

Early Recitative Accompaniment – Some Basic Points

(Prepared for TBSI 2009 by Lucas Harris)

A) Context and Rhythm in Recitative Style

- 1) One theory is that there isn't any 'meter' in recitative, that rhythms can/should be changed by the singer
 - a. According to this theory, recit was only written in C or 4/4 time because notational conventions did not permit writing without any meter or barlines.
 - b. This would seem to free the singer to deliver the text as heightened speech according to the goals of the *seconda prattica*
- 2) Another (*better!*) theory that there is still a 'tactus' in recitative
 - a. Usually two beats per bar as in Renaissance polyphony (which the composers grew up with)
 - b. The tactus is fluid – it can speed up and slow down according to the rhetorical delivery of the text (just as Frescobaldi's toccatas should speed up and slow down, imitating the 'modern madrigals' in his instructions). The relative note values remain roughly the same as written (i.e., a half note lasts about twice as long as a quarter, a quarter about twice as long as an eighth).
 - i. Recit is sometimes accompanied by one continuo player, sometimes by multiple players, sometimes conducted. In any case, continuo players ought to have *a moment-to-moment awareness of who is control of the next beat* (you, one of the upper voices, bc section leader, conductor, etc.).
 - i. When you find a new syllable on a beat, we just accompany the singer (place the bass note with the syllable)
 - ii. When there is a new chord under a rest or a tie in the voice, the continuo leads
 - iii. This happens most efficiently through a continuo section leader ('sniffer')
 - iv. The 'sniffer' gives cues to the section with a breath accompanied by a head-nod
 - v. Good recit accompanists often look ahead in the music to be prepared for any of these possible events

B) Text

- 1) Italian poetry normally has an odd number of syllables per line, usually 7 or 11. The Lamento is written in a free verse which combines 7 and 11 syllable lines, where the primary accent is on the penultimate syllable.
 - a. Endings
 - i. Normal 'feminine ending' (strong-weak or long-short): *a-mo-re, tor-men-to, mo-ri-re*

This is by far the most common ending. This ending usually set to a cadence in the music where the strong (penultimate) syllable is on the 'dominant' chord and the weak (final) syllable on the 'tonic' chord. For that reason we play strongly on the dominant and very lightly on the tonic.
 - ii. *Tronco* (final syllable is strong and short) – used in canzonettas, etc.: *giu-rò, ciel, di, o-hi-mè*
 - iii. *Sdrucchiola* (strong-weak-weak) – used for comic scenes: *fe-mi-ne, de-li-zi-e*
 - b. Caesuras //
 - i. 11 syllable lines often have a break or *caesura* in the middle which a composer can choose to set in any number of ways, sometimes increasing rhetorical contrasts by breaking an elision at the caesura point, splitting the 11-syllable line into two segments of 5+7 or 7+5 syllables

Ma, con l'aure serene (7)
tu te ne vai felice, // et io qui piango. (11) (Monteverdi: 7+5)
A te prepara Atene (7)
liete pompe superbe, // et io rimango (11) (Monteverdi: 7+5)
cibo di fere // in solitarie arene. (11)

But, with gentle breezes,
you happily set forth // while I still weep here.
For you, Athens is preparing
joyful and proud ceremonies, // and yet I remain
food for beasts // on these lonely sands.

2) Meaning

- a. Learn some basic Italian!
- b. Watch out for important words that will suddenly change the affect such as *Ma* ('But . . .')

3) Dynamics

- a. Dynamics very often follow the tessitura of the voice (higher = stronger, lower = weaker)
Monteverdi's preface to book VIII describes the three registers of the voice:

“Having considered that our minds have three principal passions or affectations -- anger, temperance, and humility or supplication – as the best philosophers affirm, and, indeed, considering that the very nature of our voice falls into a high, low, and medium range, and musical theory describes this clearly with three terms of agitated (concitato), languid (molle), and temperate (temperato) . . . “

4) Punctuation

- a. Try to give your singer a rhetorical accompaniment which imitates the punctuation in the text/setting
- b. , / ; / : / . / ? / ! – what do these correspond to in the continuo?
 - i. Comma (,) – probably a short breath
 - ii. Semicolon or colon (; or :) – perhaps a longer pause
 - iii. Period (.) – a ‘dying-away’ arpeggio or a short chord with a feeling of closure
 - iv. Question mark (?) – a short chord which releases with an ‘interrogative’ feeling
 - v. Exclamation (!) – a strong chord with an ‘exclamatory feeling’

5) Consonants

- a. Consonants should come before the beat – *your bass note should pluck together with the vowel!*
- b. Allow time for ‘liquid’ consonants when necessary (m, n, l, s)
- c. Allow time for double consonants (nn, ff, bb, zz, etc.)
- d. Rolling the chord before the beat ‘munches’ the consonants and makes the text less comprehensible, makes tight ensemble more difficult with the rest of the continuo team, and takes away the singer’s freedom (to slow the pacing, to make an expressive word, to take time for a special affect change).

C) The figured bass

- 1) The bass line is usually harmonic and not melodic. Composers and printers were sometimes careless about note lengths and ties in the bass line.
 - a. Any two equal pitches in the bass can be tied (do this especially when the second is under a weak syllable)
 - b. One can re-strike the chord (with one or both hands) in the middle of a long note, or break a tie
- 2) Harmony in early recit style
 - a. Simpler harmony derived from Renaissance counterpoint rules (see Borys’s harmony handout on unfigured basses)
 - b. Most chords take a #, b, or 6 according to the ‘Rule of the Octave.’ Remember especially that cadences normally end with a major chord (this has nothing to do with being happy or sad)
 - c. The richer harmonic language of the 18c does not apply in early recit style.
 - d. An important expressive device for the singer is singing outside the harmony (not possible if the continuo includes the dissonances as in later continuo playing)

D) Style

- 1) Basic arpeggio types
 - a. ‘Messa di voce’ / ‘normal’ chord: on a whole note or dotted half, arpeggiate *to the bar middle*.
 - b. ‘Impulse’ chord: when the singer has a short rest, play a compact chord with a precise attack to launch the singer’s phrase. Make the chord in the character of the phrase.
 - c. ‘Dying away’ chord: at a cadence, finish the phrase with an ‘out of time’ chord which does a diminuendo to nothing (softer instruments can sometimes continue the diminuendo after the harpsichord’s last note).
- 2) Smaller note values in the bass (halves, quarters) can be phrased in a speech-like way. Usually strong-weak or long-short is a good starting place.

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