

'Historically-informed singing': fantasy, reality – or an irrelevance?

National Early Music Forum, Brighton 21 October 2018

Richard Wistreich, Royal College of Music

ABSTRACT: The phrase 'historically-informed' is a badge (usually self-awarded) worn by many musicians who perform 'early music' these days. But just what does it really mean, both in a certain world of musicking that embraces practitioners and their audiences, and in more scholarly historiographical terms? When it comes to singers and singing, for all that the airwaves and download sites are brimming with the sounds of confident performances of a massive range of music of the past, almost unimaginable fifty years ago, there remains a continuous uneasy stand-off between what we think we know and what we think we are actually doing. Indeed, rather than coming to terms with what a commitment to being 'historically-informed' might actually lead to, singing itself is (and is in danger of remaining) the elephant in the room.

In late 1600, the Florentine printer Giorgio Marescotti issued in sumptuous folio, *Le musiche di Jacopo Peri ... sopra l'Euridice del sig. Ottavio Rinuccini*, presenting in print the eponymous play in music 'represented at the wedding celebrations of the Most Christian Maria de' Medici Queen of France and Navarra'. Maria had acquired her royal titles a few days previously through her proxy marriage to Henri IV — he hadn't deemed it worth turning up in person to marry her, his second wife — and the 'play in music' of *Euridice* had been one of the relatively minor, private entertainments in a week-long festival of extravagant public theatricals in which the Medici had long specialised.

The book is striking for the beauty of the type-setting that Marescotti achieved for the representation of the Florentine *recitativo* that in the Introduction, Peri laid claim to having invented. Quite apart from its being the first true 'opera' to be published in score, among the volume's many claims to fame is the fact that it is also one of the very first printed books containing extensive passages of dramatic dialogue notated for monodic singing. The notation is perfectly readable today by any suitably skilled musician and the most experienced twenty-first century professionals can turn these signs into apparently highly convincing and recognisable musical performances, without the need of any intermediary editing. (Figure 1).

The image displays a page of musical notation from Jacopo Peri's *Le musiche sopra l'Euridice*. It features six systems of music, each with a vocal line and a basso continuo line. The systems are as follows:

- System 1:** Orfeo. Lyrics: "re Non chieder la cagion del mio dolo re Ninfa deh sia contenta ridir perche t'af".
- System 2:** Dafne. Lyrics: "fanni che taciuto martir trop po tormenta Com'esser puo gia mai Ch'io narri,e ch'io riue".
- System 3:** Lyrics: "li Si mife ra bil cafo? ò tato? ò Ciel? Deh lasciami ta cer troppo il saprai".
- System 4:** Arcetoro and Dafne. Lyrics: "Dipur fo uente del timor l'affanno E' dell'ist'f somal men graue affai Troppo piu del timor".
- System 5:** Orfeo and Dafne. Lyrics: "fia graue il danno Ah non sospender piu l'alma turbata Per quel vago bofchetto Oue rigando i".
- System 6:** Lyrics: "fiori Lento tra corre il fonte degl'allo ri Prèdea dolce di letto con le compagne fue la".

Figure 1. Jacopo Peri, *Le musiche sopra l'Euridice* (Florence: Marescotti, 1600), p. 14.

Meanwhile, in the same year, 1600, Victorio Valdivino published an equally sumptuous folio book in another of Italy's great cities, Ferrara. This was the *De vocis auditusque Historia Anatomica*, or *Anatomical History of the Organs of Voice and Hearing* by the great Paduan anatomist, Giulio Cesare Casserio. One of the book's most celebrated features is its series of extraordinarily precise copperplate engravings by Francesco Valesio that accompany the section of the book describing the parts of the larynx, explicated with a level of detail never before seen in print (Figure 2) Although this final image in fact portrays a cadaver undergoing a laryngotomy, it appears so remarkably life-like that we might well momentarily read it as a man screaming as his throat is cut open.



Giulio Cesare Casserius [Casserio], *De vocis avditvsq[ue] organis historia anatomica* (Ferrara: Baldini, 1600–01).

