One of the most important elements of performance practice for the choral conductor is sound quality. Since the singer carries his own instrument with him, he must not only regulate the manner in which he performs early music, as does an instrumentalist, but he must also adjust his voice to suitable Renaissance sound quality. The instrumentalist can generally solve this latter issue by playing a Renaissance recorder, cornett or viol, for instance, or a suitable replica of a period instrument. When he uses the period instrument in a proper manner, he can approximate an appropriate sound ideal. The singer, on the other hand, must modify his twentieth-century vocal technique to suit an earlier convention of sound production. At this point the singer faces two problems: acceptable vocal sound quality for early music and suitable technique and execution.

Help can be obtained by listening to the manner in which the sound is produced on early instruments. The more one listens to and performs with Renaissance instruments, the easier it is to understand the effect that instruments have on the singer. By and large, the sound of Renaissance wind and stringed instruments is remarkably similar to the timbre and expressiveness of the human voice. It is very easy to understand why the voice was viewed as simply an extension of the consort principle, or the homogeneity of sound of like instruments which distinguishes the Renaissance musical texture.

Recordings of Mass settings, listed in the discography at the end of this article, with winds and strings reveal an homogeneous sound which is totally foreign to our concept of instrumental individuality. The Renaissance instrument could reinforce and blend with the voice to a remarkable degree. It is not only amazing that the instruments could blend so easily with the voice, but that the instrumental timbres could blend so well across the spectrum of wind, string, and brass consorts. Given a fairly strong middle register of instrument and voice, and the relatively narrow range of the Renaissance parts, the blend and sound quality of the two mediums can and should be quite homogeneous.

**Renaissance Vocal Technique for the Choral Conductor**

_by Gary Fisher_

With a fuller understanding of the ranges, uses and capabilities of the Renaissance instruments, the singer can more closely approximate a suitable range of dynamic, timbre, blend and overall ensemble use of the voice which will be better suited to the stylistic demands of the Renaissance score. The modern singer needs to understand the method of attack, dynamic range, and sustaining quality of the early instruments. These elements of sound all create a composite quality which has certain limitations or boundaries, beyond which the twentieth-century singer must not transgress. If he does, he is in danger of losing, so to speak, his early instrument and returning to one of the twentieth century.

The first step is to understand the vocal technique as taught in sixteenth-century Germany and Italy. The Italian doctor and philosopher, Giovanni Maffei (Discorso, 1562), outlines in considerable detail the physiology and technique of Italian Renaissance vocal style. Maffei defines the process of singing as: "... a sound caused by the minute and controlled repercussion of the air in the throat with the intention of pleasing the ear." Maffei also describes the location of the glottis with amazing accuracy by modern standards. He speaks of singing from the throat, or "modo di cantare con la gorga." The term "gorga" would later refer to the florid ornamentation in the late sixteenth century; however, for Maffei's purposes, "gorga" referred to the throat, having its origin from the Latin, 'guttur,' for throat. Maffei obviously placed a great deal of importance on the proper placement of the sound in the *cimbalare* or throat because he refers to its location numerous times in his treatise in an effort to insure that students utilize proper technique. Through this proper use and exercise of the vocal apparatus, the student will achieve the proper "disposition of the throat." This means learning how to locate and manipulate the sound in the throat.

To this end, Maffei provides ten rules or guidelines to help the singer achieve proper vocal production. Only four of these rules have a bearing on the present discussion:

1. Make no movement in any part of the body except in that *cimbalare cartilagine,* because if those people appear ugly to us who, when they sing, shake their heads, tremble in their legs, or move their hands and feet, we must be sure that we appear ugly to others when we do the same thing.

2. Extend the tongue so that the tip touches the base of the lower teeth.

This prescription is designed to ensure that the singer uses only the *cimbalare* to activate and control the vocal process and not any contortion of the face or neck to affect a sound or otherwise impair the proper opening of the larynx through tension.

3. Keep your mouth moderately open, no wider than when you are conversing with friends.

This advice is to prevent any contortion of the mouth or tongue. A relaxed tongue which rests naturally at full length in the mouth allows the throat to function at its optimum. Tension in the tongue transfers to the throat and face and causes undue strain on the vocal mechanism.

4. Let out the breath a little at a time with the voice, and take care that it does not go out through the nose or through the palate, for each would be a great mistake.

