

Venetian Musical/Rhetorical Clichés 101

(Prepared by Lucas Harris, September 2009)

When trying to shape your delivery of (or BC accompaniment to) recitative style music, ask these questions of each passage or gesture, in this order:

- 1) **What do the words mean?**
- 2) **How did the composer set the words?**
- 3) **How can my delivery (or accompaniment) make that setting more vivid?**

Be on the lookout for some of these rhetorical clichés found frequently in Venetian opera scores:

Clue(s) in the setting

Emotion / affect / gesture

How to make it more vivid

1) Writing in the low register

Supplication, desperation, baseness, weakness, secrets / hiding / disguises, quasi-spoken exclamations, word painting of 'terra,' 'abyss,' or 'tace' etc.

Voice: Give yourself extra time for low notes to speak well.
BC: Play softly and with lower chord voicings (or *tasto solo*) and/or low bass notes. Be careful to not cover your singer.

Non of- fen- do- no j vin- ti, i pri- gio- nie- ri.

Melloe: "... don't harm the vanquished, or prisoners"

sta- ta Sot- to man- to vi- ril sem- pre ce- la- ta?

Tigrane: "Is she still disguised as a man?"

2) Writing in the high register

Agitation, anger, triumph/victory, strong emotions, sublime objects or feelings, exclamations such as *o* or *ohimè*, word painting of *ciel*, *sublime*, *paradiso*, etc.

V: Use a stronger delivery
BC: Play louder and with higher/richer chord voicings.

oh _ for- za Di due lu- ci,

Eurinda: "Oh, the power of those two eyes!"

3) Syllabic writing on faster note values (eights & sixteenths)

Basic narration/description, or fast-paced, patter-like conversation

V: Rattle these passages at a good clip, looking for important syllables to use as structural points.
BC: 'Rumble,' re-striking chords or bass notes under important syllables .

I po- po- li più bar- ba- ri, e più fie- ri Non of- fen- do- no j vin- ti,

Melloe: "More barbarous and fierce peoples don't harm ..."

La mia ca- du- ta op- pri- ma, O l'a- dul- te- ra mo- glie, o il Re la- sci- vo,

Tigrane: "Let my downfall weigh down my adulterous wife or the wicked king."

4) Slower note values
(quarters & halves)

Declamatory, pompous, used for official
decrees

V: Use a more portentous (strong & slowish)
declamation.

BC: Strong, compact chords.

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-des- se l'Ar- me- no E- gl'a- vea de- cre- ta- to;

Marte: "And he (Giove) decreed it . . ."

5) Coloratura

Divine characters showing vocal virtuosity,
word painting of *volare*, *cantare*, *fulmini*,
saetta, etc.

V: Use agile, quick articulation.

BC: Track the singer's passagework carefully,
pushing forward or allowing extra time where
necessary. Make the accompaniment 'sparkle.'

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-ci- ti Vo- la, vo- la to- sto fra' Sci- ti,

Marte: "Fly quickly among the Scythians . . ."

6) Repeated words or
short phrases

Rhetorical emphasis

V: Give more urgency to the strongest repetition
(which should be higher or longer). Connect the
final repetition to the continuation of the phrase.

BC: Shape your dynamics to be loudest on the
strongest repetition.

SABARI

Trop-po, (trop- po) ho det- t'io.

il fu-ror, (il fu-ror) in me s'am-mor- za.

Sabari: "Too much, too much have I said."

Eurinda: "The fury, the fury . . . subsides in me."

7) Dotted writing

Can be playful & comic, or martial

V: Articulate the dots sharply.

BC: Perhaps add some dotted material to your
realisation.

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-o, Pu- gne-rà, Fe- ri rà, Pu- gne-rà, Fe- ri rà

Marte: "You will fight, you will wound . . ."

La Discordia: "I'll sow seeds of war . . ."

8) Slurs or paired notes

Sweetness, amorous emotions (cf. Monteverdi's *stile francese*), also bondage, word painting of *catena*, *lacci*, etc.

V: Lean a little on the first of each pair.
BC: Smooth, *legatissimo*!

Ger- mo- glio- no — fu- -ne- sti j suoi ci- pres- si.

Marte: "... and their sorrowful cypresses will grow."

9) Repeated or triadic pitches

Angry or warlike imagery (cf. Monteverdi's *style concitato*)

V: Heroic, aggressive delivery.
BC: Loud, compact chords, strumming.