What these images have in common, I want to suggest, is that each was an attempt, using the very latest and most sophisticated technology available, to represent on the printed page that which could not, in fact, be recorded – the human voice. The dilemma of voice's evanescence, a fact of nature that we can so easily forget today, was well recognised by the French philosopher, Pierre de la Primaudaye, in his popular *Suite de l'Academie française* published in 1580, in which he laments that the voice:

is invisible to the eyes, so it has no body with which the hands are able to take hold of it, but is insensible to all the senses, except hearing; which, nevertheless unable to grasp it or hold on to it, as it were with outstretched hands, but being entered into itself, it is so long detained there while the sound rebounds in the ears, and then vanishes suddenly.<sup>1</sup>

This unassailable fact so presciently articulated in 1580, puts in a nutshell the dilemma that underlies what I wish to suggest today, is a fundamental rupture between two ultimately incompatible historiographies. On one hand, the 'deafening silence' of the early modern voice can be considered as essentially a question of archaeology, an absence whose investigation entails considering it as part of a complex of other surviving material evidence, and that voice be understood as a fundamental component of early modern constructions of identity, ranging from social relations and ideologies of power to medicine and philosophy. On the other hand, the almost unbearably alluring reconstructionist dream of defying the historical voice's evanescence by indeed 'grasping and holding on to it' has underpinned a tenacious commitment to the possibility of resuscitating the vocal sounds of 1600 and hearing them again in the Jurassic Park world of what has come to be known as 'historically-informed' performance'.

As a one-time professional early music singer and now a historian of voice, this rupture (philosophers would call it 'an epistemological divide') suggests to me that it could be a great starting place for a serious reflection on just what it is we think we mean when we say we are 'historically-informed'. Is the 'informed' bit of 'historically-informed' just a disclaimer, meaning in effect that we invoke 'history' if that lends an external authority to our performances, but disregard it when it gets in the way of art? At the time in which we are now living, when the relationship between evidence and spin, and the question of who has the power to define and police cultural paradigms, understanding the burden of responsibility that goes with appropriating the authority of 'history' is something that none of us should underestimate.

It is probably fair to say that many historians of the voice, and not just musicologists, are to some extent driven — even occasionally tormented — by a mad desire somehow to circumvent the truism of the lost sound of music of the past, and to be able to switch the volume button of visual images like these back on — to hear again John Donne preaching in St Paul's Churchyard or the King's Men performing Hamlet. But, deprived even of the possibility offered by recording machines of recovering the 'suddenly-vanished' immateriality of the lost voices of the recent past (unimaginable to Primaudaye), we find ourselves at the most exposed edge of a historiographical precipice that should cause more than just the faint-hearted to shy, in the face of the fact that not only are *any* bodily actions of the distant past essentially irrecoverable, but in the case of anyone chasing something as utterly lost as the early modern voice, ought to cause them seriously to question the entire premise on which they claim to be engaged in a viable historicist project to recover it. In this talk I want to consider the relationships between historical evidence and contemporary practice in the

---

<sup>1</sup> 'est invisible aux yeux, ainsi elle n'a point de corps, par lequel les mains la puissant empoigner, ainsi est insensible à tous les sens, excepté à l'ouye, laquelle ne la peut encore empoigner comme à mains estenduës, ne detenir, ains estant entrée d'elle mesme, elle est detenuë ce-pendant que le son en resonance aux oreilles, & puis esvanouyt soudain'. Pierre de la Primaudaye, *Suite de l'Academie Françoise* (Paris: Guillaume Chaudière, 1580), f. 54v.

performance of sixteenth and seventeenth-century vocal music, not through the usual lenses of what are, ultimately, matters of 'interpretation', but rather through a tighter focus on the production of vocal sound.

Let's begin by looking again at our silent images of voice and think a little about the ways in which evidence can be deceptive and can also make uncomfortable demands on us when we start to wrap ourselves in the cloak of 'history'. What are the sign systems adopted by the authors of each of these images supposed to do? Are Peri's and Rinuccini's words and notes a *representation* of what was sung and played in the Pitti palace – a substitute for a recording, perhaps; or are they, rather, a *prescription* for future singing and playing – even centuries years after the original event? Likewise, Valesio's near photographic images of the dismembered flesh and gristle of the vocal tract hover, for obvious reasons, between realistic depictions of a dissection and its diagrammatic rationalisation. Both *seem* to offer a potentially unambiguous legibility to the modern reader. Perhaps precisely because we feel sure of one thing — that the human larynx and thus its mechanical function has not changed in the 400 years since the images were made — we are confident that through the mediating agency of our very own vocalising bodies, we should be able to bridge the silence that separates us from this past in ways that other kinds of historical evidence do not afford.