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This rule calls for a measured release of breath which means careful control of the phonation process. Such careful release also implies a lighter sound due to a use of smaller amounts of air. The emphasis is on a small, measured release which is dependent upon a light source of energy, not at all heavy or as full as the modern singer is accustomed to supplying to his production.

The proper tone can only be produced by a "pleasing and soft instrument" which comes of a "soft and pliant throat." The description of "soft and pliant" for the throat probably refers to the quality of rendering the music as well as a conscious effort to mold the nature of the throat. Maffei describes the ideal voice:

It was this "flexible and pleasing voice" or "voce flessibile e piaghievole" which was so necessary to successful performance of the florid passage work or "passaggi" in the sixteenth century. These "passaggi" or diminutions were fast moving melodic formulas applied as decoration to long notes or at cadential points of a phrase. Maffei described the singing of these passaggi as "decorating with the throat." The important distinction for the singer was to articulate the sound from the throat and not the mouth. Consonants were added by the mouth but the throat was the primary vehicle for the sound or the vowels.

Flexibility included the ability to traverse vocal registers with ease and lack of apparent strain or discernable tension. This is a quality which goes a long way in creating a blend in an ensemble context. Maffei explains that there were those singers who:... are found who sing bass, tenor, and other voices with great ease, and decorating, diminishing, perform passage work now in the bass, now in the mezzo, now in the alto—all beautiful to hear.

And at still another place in the Discorso:

...such a voice is different from the others inasmuch as it is reduced to the flexible, consisting as it does in going from the bass to alt, and descending from alt to bass with the diminutions and orderly repercussion of the air. So it can only be produced by a pleasing and soft instrument.

Apparently the best of the Renaissance singers were expected to traverse more than one vocal part (such as tenor to alto or baritone through tenor) with ease and grace of line.

Part of the key to successful Renaissance vocal production is the use of a warm vocalism which preserves clarity. This entails the use of one of the least understood aspects of sixteenth-century singing: the vibrato. Unfortunately, the Renaissance writers do not help us to distinguish between a normal, healthy vibrato which adds warmth, and the fairly large vibrato, using the lowered larynx to attain a greater volume and size of sound, which we associate with the Romantic singer. Misunderstanding arises with the amount of vibrato which eventually begins to cloud the texture and thus rob the music of its clarity and homogeneity.

Michael Praetorius (Syntagma musicum, 1619) recommends that the singer:

must have a pleasantly vibrating voice (not, however, as some are trained to do in schools, but with particular moderation) and a smooth round throat.

Praetorius is obviously suggesting that the singer employ a natural vibrato, but not to the point that it becomes noticeable and thereby destroys the clarity of the line and the blend of the ensemble.

Fortunately, Ludovico Zacconi (Prattica di musica, 1592) offers a fair-
Iy thorough explanation of how the vibrato operates and, even more helpful, how the vibrato can be seen as a natural extension of healthy singing:

I have to help the singer, I say also that the tremolo, that is, the trembling voice, is the true gate to enter the passages and to become proficient in the gorgia; because the boat moves with greater ease when it is first pushed, and the dancer leaps better if first he prepares for the leap.

The tremolo should be short and beautiful, for if it is long and forceful it tires and bores. And it is of such a nature that those who employ it must always use it, so that it becomes a habit. The continual movement of the voice aids and voluntarily pushes the movement of the gorgia, and admirably facilitates the beginnings of the passages. This movement I am speaking of should only be made with proper speed, and lively and vehemently.15

Clearly, the singer was moving more and more toward the use of the voice as an ornamenting instrument in its own right. The important thing for the modern conductor to remember is that sixteenth-century vocalism is not a thin, lifeless, tone without vibrato, but rather a warm sound, enhanced by the use of natural vibrato so that clarity is not obscured.

A German contemporary of Maffei was the Wittenberg organist and composer, Hermann Finck. Finck supplies valuable evidence of German vocal practice in the mid-sixteenth century and its testimony to the spread of the Italian coloratura technique to Germany. In his Practica of 1556, Finck uses much the same language to describe florid singing as Maffei used in the Discorso. Finck describes florid song in the following fashion:

I have divided the coloraturae into two categories: those of the throat and those of the tongue. The tongue-coloraturae are used in solmization without text, in such a way that the degrees ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la are not sung with a full mouth, but rather flow easily and naturally from the mouth, very delicately and at the same time separated.

