

Musica Poetica Rediviva

- a new look at the renaissance musician's approach
to moving the emotions

DIGEST/ABSTRACT

This article puts the spotlight on how musicians in earlier times saw music in the same way as any other communicative art - through the tradition of rhetorical public speaking which each learner had mastered before studying music.

It then proposes simple ways to apply these insights to enhance music-making today.

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Introduction - first reflections

In today's world, many people think of the ability to speak in public, and do so in such a way as to move an audience, as a rather special skill, given only to a few. This contrasts with the situation in earlier times, when every educated person had developed his language- and communication-skills to a mastery of



composing both verse and prose; and to performing - both reading poetry aloud and making a speech. Many of the tricks of everyday language were polished as rhetorical techniques - similes, metaphors, repetitions, living descriptions - and their use was firmly established as the basis for life at court, in the church and in academic circles.



Many of the old teachers made clear comparisons between prosody and music, or between spoken rhetoric and musical rhetoric. At the general level they pointed

out that the functions and practice of music corresponded to those of poetry and rhetoric; and at the detailed level, they described the connection in phrasing, emphasis, breathing, length of syllable and note, ways of teaching and so on.

Some remnants of this tradition can be traced in modern 'art' singing, where it is sometimes possible to hear the words; but in 'art'-music generally 'expression' has become a standard cliché, such that a composer can mark a piece with nothing more precise than '*con espressione*', and a teacher can say 'I can't tell you what you're supposed to express - just play with expression'.

On the other hand, writers from Ganassi in the 16th century to Mattheson in the 18th make it quite clear that the criterion of a good instrumentalist was not only that the listeners recognised what specific

emotion was being expressed, but that they even understood the individual words.

There are indeed old teachers who mention nothing explicit about conceiving music as another language, and some modern scholars have interpreted this to mean that rhetorical thinking doesn't apply in their music; but another conclusion may be taken as much more likely, that everyone was so impregnated by their training in poetic and rhetorical speaking that the parallels were simply obvious, and to express them would have been superfluous.

At the same time the languages of both speech and music have always been used at a more superficial level, simply to give pleasure to the ear or the mind: consensus and practice have swung like a pendulum between the two extremes - clarity versus simple beauty.

Spoken rhetoric is far from dead, even in the busy modern world: if you listen to a spiritual leader, a leading actor, a persuasive politician - whatever the value of the content... : Ghandi, Lawrence Olivier, Margaret Thatcher... Or, most surprisingly, country singer Dolly Parton, who revealed the model for her stage shows - which come complete with surprise fireworks - as "Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, scare 'em to death, and go home!".

The fact that it has in later times become normal to consider rhetoric as 'empty', is a result of its misuse and devaluation, rather than any reflection on its intrinsic value:

nothing stops us reaping great benefit from using it in a sensible way today.

Scientists, musicians and listeners would say that there is much to distinguish speech from song, as they are used today. But for those who lived in ancient times, the only difference between speech and song is that in song you can measure accent and rhythm with greater exactness. To explore what difference it makes to adopt again the older way of thinking, can lead to exciting 'new' (i.e., old, but forgotten) possibilities for making music more natural, more easily approachable, more satisfying and more enjoyable.



As it is the task of an orator,
not only
to decorate a speech
with beautiful, lovely and lively words and delightful figures,
but also
to perform well and to move the emotions
and in this he sometimes raises his voice,
now lowers it,
sometimes speaks with a full voice,
now softly and gently:

In the same way, it is the task of the musician
not only
to sing,
but to sing artistically and beautifully;
and so the listener's heart and emotions are moved,
and so the song may reach the goal it was made for.

Michael Praetorius (1618, tr. DK)

We also need to recognise that the means of expression used in earlier music are much more delicate and subtle than those of later music: we are looking, not at a Wagnerian chorus of blacksmiths banging their anvils on the banks of the Rhine,



but at a gossamer trio of Graces weaving filigree figures in a sylvan grove..