This position was unequivocally stated a few years ago by the conductor and erstwhile singer, René Jacobs, in an interview with *Le Monde*. 'There are no Baroque voices: unlike instruments, which become outmoded and develop, the voice does not evolve. The only thing of which we can be sure is that voices today are identical to those of the past'. It's certainly true that in evolutionary terms the mechanism of the human vocal tract today is identical with that of, say, a sixteenth-century singer, and although we have no Renaissance larynxes in pickling jars, we do have early anatomical drawings, such as those in Casserio's book. But there is a deeper problem with Jacobs's bold statement, which rather disingenuously implies that the range of potential sounds of the singing voice is as circumscribed as those of the harpsichord or the lute. In fact, we only need to open our ears to the almost unlimited different ways in which humans use their voices to sing, to realise that unlike the *physical organ* of the voice, vocal production is, of course, culturally, even ideologically, constructed. Just shuffle through the Spotify catalogue for ten minutes and you can listen to examples of wildly different vocal productions in the contemporary indigenous singing of South Africa, Mongolia, Tuva, Bulgaria, or Egypt, not to mention soul or rock singing, hip-hop, grand opera, choral evensong or, indeed – if you search online for his reissues – René Jacobs himself. And if there are no 'baroque' voices (and, by implication, no 'medieval', 'Renaissance', or for that matter, 'romantic' or even 'modern' voices), then Jacobs's logic would suggest that as a performer of music of the past, although you might make gestures towards stylistic differences between repertoires of different eras (such as appropriate ornamentation) that may encourage you to award yourself the 'historically-informed' badge, at the level of vocal sound production itself, you should simply stick confidently and faithfully to the 'certainties' of some apparently self-evident notion of 'proper singing'.

Seen in the context of all the other premises of the early music performance industry, this looks like a seriously irrational side-stepping of a whole range of issues, not least the already relative diversity of 'early music vocal production styles' (although not as diverse as we sometimes like to think), and also the fundamentally ideological implications for how we construct our notions of what might constitute 'proper singing'. It is, however, the position that has by and large been accepted, adopted, and promoted both in the profession and, particularly significantly for the training of most of today's professional singers, in conservatoires, right up to the present time.

The hard fact is that we can have only the most tenuous, if any, notion of how singing voices sounded before the age of that tiny number who began their careers in the middle of the nineteenth century and then lived long enough to leave a recorded trace. Before this, any sort of evidence-based 'historically-informed singing' becomes, to put it mildly, a highly speculative and subjective endeavour. So, let's fast-forward almost 400 years to the moment which Pierre de la Primaudaye could not in his wildest thoughts have ever imagined, when

the silence of history was over, and the evidence base for recovering lost voices suddenly and irrevocably changed.

MUSIC EXAMPLE 1 Alberto del Campo, 'Vi ravviso, o luoghi ameni' from *La Sonnambula* 1898

When it comes to historical singing you don't get much more historical than that. You heard the voice of an otherwise unknown baritone, Alberto del Campo, who recorded that short extract from Vincenzo Bellini's *La Sonnambula* in New York 120 years ago, on 6 June 1898, as a demonstration of Emile Berliner's gramophone – the first recording and playback machine to use a flat disc, which improved considerably on the squawking of Edison's cylinder recorder. There is enough clarity here for one to catch not just something of the emotional power of the interpretation but also a sense of the singer's technical style too. Perhaps even more forcefully than an old photograph, such a recording seems to offer a direct connection to a 'real-time' fragment of human communication taking place right inside a different historical era, and for that reason alone, it still makes my scalp tingle. We might be tempted to go further, and suggest that del Campo's recording provides a sounding witness not only to his own, but also the generation of his teachers, and even, perhaps a very, very faint trace of his teachers' teachers: let's be generous and say this could take us – just – back to some echo of the composer's own lifetime – Bellini died in 1835. So – is *this* 'historical singing'? If (and this is, as we'll see, a complicated 'if') we wanted to try to reconstruct the composer Bellini's 'intentions', would we do best to try to emulate – even to imitate – at least some aspects of del Campo's performance?