The coloraturae of the throat are employed when the text is sung. . . . The law and nature of coloraturae requires that all those notes formed within the cheeks and delivered distinctly and clearly can be heard.16 To achieve the proper balance between sound and words, the singer must have suitable laryngeal control for proper placement of his tone and flexible use of his tongue for clarity of text. Finck's goal for vocal quality was identical to that of Maffei's: a smooth and pleasing sound which did not allow for any abrupt shifts or inequalities in register or volume. The overall goal was always one of clarity and purity of sound for both the soloist and the ensemble singer.

One of the most important concepts of Renaissance vocal technique that the modern choral director must understand is the blending of voices in the choral context. Fortunately, the sixteenth-century writers were fairly generous in their assessment of the requirements for choral sound. At one point in his Dialoghi of 1569, Massimo Troiano, a talented singer in the München Kantorei under Orlando di Lasso, describes the superb leadership qualities which Lasso ex-
hibited with his singers and players:
With such skill, confidence and understanding of art, he brought musicians to the right tempo. . . . So did the experienced singers under the leadership powers of Orlando di Lasso find that they could sing more beautifully with more energy and a better tone under his leadership. . . . And something else that I heard with astonishment and satisfaction was that they sing so well together that even he who has the best ear cannot detect one singer's voice from another's.17

From these brief comments we can discern that there were several qualities which were desirable for the Renaissance ensemble, not the least of which were blend, tone, and balance.

Unlike Maffei, Hermann Finck discusses the specifics of ensemble technique for the choral singer. Finck offers important advice on the suitable blend and character of each of the parts in a choral ensemble:
For example, a discant singer sings with a tender and soothing voice, but a bass with a sharper and heavier one; the middle voices sing their melody with a uniform sound and pleasantly and skillfully strive to adapt themselves to the outer voices. . . . The discant and the alto [do] not rise higher than they should, or . . . no singer strains his voice; for many singers change their tone colors, becoming black in the face and come to the end of their breath. . . . A beautiful song can be sung and brought to performance by such delightful, thoroughly refined, and well-blended voices that one could not ask for it to be better. . . . The higher a voice rises the quieter and lovelier should the note be sung; the more it descends, the richer the sound, as in an organ, [bold face mine] wonderfully assembled of different kinds of pipes . . . so that one voice like another, the high as well as the low, become soft, gentle, and clearly understood.18

The quality of sound that Finck seeks is one which, above all, is blended. No one voice should protrude from the fabric of the music due to unusual quality or tone. Finck maintains that the inner voices should be slightly subservient to the outer parts. The inner voices must "adapt themselves to the outer voices" and above all else, no part must reach or strain beyond its range.

The idea of singing softer as one moves higher is of course contrary to what the modern singer is taught. Vocal pedagogy tells us that as the voice ascends, greater resistance is offered to the breath resulting in greater air pressure. It comes naturally to increase the volume as the pitch rises.19 In moving to a higher register, the modern singer naturally increases the tension on his vocal chords by manipulation of his arytenoid and cricoid cartilages which exert the suitable pressure on the position of the (lowered) larynx to achieve a greater degree of active contraction on the vocal chords.20 This exertion of greater pressure on the larynx allows for the maximum vocalisation and resonance. We can be fairly sure that the Renaissance singer did not employ such techniques as a fully lowered or dropped larynx to achieve his sound because we can compare the techniques described by nineteenth-century writers with earlier approaches to singing and see the differences.

We are essentially products of nineteenth-century techniques of singing. Manuel Garcia (Traite complet de l'art du chant, Paris, 1840) describes a vocal technique which favors a consistent use of the lowered larynx.21 This approach to singing produces the full, rich and resonant sound that we associate today with symphonic or operatic voices. Such production is absolutely necessary to produce the formants to "ring" over the sound of a full orchestra and the depth of a large hall. The problem with such production in regard to Renaissance singing is that the throat is no longer free to navigate rapid passaggi or provide an homogenous timbre, so crucial to uniform, ensemble sound.

In direct contrast to the modern hall and its size [more to the point, its lack of resonant acoustic], the cathedral had a resonant acoustic which actually substituted for the increased vocalism of the nineteenth century. With the advent of larger orchestras, increased audiences, carpeting and poorer acoustics, the singer was forced to expand his ability to be heard. When one sings in a Renaissance acoustic, the voice is actually hampered by the use of a larger vocalism. The larger the resonance of the room, the more
easily and lightly the singer must project, to allow the room to carry the optimum clarity of sound.

