

Seventeenth-Century Opera Style Sheet

Prepared by Lucas Harris, February 2007 for *La Calisto* production at Ohio State University

❖ Know the text

- ✓ Everyone in the cast & band ought to take the time to read through the whole libretto. Ask for a copy if you don't have one.
- ✓ Singers should know the meaning of every word they sing. Continuo players should know the meaning of every word they accompany. If your Italian isn't strong, don't be embarrassed about writing a word-by-word translation into your score as best you can (I admit that some of the poetry is complex!). This takes time, but yields huge rewards. It's also quite important as we usually don't have enough time to do much text translation together.
- ✓ Remember that word painting in this style is often at the level of *individual words* rather than the sense of the whole phrase. As both singers and players, we can also take time to highlight expressive words with special vocal/tone colors.

❖ Learn the written rhythms

- ✓ There are lots of opinions regarding 'freedom' in recitative style from different periods. To sing a recitative stiffly in one tempo with exactly the written rhythms, and with no care for inflecting strong & weak syllables, would be incredibly boring. Yet, if we introduce our own rhythms in place of the composer's wherever we please, the result can lack an underlying rhythmic structure which is near-impossible to accompany (especially by a large continuo group at a distance). My feeling is that we can pay close attention to the richly varied rhythms the composer often gives us, remembering to inflect stresses of the Italian language through these rhythms, as well as varying the dramatic pacing by speeding and slowing the overall pulse (see below).
- ✓ It's true that early recitative should sound like musical 'speech.' However, the speech rhythms composers use are less like the ones that you or I would use in modern conversation, but rather more like the rhetorical/stylized rhythms a seventeenth-century actor would use to declaim structured poetic lines in a large theatre. When singers are asked to be free with rhythm, they often tend to shorten long notes (expressive words), lengthen short notes (non-expressive connecting words), and sing through rests (important rhetorical spaces or punctuation points). *The danger here is equalizing the rhythmic contrasts which keep recitative rhetorically interesting.* If you want to take freedoms, take them in the other direction: Make the *long notes longer* and *short notes shorter*. Use rests rhetorically, connecting phrases over them without ignoring them.
- ✓ When there is a succession of equal note values (such as four quarters or eighths in a row), use a natural speech-like alternation of stronger & weaker syllables. Make the phrase move towards a 'goal,' usually the most important word in the phrase. This applies to the continuo as well when there are melodies in the bass line.

❖ Feel the beats

- ✓ We can work in a recitative style where there is a pulse or *tactus*, usually two beats per bar in 4/4 (C) time. This *tactus* speeds up and slows down according to the drama/emotion of the delivery, but the *relative lengths of all note values should usually be respected* (a whole note is basically twice as long as a half; a half note is twice as long as a quarter, etc.).
- ✓ Singers: practice 'conducting' yourself on these big beats while singing your recitatives. Snap your fingers on every downbeat and bar middle, making one of your snaps heavier (try moving your hand

down & up or right & left, making smooth/flowing beats). You'll notice that there is usually an 'event' on each beat – usually a strong syllable or a new continuo chord or both. When you hold a long/tied note over a beat, it's often an expressive syncopation, so feeling the beat is still important. Practice slowing down and speeding up your tactus when you are inspired to do so by the drama/music/text, but never lose your tactus. (If you have trouble practicing this way, it means you need to do more of it!) Paradoxically, this structure will allow your recitatives to be MORE expressive: the contrasts written into the music will be clearer (long/short, strong/weak, articulate/legato, consonant/dissonant, on the beat/off the beat, 'spoken'/'sung'). You will also stay more connected to your accompanists, who will be able to give you a stronger accompaniment to amplify your delivery.