Before committing ourselves, let's hear another early recording of a singer, this one made in 1905, and quite possibly known to at least some of you in this audience (I have slightly shortened it):

MUSIC EXAMPLE 2 Adelina Patti 'Voi che sapete' (1905)

That was the voice of probably the world's first transatlantic superstar singer, Adelina Patti. As you heard, this is a performance that we probably now find rather bizarre. It seems to conflict with just about everything we celebrate, let alone encourage, in our modern notions of how Mozart's music should be sung. Quite apart from the inaccuracies of intonation, there are (to our ears) very pronounced glissandos and portamentos, both up and down; exaggerated rallentandos at cadences and accelerandos mid-phrase; not to mention the interpolation of appoggiaturas and breaks where they are not in Mozart's score, and others left out where they are. And then there is the vocal sound itself. Even allowing for the limitations of the technology, which bleaches out the full range of frequencies, there are, nevertheless, clearly undisguised register changes, a wide open and almost baritone chest note contrasted with a clear dropping of the palate to produce a sweet, almost girlish lightness for the top notes. There is almost no hint of vibrato in the voice, even though Patti was 62 when the recording was made, 10 years after her farewell performance at Covent Garden. Is this the rather embarrassing self-indulgence of a singer who did not know she was past her prime, drifting dangerously in the direction of Florence Foster Jenkins, or is it, in fact, a very precise record of nineteenth-century performance style, that gramophone recording has itself, over the intervening 113 years, rather ironically contributed to effacing?

In fact, careful analysis of the performance shows that, notwithstanding our initial scepticism, every one of Patti's performance decisions is not only very precisely tied to the accentuation of the text but also tallies closely with the hundreds of written-out interpretative annotations and technical recommendations by influential vocal teachers going back at least to the first half of nineteenth century when Patti learned her craft (she began performing aged 7 in 1851 and made her stage debut in New York in the title role of *Lucia di Lammermor* at the age of 16). Her approach ties in with everything we know about the singer-led, improvisatory approach that characterised opera performance and probably other composed vocal music at least up until the advent of recording.

Would Adelina Patti have cringed on hearing this recording? Apparently not. John Potter writes that 'Not all divas were happy when they heard their own voice for the first time, but Patti was enraptured, remarking that it was no wonder she was who she was: "Maintenant je comprends pourquoi je suis Patti ... Quelle Voix! Quelle artiste!"' Patti's manager and coach throughout her early career was her brother-in-law, Maurice Strakosch. He had studied and later played for the great Giuditta Pasta, who created roles for Donizetti and Bellini and sang Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* when Mozart, had he lived, would have been only 61. Might Patti's 'Voi che sapete', then, not in fact, against all our instincts, be a reasonable starting place for reconstructing a 'historically-informed' Mozartian singing?

This particular manifestation of our own aesthetics coming hard up against the historical evidence might be an interesting test of the limits of what has for a long time been presented as a comfortably symbiotic partnership between the discipline of musicology and the modern performance of early music. As the German equivalent of Grove, *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* confidently declares: 'Nowhere is the connection between theoretical musicology and musical performance as close as in the field of historical performance practice'. But it's had its notorious ruptures, too, that have directly affected the 'historical-informed' performance of vocal music. For example, the long-running clash between, on one hand, the hard evidence that almost all of Bach's choral music was conceived for ensembles made up of single voices – that is one singer on each line - and on the other the resistance – including among otherwise committed historical performers – to giving up a deeply embedded attachment to a nineteenth-century idea of 'choral' performance; or nearer in time to our concerns today, the skirmishes over downward transposition in works such as the Monteverdi *Vespers*. The case of Patti's Mozart could theoretically become another one, but I am willing to bet that it's unlikely to be tested in an opera house anytime soon. Similar negotiations around tradition, public and critical taste and above all, pragmatism, happen daily in just about every aspect of the contemporary 'historical' performance of earlier repertoires – literalism in the interpretation of notated music; chamber organs; opera continuo scoring; countertenors; to name just a few of those which seem to many of us to be more or less lost causes.

In fact, in no aspect of historical performance is this more apparent, I'd argue, than the ways singers who claim to be 'historically-informed' actually use their voices to perform early-modern music (and here I mean the period between about 1450 and about 1750 – medieval music presents its own set of historiographical problems and here is not the place to address them). Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the singing voice has been the elephant in the room of mainstream historical performance from the start. In most areas in which early music is practised professionally – concert hall, opera house, recording studio or conservatoire teaching room – singing has tended to claim, and often been granted, a kind of exemption from the implications of the grounded historical approach to performing the music of different eras, genres and places to which instrumentalists have been subject.