L'i- ra, l'i- ra m'in-fiam-ma il sen Cie- co fu-ror, <cie- co fu-ror> mi ti con- sa- cro, e do- no.

Eurinda: "Wrath, wrath inflames my heart!"

Tigrane: "Blind fury, I give in to you!"

10) Punctuation (?, !)
followed by rests

Interrogation or exclamation followed by a rhetorical pause.

V: Make the note before the rest short. Use the empty space dramatically.
BC: Stop the chord abruptly. Sometimes the chord will be written short, sometimes not, but regardless make a short chord your default.

vi- le Col san- gue de- gl'Ar- sa- ci?
ohi- mè, che in- te- si? E a chi la dis- co- pri? ri- spon- di,

Eurinda: "... with the blood of Arsacians?" Tigrane: "Alas, what have I heard? And to whom was she revealed?"

11) Moving or 'walking' bass line in BC

An 'arioso' – a little tune which will highlight a phrase in a special way

V: Make a clear separation between the arioso and the recit by taking a clear, confident tempo. Be aware of the direction coming from the bass.
BC: Use more articulation in the bass to create a more aria-like feeling (long-short is a good starting place).

Non vi- o- lar l'u- so di guer- ra an- ti- co, —

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Trag-ge con Ar- ta- ba- no a- man- te, (a- man- te) a- ma- ta.

Melloe: "Don't violate the ancient rules of warfare."

Sabari: "... with Artabanus a beloved lover."

12) Phrase beginning before the beat

Urgent, syncopated, unsettled, supplicating

V: Shape the anticipated note with a clear direction and mood. If you know where the chord should come, it will probably come there!
BC: Look up for a cue from the section leader.

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ciel, mor- ta- li af- fan- ni. Ah s'a fron- te fos-s'i- o Di co- lui,

Doriclea: "Ah, if I were in front of him . . ."

13) Phrase beginning after the beat

BC chord launches the colour/dynamic of the phrase with an 'impulse' chord (usually an unarpeggiated/compact which serves as a launch for the singer's phrase).

V: Wait for the chord, allowing its weight and timing to be a part of your delivery.
BC: Give the 'impulse' chord with the weight & timing the singer needs.

Oh co- me è bel- lo, E tu, che sno-di ar- di- to L'au-da- ce lin- gua,

Eurinda: "Oh, how beautiful he is."

Melloe: "And you, who loosen your inflamed tongue . . ."

14) Phrase beginning on the beat

Stability, control, intentional placement, official or polite discourse

V: Breathe and begin the phrase with the BC.
BC: Breathe with the singer and place the bass note precisely, letting the consonant(s) come before the beat.

EURINDA
Tu, tu te- me- ra- rio o- sa- sti No- bi- li- tar

SABARI
O si- gno- re? vi- ve,

Eurinda: "You, you recklessly dared to exalt . . ."

Sabari: "It is you, Sire? She lives . . ."

15) Dissonances (2nds, 4ths, 7ths between V & bc, also 'illegal' augmented or diminished intervals)

Jarring, bitter, wrenching, painful sadness or melancholy. Can sometimes be wrenching in a pleasing way (kisses, etc.).

V: Use an unvibrated tone to allow the dissonance to grind more strongly against the bass.
BC: Play the bass strongly, and bring out/double pitches in the chord that increase the dissonance.

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-bai sin che po- te- i. a- gu- ra a- gl'in- fe- li- ci.

Sabari: "... as long as I could."

Sabari: "Every misfortune falls upon the miserable."

16) Consonances
(between V & bc)

Unisons, 5^{ths} and octaves tend to be more declamatory/stable while 3^{rds} & 6^{ths} are more expressive

V: Try for perfect intonation.
BC: Try for perfect ensemble.

o di Mar-te Più ca-ra, ca-ra, e

Marte: "... of Mars the most beloved ..."

17) Chromaticism

Dolorous, unhappy, anguished

V: Sing softly, sometimes sliding between a note and its chromatic alteration.
BC: Play as smooth as possible, with few accents.

So-vra-sta, (so-vra-sta) o-gni scia-gu-ra a-gl'in-fe-li-ci.

Sabari: "Every misfortune falls upon the miserable."

18) Leap(s) downward

Something becoming unravelled, undone, defeated

V: Slide between the pitches of the large intervals.
BC: Decrescendo & run out of steam.