"To go from Romantic music to early music is to leave aside oil painting for a while to discover the nuances of drawing" (Morgan Niklasson).

1. Music in a Communicative Context

The first level of mediæval and renaissance university studies was essentially a foundation course in 'Communication Skills', divided into three main areas:

◆ **grammar** (putting words together in the accepted way, including prosody - pronunciation and poetry)

◆ **logic** (reasoning so that all can agree on the conclusion)

◆ **rhetoric** (speaking in public so as to move your listeners from one emotion to another)

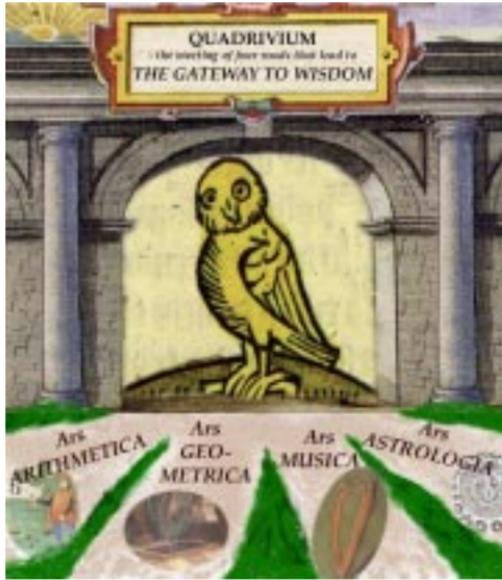
These three topics were compared to a meeting of three roads, the *trivium* (from '*tres viæ*', hence 'trivial', of lower importance), which together led through



the Gateway to Eloquence - the art of speaking well.

Thus, when the next stage of studies was taken - the four branches of mathematics (Gk. *mathematiké*, knowledge, learning), the *quadrivium*, the meeting of four ways, leading through the Gateway to Wisdom - what could be more natural, than that the study of music should be based on a comparison with the communicative skills

already acquired.



'The Roman Empire became great because the Caesars were skilled orators': and for renaissance writers, the model orators were Cicero, the Hitler of the ancient world, active in the power struggle around Julius Caesar, and Quintillianus, a 1st century Martin Luther King, and tutor to the Roman princes. When

the Romans later adopted Christianity as the state religion, their language became the international language throughout the spiritual empire of the Roman Church, which, of course, reached places where the military of the Roman State never did; and the grammatical, poetical and rhetorical doctrine of Latin, for better or worse, became the model for all the western languages.

The pronunciation of Latin in each nation was characterised by its local mother tongue: but the Italian was considered the model to imitate.

To all skills belong three things: *Natura, Ars sive Doctrina, Excercitatio* - nature, knowledge and practice. Later authors taught that art - the application of human skill - must **replace** nature: but to the renaissance creator, art comes into the picture only at the point where nature is no longer adequate.

The emotions which music was used to arouse were also clearly recognised and even catalogued: some teachers considered the number large, Boëthius reduced them to four:

- ◆ two positive: joy and sorrow*
- ◆ two negative: hope* and fear

The emotions show themselves naturally and one notices their various signs, such as skin color, gestures, the voice's melody or accent, rhythm, emphasis, etc.

The closer a speaker or musician imitates nature, the more he moves the emotions - though in varying degrees: a distinction is made between different styles, which are appropriate in different situations.

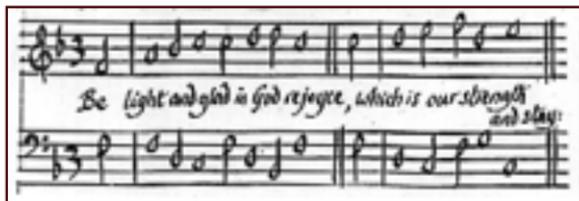
2. How Music is Conceived and Created

To begin with our model, eloquence, one way to consider speech is to distinguish between speech pure and simple, *oratio pura*, and its ornaments, *ornamenta orationis*. These are partly the figures of speech (metaphor, simile, exaggeration etc.), partly such aspects as form, appropriateness (*decorum*), and elegance: and the performer needs to recognise them, to be able to bring out their effect in performance.