Now this might come as a bit of a surprise to those who think that there is, of course, something not only instantly recognisable as 'historically-informed singing', confirmed by the fact that a sizeable number of fine singers manage to make careers specialising, at least part of the time, in performing pre-Romantic music, and pleasing a large number of clearly satisfied listeners (if they weren't, they presumably wouldn't keep coming back for more). Whether it is a certain kind of light soprano or tenor sound, the pure intonation and homogenous balance of vocal ensembles doing their sometimes desperate best to eschew too much vocal colour in the performance of sixteenth-century polyphony, or the often impressive application of stylistically-appropriate ornamental notes to written lines of seventeenth-century figured music, surely 'early music singing' is not only all around us, but in rude health? Well, there is certainly plenty of often extremely polished, committed and even persuasive singing of renaissance and early Baroque music to be heard, but the fact is that, with some exceptions, what all these singers actually practise is a more or less adapted, but completely conventional 'modern classical technique' – the 'proper singing' which I, perhaps also a bit disingenuously, linked to René Jacobs' statement quoted earlier. It has been practised by and taught to professional art music singers only since around the

beginning of the nineteenth century, mainly because of its obvious mechanical advantages, and as a result of a sustained teaching tradition and a proven track record of being robust and adaptable, it has successfully established itself worldwide as ‘the sound of Western classical singing’. Even though they may not be exploiting these mechanical advantages to perform verismo opera, you can, in fact, hear it being employed by just about every professional singer in performances of everything from Monteverdi operas and Bach cantatas to Palestrina, Gibbons and Dufay.

But why this fuss anyway? As we all now know—and in case we had not worked it out for ourselves a long time ago, a number of music philosophers have gone to great lengths to inform us — what we in the HIP project have been up to for the last forty years apparently has little or nothing to do with the genuinely historical. It has to do with the modern: ‘it is the sound of now, not then’ as it was so succinctly put by the musicologist Richard Taruskin, a good 40 years ago. Isn’t our pursuit of any historical ‘truth’ an illusion? In fact, just as there aren’t many who would want to emulate Adelina Patti’s style of singing Mozart, haven’t we always picked and chosen from those bits of historical evidence that best fitted our notion of how we wanted music of the past to sound. HIP is, in fact, an archetypal product of industrial modernism, with its elevation of the values of functionality, clean lines, and reproducibility. If it works, and if even the directors of historically informed music ensembles and the specialist critics of *Gramophone* magazine are satisfied, why shouldn’t we be? If early music singers never actually had a technical revolution to compare with that of instrumentalists, who cares?

Well, perversely perhaps, I do, and I want to encourage you to as well. Not just because I am the mischievous iconoclast I once was, who together with my colleagues in Red Byrd, in an effort to throw off the shackles of Oxbridge chapel choir vocal authority, did rather outrageous things to the Tudor church music that had nurtured our early musical lives. Rather, because as a singer as well as a historian, I am still as thrilled by the feeling of being able to apply my own voice to test out the evidence of my research as I was, when in the mid-seventies I was lucky enough to come to London as the early music revival was still in its teenage years, and I discovered that ‘proper singing’ simply did not answer the technical, let alone the aesthetic demands of much of the sixteenth and seventeenth century song that I wanted to perform.

So, if we could reconstruct, say, early seventeenth-century vocal production, what would it be like? Would we like it? Would it be worth the effort? Let’s see what we think after the final part of my talk, in which I look at a few examples of what we might learn from the earlier history of vocal technique and what it might entail to put the evidence into practice.

