceptis artis musicae, includes four distinct types of pieces, all of which are evident in the psalm collections. The evolution theory, then, involves the development of an improvised tradition in the performance of psalmody and its transference to a written tradition. Fauxbourdon is merely one of the four choices for these improvisations.

The psalms of Siena K.I.2, the only collection entirely set for four voices, show how this improvised tradition is absorbed into the mainstream of "art" music in the late fifteenth century. While the improvised tradition discussed in Guilielmus' voice-leading formulas is still the dominant style in these psalms, there is evidence that these voice-leading formulas are sometimes altered to accommodate harmonic principles, lending some credence to the cadence theory. There are also some psalm verses which feature more independent counterpoint, imitative polyphony, etc. and represent a move away from improvised counterpoint to "composed" music in the contrapuntal styles of northern composers such as Compère and Josquin.