Music is taught in three parts, or stages of complexity:

* sorrow is seen as positive, because it leads to catharsis, healing through mourning; hope is seen as negative because it is based on uncertainty - to **know** is positive...

❖ *contrapunctus simplex* - note-against-note, as in a hymn or psalm



❖ *contrapunctus floridus*



- 'flowering counterpoint', with added ornamental notes



❖ *musica poëtica, musica rhetorica* - adapting the notes to suit a text.



And particularly at this third stage, the *ornamenta orationis* have their counterparts in music: and the musical performer needs to recognise them, to be able to bring out their effect in the musical performance:

❖ form is concerned both with how the different parts fit together, the length of different sections etc.: but also formality in questions like key;

❖ *decorum* is concerned with choice of an appropriate rhythm, key, instrument, tempo, in relation to the basic mood and purpose of the piece

❖ *elegantia* are the *passaggi* - elaborate runs - variations, trills etc.

- and the *figuræ* are concerned with how a composer departs from the basic practice, and uses 'licence' - freedoms - to express the text:

❖ basic practice:

◆ consonant harmony, together with a very few dissonances conventionally handled - suspensions and passing notes

- ◆ stepwise melodic movement
- ◆ a basic 'white-note' scale

'binding dissonance or 'suspension -



◆ rhythmic unity = notes of the same length

◆ rests & pauses only at the end of a phrase, before starting again

❖ freedoms, *licentiæ*:

◆ unexpected dissonance

◆ unexpected leaps in the melody

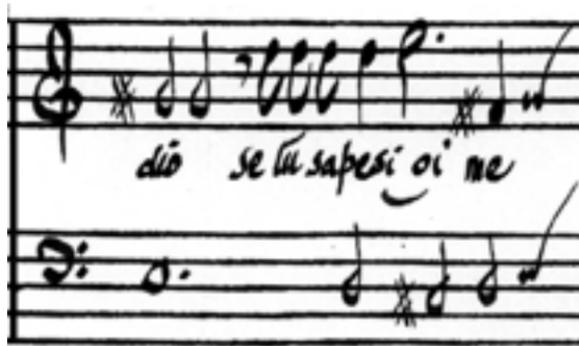
◆ occasionally altered notes, sharps and flats

◆ rhythmic variation = notes of different lengths

◆ rests within a phrase, e.g. *sospirium*, a sigh

... as Henry Mancini understood perfectly well when he wrote the theme music to 'The Pink Panther'...

Most remarked on of the figures was *hypotyposis*, the bringing to life of a story, which might use all the unexpected features at once - a sigh, sudden quick notes, a chromatic alteration, an uncomfortable leap, a dissonance handled irregularly - the mark of a Monteverde, a Schütz or a Matthew Locke...



After 1600, four styles were distinguished,

each having its own way of treating a text, but the details are more appropriate for a deeper study than this survey.

So a practice is built up for phrase lengths, melody, harmony, form and so on, all dependent on 'text thinking': and this practice is used even when you later compose without a text - a Marini violin sonata is essentially the same thing as a Monteverde solo madrigal, though without a text and with a larger range which reflects the instrument's physical capabilities rather than the voice's.

3. What it Means for the Performer

Of course the performance of music is more than just playing the notes and singing the text: but here it is specifically poetical and rhetorical speaking which are the models for music-making:

- ◆ you consider the basic mood
- ◆ you phrase, emphasise, breathe as you do when you speak in public
- ◆ you trace the rhetorical figures in the written music - i.e. everything which is not usual - and exaggerate them as an actor or any other orator does.