La mia ca-du-ta op-pri-ma, O l'a-dul-te-ra mo-glie, o il Re la-sci-vo, -ne-sti j suoi ci-pres-si. Deh,
Vor-rei, che gl'e-stin-gues-se U-na vol-ta per

Tigrane: "Let my downfall weigh down my adulterous wife or the wicked king." Marte: "... their sorrowful cypresses." Doriclea: "I want it to be extinguished ..."

19) Leap(s) upward

Something being born, growing, rising, coming into power

V: Use confident, supported delivery.
BC: Crescendo with the leap to the 'top'.

-gio-re Di quel che na-sce da un cor-rot-to a-mo-re. il fu-ror, (il fu-ror) in me s'am-mor-za.

Sabari: "... of that which is born from a rejected love."

Eurinda: "The fury, the fury ... subsides in me."

20) Voice cadences before BC

Impatience, urgency, taking action

V: Use fast pacing through the end of the phrase (not even a hint of *rallentando*!).
BC: Play rhythmically 'straight', i.e., cadence as normal.

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Per con- dur Do- ri- cle- a Nel- l'I- be- ria qui ven- go;

pe- ra il fel- lo- ne.

Tigrane: "I've come to rescue Doriclea and bring her into Iberia."

Eurinda: "Let this offender die!"

21) Unresolved dissonance (4ths or 7ths in voice which do not resolve downwards)

Burning, grinding, stubbornness

V: 'Sit' on the dissonance a little longer.
BC: Grind the resolution against the singer's note.

strug - - - go e ar - do. Mâ,

(cie- co fu-ror) mi ti con- sa- cro, e do- no.

Strozzi cantata: "I struggle and burn."

Tigrane: "Blind fury, I give in to you!"

22) Syncopation

Surprise, emphasis, putting the brakes on, word painting of *frena*, etc.

V: Put a good 'spin' on the syncopation. You must feel exactly where the beat is in order to sing against it.
BC: Create a stable rhythmic foundation for the syncopation to set itself against.

So- vra- sta, (so- vra- sta) o- gni scia- gu- ra

Sabari: "Every misfortune brings down the miserable."

23) No space between dialogue exchanges

Interruption

V: Jump in rudely (don't politely wait). Be aware of whether there is a change of harmony before or on your entrance.
BC: Orchestrate – put a team with each character. Sometimes an elision is appropriate (one character's last chord becomes another's first).

64 TIGRANE

-bai sin che po- te- i. Che Sa- ba- ri?

Sabari: "... as long as I could." Tigrane: "What, Sabari!?"

24) 'Ma'

Sudden change in emotion or affect or delivery style; catches the listener's attention

V: Sing the 'ma' short and accompany it with a stage gesture.

BC: Be ready for new affect/colour.

SABARI

O si- gno- re? vi- ve, ma qual nu-me av- ver- so Ti fa-er-rar fia a ne-

Sabari: "It is you, Sire? She lives . . . but what opposing God constrains you to be here in enemy territory?"

25) Phrase ending with lengthened note values

Switch from a more 'spoken' to a more 'sung' delivery and pacing; or the composer takes time to put a special colour on a certain word or phrase, or simple texture/pacing contrast.

V: Exaggerate the contrast in pacing: accelerate the pacing just before the slow bit so the broadening seems more dramatic.

BC: Expand the support with richer arpeggios.

So- vra- sta, (so- vra-sta) o- gni scia- gu- ra a- gl'in- fe- li- ci. ____

Sabari: "Every misfortune brings down the miserable."

26) BC 'marches' towards a cadence in half notes

The declamation takes on a new sense of movement or direction; a decision is made.

V: 'Feel' the momentum of the marching bass and go with it towards the cadence.

BC: Play more legato, with a sense of line moving towards the cadence.

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-scen- te, Ven- di- car mi vo- gl'io, già che le trec- ce L'oc- ca- sion mi por- ge.

Sabari: "I want to avenge myself now that the opportunity has been given to me."

27) Short cadence

Urgent declamation, decisive

V: Keep the pacing fast and the final syllable short.

BC: Weight your chords according the syllables (i.e., usually strong-weak).

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va- go I tuoi de- si- ri ap- pa- go.

Eurinda: "Since you so wish to die, I'll fulfill your desires!"

28) Long cadence Expressive, sometimes dolorous

V: Do a cadential ornament which matches the colour of the word.

BC: Same!

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Trag-ge con Ar- ta- ba- no a- man- te, (a- man- te) a- ma- ta.

Sabari: “. . . with Artabanus a beloved lover.”