- ✓ Continuo players should have a beat-by-beat awareness of who is 'in control' of the tactus – singers or continuo. If there is a *new syllable*, keep your attention towards the stage and continue to follow the singer. If there is a *rest* or a *held note* in the voice, look up and coordinate that beat with the rest of the band.
- ✓ When bass notes are simultaneous with a new syllable, players should place the bass note of their chord *with the vowel* of that syllable. Let the consonants come before the beat, and avoid rolling the chord early. Allow extra time for expressively long consonants (especially m, n, s) and doubled consonants (ff, rr, zz, etc.)
- ✓ For everyone: Be aware of when the singer's note is a consonant internal (third, fifth, sixth, octave) or a dissonant one (second, fourth, seventh) in relation to the bass. Look especially for long notes which begin as a consonance but then become a dissonance when the bass changes. Singers can make an expressive swell and lead the continuo team towards the moment of dissonance, where the continuo players can play an especially juicy chord (it's often not necessary to play the dissonance as part of the chord).
- ✓ An important contrast in recitative is whether a new phrase/idea/tempo begins on or off the beat. When it's on the beat, the singer and band should truly begin together. When a phrase begins on a rest, the continuo provides an 'impulse' chord: a compact (unarpaggiated) chord in a rest which clearly shows a beat and launches the phrase. It's normally lead with a head nod by one continuo player, and must have the dynamic/color appropriate for the vocal phrase about to be delivered.
- ✓ To the question "Are you going to re-strike the chord there?," the answer is often 'maybe'! Both the singer and continuo team should feel empty beats together, whether or not something actually happens.

❖ **Be expressive at cadences -- but don't slow down**

- ✓ Most cadences don't need a rallantando! This applies both to singers and players. In most cases, we can 'hand the baton' to another character or to the band, or allow a recit to launch right into an aria/arioso.
- ✓ Feather off final notes on weak syllables! The penultimate syllable of a line of Italian poetry is most often the strongest, and is usually followed by a weak syllable. This is usually reflected in the music with a strong/weak pairing of dominant/tonic. Both singers and players can move phrases towards the strong penultimate syllable and then relax on the final weak syllable. On these final weak syllables, finish early to allow a breath before the next event (don't sing through the full value of the note or roll the chord for too long).
- ✓ When a cadence ends on an interrogative (question mark), singers should make an especially short final syllable and players should stop the chord right away. This mimics the raised intonation of a question mark in speech.
- ✓ If a singer has short note-value pickups to a long cadence note (such as three eighths before a whole note), the accompanists will assume that the rhythm continues in the tempo of his/her pickups!



❖ Keep a good exchange between stage & pit

- ✓ Singers: know the rhythm of the bass line, too. If a new bass note comes in the middle of your held note, if YOU know exactly when you want it to come, the band will usually put it there.
- ✓ If you're not getting the accompaniment you want, feel free to make a request to the pit. Be friendly about it, and even try to get the band interested & involved in how you are trying to shape your delivery.
- ✓ Continuo players: remember that
 - you are there to support the singers, to be good partners to them and to give them an inspiring accompaniment
 - cast members are dealing with a lot of elements at once music, language, staging, costumes, etc. – so be patient!
 - the cast must sometimes save their voice/energy, and so can't always rehearse passages again and again

❖ Ornament tastefully -- if at all

- ✓ Singers: don't necessarily feel the need to add ornaments. Sometimes the composer gives them to you already. If you do add them, don't do so before the piece is already succeeding well musically and dramatically without them! Embellish important/expressive words, and make your ornament reflect the meaning or mood of that word. Make sure you don't add or take away any beats in the music.
- ✓ The most important ornaments in this style don't involve adding notes, such as the *messa di voce* – a swell (crescendo & decrescendo) on a long note. The continuo player's equivalent of the *messa di voce* is a longer arpeggio whose final note goes on the next beat.
- ✓ Cadences are often the most appropriate place for singers to ornament. Make them rhythmically clear so that the continuo players can be together internally when playing cadential harmonic movement. On a whole note cadence, an ornament which somehow shows the bar middle is often the easiest to follow. Continuo players should be careful about playing ornaments which force a cadential slow-down.

A Follow up!

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Underline Contrasts!

Good 17c opera performance is about rhetorical contrasts (rhetoric is the art of persuasion in public speaking from antiquity, which the first creators of opera were heavily into). I'm not talking here about the large structural contrasts which are built into the piece: serious vs. comic characters, recits vs. arias, ensembles vs. solos, etc. More to the point and harder to grasp are the *instant-by-instant contrasts* written into the musical rhetoric of the word setting: on the beat vs. off the beat, more 'spoken' phrases vs. 'sung' phrases, fast vs. slow note values, strong vs. weak syllables, consonances (3/5/6/8 steps above the bass) vs. dissonances (2/4/7 steps), conjunct (step-wise) motion vs. disjunct (leaps), starting a phrase with the continuo vs. starting after, quick interjections vs. long phrases, syllabic writing vs. melisma, etc.