Giulio Casserio’s somewhat arresting dissections of the larynx are a reminder to singers of the perennial fact that you can’t touch your voice, or have it manipulated manually, as a violin teacher might demonstrate bow-hold or finger position to a pupil: the nearest you can get is to place a finger lightly on your Adam’s apple and feel the movement of your voice box as you sing. As many of you here will be well aware, the technique by which singers can greatly increase the volume of the voice, sustain long phrases, and carry the full chest voice up higher without having to break naturally into its falsetto range by *depressing* the larynx and raising the soft palate to elongate the vocal tract, was a development of the early nineteenth century, described in print for the first time in a serious singing treatise only in 1847 by the great singing pedagogue – and inventor of the laryngoscope – Manuel Garcia the younger. But back in 1636, Marin Mersenne, in his exhaustive investigation of the function of the human voice, stated unequivocally that ‘the larynx rises up when we sing high... the larynx goes down when singing low’. This is in essence repeated more than a century later by another singing teacher, Jean Antoine Bérard in 1755 who, in a mistakenly mechanistic attempt to explain the way in which the voice changes pitches in the same way as stringed instruments, advises the student to place a finger on the larynx and to note how it rises by steps as the sung notes get higher. However ambitious his theory, the experiment demonstrates for us precisely the vocal technique of an eighteenth-century professional singer and teacher that corroborates Mersenne’s observation.



The evidence for high- or floating larynx vocal production in pre-Romantic technique (and also basically what just about all singers outside the relatively narrow confines of Western classical art-singing also do today) informs the final section of my talk today, which tackles a fundamental dimension of sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century vocal technique that has no part in 'modern classical technique, and for good reason, as we will see. Marin Mersenne named *flexibilité* as a basic requirement of a good voice, which he defines as 'nothing else than the facility and the disposition that the voice has to pass through all kinds of progressions and intervals, both rising and falling and the making of all kinds of passages and diminutions.' My research over more than forty years leaves me in no doubt that the precise singing of melismas (*passaggi*) and rhetorical ornaments (*accenti*), which are an enduring feature of vocal music from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, required and therefore requires mastery of throat articulation – in Italian, *cantar di gorga* – which in turn appears to be the technical essence of that elusive precondition of good singing: *disposition*.

The ability to control rapid opening and closing of the glottis to make very fast and precise note articulation goes against normal modern vocal technique, dependent as the latter is on depressing the larynx to maximise dynamic power, which makes *cantar di gorga* impossible to achieve. Nevertheless, the sources are absolutely clear on the matter, and without a flexible, swift and accurate disposition in order to sing passages and ornaments in the throat (they are indeed called *gorgie* in Italy in the Baroque), no singer in the Renaissance, Baroque, or Classical periods could hope to be taken seriously as a professional. Here are just a few quotations from Neapolitan, German and French sources over a hundred-year period.

The principal way that disposition is displayed in singing is in the perfect execution of the *trillo*, which is the exercise used to practise disposition in the first place. The *trillo* itself is in fact the fastest possible repetition of the tone, and once mastered, it opens the door to all the other types of articulation figures in the singer's armoury: *gruppo*, *tirata*, *cascata*, *ribattutta di gorgia*, *tremolo*, the diminutions of the Renaissance, and the *accenti* and *passaggi* of the Baroque, the latter still being prescribed by Domenico Corri in his *The Singer's Praeceptor* in 1810.

So how is it done? A number of otherwise helpful sixteenth- and seventeenth-century singing teachers try to describe the technique in print, only to concede that *disposition* can only really be learned by imitating someone who can demonstrate it in the flesh, 'just like a bird learns by observing another', says, for example, Michael Praetorius in 1619. But in 1620, Francesco Rognoni, member of a family of virtuoso musicians from Milan, published a page of graded vocal exercises (probably the earliest we have) that comes as near as notes and printed words could at the time to demystifying it (Figure 3).

**I veri principij per cantar polito, e bene.** r

**DOVE SI CONTIENE IL MODO DI PORTAR LA VOCE,**  
 del dar la gratta nel principio della nota, de tremoli, de gruppi, del trillo, con  
 alcune elisioni non poco vtile à chi desidera cantar con grazia, e maniera.

**Modo di portar la voce.**  
 (Musical notation: Ascending and descending scale with dotted minims tied to crotchets. Rubrics: *Allargando*, *Diminuendo*)

**ACCENTI.**  
 (Musical notation: Notes with various accent marks)

**Del Tremolo di sei modi.**  
 (Musical notation: Six different tremolo patterns)

**Del Gruppo.**  
 Simple.  
 (Musical notation: Simple groupings)

Doppio.  
 (Musical notation: Double groupings)

**Del Tremolo alla Nota di Semibreve.**  
 (Musical notation: Tremolo on a half note)

**Del Trillo sopra la Minima.**  
 (Musical notation: Trill on a quarter note)

**Del Trillo sopra la Semibreve.**  
 (Musical notation: Trill on a half note)

(Musical notation: Trill on a half note)

**Elisioni.**  
 (Musical notation: Notes with elision marks)

**Del principio della Nota.**  
 (Musical notation: Notes with various starting techniques)

Figure 3. Francesco Rognoni, *Selva di varii passaggi* (Milan: Filippo Lomazzo, 1620), p. 1r.