When looking at the notes, the performer notices first which are the basic consonant harmonies: where there are suspensions (*stile alla Palestrina*) he emphasises these a little, so that the following consonance will be all the sweeter; where there are *passaggi* - groups of running notes, often four or eight, to link the main harmony notes - he makes these a little softer and a little shorter, so that the listener is clear about which is the main note. Remembering that the basic style of melody is moving by step, any leaps he sees will be slightly more articulated, in a hierarchy so

that the greater the leap, the more a special point is made of it; similarly with any occasionally altered note, flattened or sharpened - in a hierarchy depending how far from the basic scale they are. And again the same with any unusual rhythms. All these features will have been put there for a special effect by the composer, to reflect a feature of the text - whether it is an actual text written in near the notes, a text imagined by the composer, or the resonance of all the clichés floating around in the composer's consciousness as he wrote an instrumental piece...

This can mean adopting the maxim that things must be ten times as large as life on stage, if they're to appear life-size when they reach the listener: or it can mean adopting the keyboard player's technique, of articulating by the use of silence - a note which comes after a longer pause has greater effect, even if it is no louder: you

don't need to shout out your great surprise, you can just keep silent a moment longer than anyone expects - - - and then whisper it...

Everything is done with *d e c o r u m* - appropriate to time and place, to company and situation.

As Vincenzo Galilei (Galileo's father) put it,

go to the theatre... observe, when one quiet gentleman speaks with another, in what manner he speaks, how loudly, with what gestures, and how quickly or slowly... notice how the angry or excited man speaks, the married woman, the girl, the child, the lover speaking to his mistress ... examine them with care... to select the form which is fitting for the expression...'

The question of 'how far to go' is one of personal judgement, of course: even among those who recognise the rhetorical basis of early music, there are the two extremes of '*reservata*' and '*concitata*' - the 'cool' and the 'excitable', and advocates of each find the other's taste questionable.

And this dichotomy is part of the historical tradition too. To Monteverde's generation, around 1600, the artist must be possessed of a genuine passion at the moment of creation, and the performer must recreate it in the moment of performance; but 'serious' musicians poked fun at the comedians who took the dramatic element so far as to point upwards when they said heaven, and growl in their throats enough to frighten a child when they pronounced 'hell'.

To Quanz, in the mid 18th century, the kind of expression aimed at was a polite public representation of something which once had been private and genuine - 'Can you imagine anything so disgusting as a display of real emotion?!': while for his colleague at the same court, CPE Bach, it was still the expression of genuine feelings which was the goal.

One very practical application of all this is in rehearsal strategy: a common scenario is to first spend ages tuning, then get all the notes right, and finally see if there's any time left for the words and the expression. Of course we want to get the tuning and notes right - the question is what's the best way to do it: an alternative is to get the text right first - even with instrumentalists - because that gives you the mood, tempo, phrasing, and more - perhaps 90% of the total message - from the organic motivation of the text. This in its turn becomes the motivating context in which to get the tuning and the notes right, usually with less time and energy than normal - people describe the feeling of simply 'hanging the notes onto the words'.

Singing is in its turn the model for playing: the whole way of singing, including the



pronunciation of vowels and consonants, is applied when you play a part which has a text - or when you imitate another part which has. Remember, the listeners expect to be able to understand the words which the player pronounces.

It's not at all difficult, for example, to play a *balletto* with an Italian text by Gastoldi, and then one with a German text by Hans Leo Hassler, so that the listener hears the difference between the soft Italian and the hard German consonants: Ganassi gives us specific examples to practice. There is even plenty of challenge and fun to be had from playing the same piece in different languages, as for example the Gastoldi *balletti* which have several different contemporary texts ...

Without a text, whether you sing or play, you apply the same habits you have built when using a text - consideration to the basic mood, the formation of the syllables, phrasing, pausing, accent, breathing, the performance of rhetorical figures. If anything doesn't fit immediately in ensemble playing, you can agree on specific words at a few key places...