As we do our final preparations for the performance, it is crucial to be aware of and exaggerate these contrasts as much as you can in your singing (our natural tendency is to minimize or equalize them). These micro-contrasting elements make recitative interesting for the audience – you'll see what I mean when you go out into the hall to listen to your colleagues. The singers who identify these contrasts and exaggerate them in both their singing and acting will hold your attention, and the ones who smooth them over will lose it.

Inflect the language!

Exaggerate the natural alternation of good and bad syllables which is the soul of the Italian language. Most lines in Italian poetry have two main accents: a primary one on the penultimate syllable, and a secondary one which comes somewhere in the middle (the variety of its placement in the line provides interesting rhythmic variation). Be aware of these so-called 'feminine endings,' where the final syllable is weak. Land gently on these final weak syllables, 'feathering' them off by shortening their notated value. This not only makes for good delivery of Italian, it also allows the action onstage to continue, as the connection to the next phrase or event can be tightened.

Comic characters are often given the so-called *sdrucchiola* lines, where the accent is on the anti-penultimate syllable of each line. (FE-mi-na, de-LI-zi-e, etc.)

Feel the beats!

Renaissance polyphony in the 16c was 'conducted' by one member of the choir beating time, usually a stronger 'down'-beat and a lighter 'up'-beat in each bar of common (C) time. This feeling of two differently-weighted beats per bar was still in composers' ears when recitative was invented and the first operas created. Singing your recits while beating the tactus for yourself (normally a 'down' on each barline, and an 'up' on each bar middle) will have several benefits, including:

- 1) Ensuring your rhythmic accuracy.
- 2) Giving your delivery a rhythmic foundation which will give syncopations and other expressive rhythms more effectiveness,
- 3) Allowing your continuo players to unify and lock into your rhythmic intentions (and play as a more effective section, which will make you sound better)
- 4) Ironically, allowing you more flexibility in your delivery, as working with larger beats allows more freedom: both freedom to shape the language, as well as freedom to speed up and slow down the pacing of your delivery in a natural way.

The tactus is like a rubber band: the more you stretch it, the more tension is created and the more it longs to return to its original shape. The more emotional tension/rhetorical contrast in a passage, the more stretching you'll want to do.

Have Direction!

- ✓ Take time between phrases, but move forward within phrases. Identify important cadences (the continuo bass goes up a by a fourth, or goes down either a fifth or a tone) and drive towards them.
- ✓ Lead the continuo to a new harmony by lengthening the syllable which falls on the *previous beat*.
- ✓ If there is an expressive word in a phrase you want to stretch, move quickly through the notes preceding it, enjoy the stretch, and then recover the tempo afterwards.
- ✓ Hold long cadences for their full length . . . remember that you are the one who sets up the length by how quickly you move through the shorter note values which precede it.
- ✓ Occasionally you may permit a tasteful rallantando for an especially expressive cadence . . . but normally it doesn't need one, and should never have one if there is a connection to a ritornello/sinfonia.

For continuo players:

- ✓ Weight your chords according to the strong/weak syllables being sung.
- ✓ Have a beat-by-beat awareness of who 'controls' a particular beat, whether it be a singer (it might be a lower/inner part in a vocal ensemble), instrument, or the continuo section. Get in the habit of looking up

whenever there is a rest or a tied note above a new bass note – the coordination for these beats must be within the continuo section.

- ✓ When a singer begins a phrase after a short rest, we need to launch the phrase with an ‘impulse’ chord – a compact, non-arpeggiated chord which says clearly where the beat is. Sometimes we come back and follow the impulse with a longer roll just to keep sound in the air, especially for long stretches with the same harmony.
- ✓ Help singers drive towards cadences, but place bass notes precisely with vowels, allowing consonants to come before (i.e., don’t roll before the beat).
- ✓ Remember to follow the violins or flutes when they enter the game, especially for final cadences of ritornellos/sinfonias which relax and finish.