

Performing Choral Music from the Renaissance

**A practical look at ways to make the performance of
choral music from the Renaissance both authentic and fulfilling.**

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2012 ACDA-CA Summer Conference
ECCO Conference Center**

RATIONALE FOR PERFORMING RENAISSANCE MUSIC

- The music is part of our choral heritage as an historical musical experience
- It is a body of literature accessible and affordable to many age and ability levels
- There are only 5 sacred vowels for unifying sound.

International Phonetic Alphabet [IPA]

a = [a]

e = [ɛ]

i = [i]

o = [ɔ]

u = [u]

- It is a perfect vehicle for teaching musical independence
- It is far removed from the over-sentimentality of later music, particularly today's music

TEXT is the most important element of the music

- Text immediately communicates to the listeners
- Provides a linear and storytelling nature to the music
- Often incorporates Word Painting
- Counterpoint uses new materials to match the old for reinforcing text
- Phrases are derived from lines of text
- The music takes its form from the divisions of the text
- Proper word and syllable stress controls the rhythmic flow
- The natural rhythm of the text was respected and descriptive words were made more explicit by their musical treatment.

MELODY

- Often based on Gregorian Chant
- Each part is equally important - no dominating parts
- Stepwise motion abounds
- Ranges were often limited
- Phrasing is irregular
- Dramatic words are often emphasized
- Dissonant and altered tones may be leaned on for their fullest effect

TEXTURE

- Independence of voices result in a beautiful, blended, balanced whole
- Points of imitation
- Homophony was important
- The vertical harmony is a result of the horizontal

RHYTHM and TEMPO

- Everything is editorial - no tempos indicated
- Tactus was between 50 - 80 bpm
- Bar lines did not exist
- The music is put together in arches, with cadences as points of repose and regathering of energy.
- There are 3 types of musical stress accentuation: Syllabic, Agogic, Tonic
- Most music can be grouped into rhythmic 2s and 3s
- Syncopation is inherent in the independent lines
- The inflection of the text is dominant
- Tempus Perfectum v Tempus Imperfectum

Finding the tempo

1. What is the pulse note or tactus?
2. What is the smallest division of the beat?
3. Consider the text - joyous? Sad?
4. What are the acoustics of the performance space?

TONE AND TIMBRE

- Males only
- Purity of tone in sacred music is a necessity
- Compatibility of tone between voices is required
- Vibrato-less sound to match the boy sopranos
- Voice Types were different than today

DYNAMICS

- No dynamics indicated
- Most performances likely did not use extreme dynamics: pp - f
- Avoid excessive crescendo and diminuendo - long notes either intensify or decay within a dynamic
- Steady sound - more voices = more sound
- Dynamics may be used to heighten dramatic contrasts

INSTRUMENTATION

- **a cappella** (Notice the Correct Spelling!!!) specifically referred to the Sistine Chapel
- Instruments: recorders, viols, lutes, cornetti, sackbuts, shawms, flutes, drums, and bells
- Possible mix: S - Recorder or Flute; A - Viola; T - Oboe; B - Cello; Keyboard

PERFORMING EDITIONS

- Are the modernizations clearly noted (meter, note values, pitch)?
- Are the editorial marks clearly noted?
- Does the text work with the score?
- Can you compare it with an original?
- Does it give a translation?
- Is it overly edited?

| SACRED | SECULAR |
|---|--|
| Liturgical | Everyday |
| Larger choir | One per part |
| Men and boys | Men and women |
| Functional | Non-functional, for wealthy |
| Benefit of the service | Benefit of the singers (entertainment) |
| Evenness of tone and phrasing | Lilting with variety |
| Smooth lines | Dance rhythms |
| Constant mood within work, or at least sections | Rapid changes of mood possible |
| Imitation abounds | Imitation not as common |
| Rhythm less important | Rhythm more important |
| Meaning of text rarely used for internal interpretation | Start with the meaning of the text |
| Traditional harmony | Bold harmonic expressiveness |
| Through composed | Repetitious/strophic |
| Word stress and accent | Word meaning important |
| Extreme legato | Articulation |

REHEARSAL STRATEGIES

- Start with the meaning of the text
- Determine word stress
- Identify and rehearse cadences first
- Learn pitches first without the text
- Short rehearsal segments are preferable to longer segments
- Rehearse in Circles

CONDUCTING RENAISSANCE MUSIC

- Little conducting is necessary
- Each new line is a continuation, building upon music that came before
 - The music must change with each new line
- Discover the linear flow of each line of text in each part
- Tactus = Touch
- Common pulse, but highlight syncopations against the pulse
- Meter is what we think, Pulse (tactus) is what we feel
- Things want to group into 2s and 3s

5 PRINCIPLES OF MAKING RENAISSANCE MUSIC (Gerald Custer)

1. Textual Primacy!
2. Independent Linearity - avoid downbeats - motion is always forward except at the cadence
3. Embrace contrast
4. Arsis et thesis (anacrusis and crucis) - gathering and releasing energy (dance - raising the foot, lowering the foot)
5. Cadential inevitability - goal oriented

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