Conclusion - final reflections

Different ways of being together

We can read in today's music dictionaries that the words 'concerto', 'concert' and 'consort' come from the Italian "*concertare*" meaning 'to strive or compete together' when making music - and many modern ensembles seem to have taken this to heart: but none of the authors I have read mentions this idea. The original Latin word was "*concantare*", 'to sing together', which was softened in Italian to "*concentare*" : it seems that people simply preferred to soften the sound yet again to "*concertare*", without implying its normal meaning of 'strive'. Some teachers say expressly that "*concertare*" in its true meaning is exactly what one does **not** do: on the contrary, the model of musical behaviour is that those making music together show consideration, making room for one another and taking care not to give offence.

Different ways of speaking together

It is clear that part of the rhetorical tradition includes the representation of dialogues and echoes;

and by extension from that, it has become common today to talk about the music of several voices as a conversation

- an argument even: but of the old authors I have read, only two make that comparison. For all the others, it seems that the different voices create a poetical or rhetorical unity, 'forming one body' as Count Bardi put it, like a Greek speaking chorus.



In improvised playing together the model is to avoid each playing a leading role at the same time, like so many sparrows, or farmyard birds all competing to be cock of the roost at once.

Different ways of doing things

As time went on, national characteristics grew up, especially in the Baroque era. The Italians dared to express the sharpest feelings in music: the French preferred simply to flatter the ear. The Italians used elaborate *passaggi* to join up the main notes, while the French preferred to polish a single note. The French developed the sweetness of the flute and oboe: while the Italians concentrated all their genius on developing the art of the violin. The Germans imitated the French and the Italians by turn, keeping a clear distinction and even exaggerating the differences:

while the English synthesised the best of each, distilling the result into something quite their own.

Different ways of seeing things

It's also interesting to note that while the Italians did it, the Germans wrote about it: i.e. the Italians created new freedoms, simply because they felt right, while the Germans tried to systematise the practice of the Italians, giving Greek names to the licences by comparison with the rules of speech: but these hardly do more than catalogue the effects of the different licences after the event.

So we have a modern Europe in embryo, where the Italians are busy creating, the French are busy polishing, the Germans are busy systematising what the others do, and the English are busy making a compromise of the whole lot.

Where to go next

This article is simply a first overview to sketch the extent of the field. Each aspect touched on here can be explored in depth in the form of a paper compendium, while those who have access to a computer and the World-Wide Web can continue their studies at the author's 'New Renaissance' web-site, under the theme 'Johan Skytte's Musical World' -

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<http://www.ibs.ee/newren>

Academia Gustaviana, later Tartu University, was founded on the initiative of Johan Skytte, who was the Swedish Governor General of Estonia, and its first *rector* .

David Kettlewell

The Authors referred to in this work include:

Plato	Giovanni Palestrina	Marin Mersenne
Socrates	Gioseffe Zarlino	Christoph Bernhard
Aristoteles	Vincenzo Galilei	Heinrich Schütz
Tullius Cicero	Thomas Morley	Christopher Simpson
M. Fabius Quintillianus	Giovanni de' Bardi	Thomas Mace
Boëthius	Giulio Caccini	Roger North
Guido d'Arezzo	Lodovico Grosso da Viadana	Friederich Niedt
Johannes Grocheo	Giovanni Maria Artusi	Jean Philippe Rameau
Johannes Tinctoris	Claudio Monteverde	John Gay
Franchino Gaffori	Giulio Cesare Monteverde	Johan Mattheson
Andreas Ornithoparcus	Joachim Burmeister	Leopold Mozart
Baldassare Castiglione	Agostino Agazzari	Carl Philip Em. Bach
Pietro Aron	Maternus Beringer	John Walker
Silvestro Ganassi	Michael Praetorius	Johan Joachim Quanz
Diego Ortiz	Charles Butler	Charles Burney