David Willcocks comments on the acoustic at King’s College, Cambridge where he directed for so many years:

... It narrows the range of expression because if you sing fff you will hear it five seconds later; if you reach mf at the climax you can move on to something else two seconds later. That restriction dictates the tone—semiquaver runs have to be light, detached and rather soft in order to achieve clarity.22

The acoustic of King’s is exceptional; however, the cathedral acoustic provides the same problem of resonance which dictates special considerations for the choral director if there is to be a suitable blend and articulation from the ensemble.

The sweet, flexible and clear sound, so often described by Renaissance writers, can be achieved by modern singers, but not by using a thin, straight or lifeless tone. The throat needs an open tract to aid the air supply, but the tension on the vocal chords is not increased by lowering the larynx; rather, focus is accomplished by the lateral manipulation of the arytenoid (laryngeal) muscles.23 This can be achieved through the slightly forward positioning of the jaw. Since the goal is articulate sound, the tongue must be free to manipulate the vowels and consonants. The slightly forward movement of the jaw will allow the proper tension of the vocal cords to gain proper resonance and higher pitch without significant increase in volume.24 This sort of demand on the singer requires a much lighter production than we are accustomed to using. The clear and resonant laryngeal timbre is still vital, but without the deeper lowering of the larynx.

A light and flexible vocal production is necessary not only as a result of the acoustic demands of the rooms, but the demands of the music as well. Sixteenth-century music with its thick, polyphonic scoring requires a clarity of sound so that the overall texture is not muddied by competing voices or vast spaces of a resonant room. Added to the difficulty of a thick, imitative scoring is the problem of the agility and speed required to manipulate florid passagework.25

Florid lines of melismatic passagework require light vocalism in order to successfully carry the lines to conclusion. A heavy vocalism would only get weighed down in such passagework.

Another significant area of vocal technique which the treatise writers take time to describe is the quality of sound necessary to make imitative entries clear. Since so much of sixteenth-century music is of a polyphonic, imitative nature, the clarity of entering parts is important to the structure of the music. Massimo Troiano (Dialoghi, 1569) describes the Munich Kantorei under Lasso singing a six-voiced Mass. At the “Introit” at the high altar: “the Kantorei sang with bright and well (clear) sounding counterpoint.”26

Clarity of sound was at its maximum in order that the full texture of the polyphony could be appreciated. Hermann Finck (Practica musica, 1556) offers specific advice on how to make the fugal entries precise and discernible:

... this ought to be proffered by a clearer and more distinct voice than is usual; also that the subsequent voices ought to be delivered in the same way, if they arise from the same theme that the first singer has sung. This ought to be observed in all the voices when new fugues arise, so that coherence and the system of all the imitations can be heard.27

Imitative music calls for a distinct articulation on the part of each voice stating the subject and a particularly clear rendering of that particular phrase to make sure that the subject is heard. The clarity with which the voice sings and the absolute uniformity of entrances from part to part will help create the “elegant fugue” as Finck calls it, and thereby enhance the integrity of the music.

Not only does such a rendering of the subject material make the entrance of the subject clearer and more discernable, but the writers stress the fact that such articulation will also reveal the structure of the music more easily. Georg Quitschreiber writes at the end of the century that singers must:

Sing elegant points of imitation with a clearer voice (fugas elegantes voce clariore canens).
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It would appear that the average Renaissance audience was expected to listen to Renaissance music. The modern conductor must keep in mind the limitations when performing Renaissance music. The singers must use an appropriate vocal technique for a clear, focused tone quality, but not allow the full power of the lowered larynx to come into play. All the training which the modern singer has undergone must be utilized, but under the realization that the full power of the focused, resonant voice must be moderated in line with Renaissance norms. The timbres and volumes of the Renaissance instruments are a great help in achieving an understanding of suitable Renaissance sound quality. The homogeneity of sound is important both amongst the singers and between the singers and the instrumentalists. Given the interchangeability of voices and instruments in the Renaissance, we must assume a fairly close blend of voice and instrument in the collected ensemble. Despite both the instrumental and vocal developments in the sixteenth century, the Renaissance singer was still a member of a consort who found his optimum performance as part of a larger whole.

Discography

This is a representative listing of current ensembles whose recordings exemplify the blend of voices and instruments so crucial to the performance of early music.


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Taverner: "Missa Gloria Tibi Trinitas," Gimell CDGIM 004; both directed by Peter Phillips.

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