The first exercise, entitled ‘Modo di portar la voce’ – literally ‘the mode of carrying the voice’, shows a very simple ascending and descending scale, in which each tone is divided into a dotted minim tied over to a crotchet. The rubric explains: ‘the *portar della voce*, which should be done with grace, is made by reinforcing the voice on the first note little by little, and then making a *tremolo* on the crotchet’... before passing to the next note. (Figure 4)

**I veri principij per cantar polito, e bene.**

**DOVE SI CONTIENE IL MODO DI PORTAR LA VOCE,**  
 del dar la gratia nel principiar delle note, de tremoli, de gruppi, del trillo, con  
 alcune esclamazioni non poco vtile à chi desidera cantar con gratia, e maniera.

Modo di portar la voce.




ACCENTI.




The second exercise, interestingly labelled ‘Accenti’ (the name given to short articulatory ornaments directly linked to text expression in early baroque vocal music), is very closely related to the ‘modo di portar le voce’. Out of these two emerge all the other basic ornaments and expressive articulations: the *gruppo*, simple and double, which is the equivalent to the later shake or trill, and the ‘tremolo’, clearly a trillo-like note repetition of limited duration that arises out of a dotted note movement, itself a useful re-animator of the flexibility of the glottis during a melismatic phrase (Figure 5).

Del Tremolo in duoi modi.



Del Trillo sopra la Minima.



The Venetian, Lodovico Zacconi, writes in 1592 ‘The *tremolo*, that is, the trembling voice, is the true door for entering into the *passaggi* and for mastering the *gorgie*, because a ship sails more easily once it is already in motion’. The ‘trillo articulation’ in the throat can only work if the voice is not pressured in the larynx, the mouth is relaxed and the dynamic level of sound not too high.

And finally, once the glottis is freely moving, comes perhaps the hardest part of all: to keep the *portamento* going whilst articulating fast in the throat. Many would say that this is a contradiction in terms, but in fact it merely needs a careful balance between freedom in the larynx and continuous *legato* tone. Zacconi sums it up perfectly:

Two things are necessary to whoever wishes to practise this profession - chest [the chest cavity, rather than the voice register] and throat; chest in order that a great quantity and number of figures can be carried through to the proper end; throat to be able to deliver them with facility.

But Praetorius was right, you can only discover the mechanism by experiment and imitation; for us this means that however many treatises we pore over, we are not going to learn disposition from a book. In the 1674 edition of John Playford’s translation of Giulio Caccini’s

*Le nuove musiche*, 1602, when it comes to the passage about the *trillo*, he provides a footnote in which he relates the following anecdote:

It was my chance lately to be in company with three Gentlemen at a Musical Practice, which sung their Parts very well, and used this Grace (called the Trill) very exactly: I desired to know their Tutor, they told me I was their Tutor, for they never had any other but this my Introduction: That (I answered) could direct them but in the Theory, they must needs have a better help in the Practick, especially in attaining to sing the Trill so well. One of them made this Reply, (which made me smile) I used, said he, at my first learning the Trill, to imitate that breaking of a Sound in the Throat, which Men use when they Leuer their Hawks, as he-he-he-he-he; which he used slow at first, and by often practice on several Notes, higher and lower in sound, he became perfect therein.

In other words, Playford's 'Gentlemen' applied their own embodied voices to help them to interpret Caccini's frankly laconic theoretical explanation.

Let's finish by listening to a modern singer who, searching for technical solutions to the performance of music such as Monteverdi's *Orfeo* that conventional operatic training simply could not answer, devoted years to study on his own and also sought out models to imitate 'as a bird learns from another', and was finally able to realise a piece of printed music that would otherwise be quite impossible to perform with a modern technique. The song, 'Indarno Febo' is by Francesco Rasi, who created the role of Orfeo for Monteverdi. Here is the score, published in 1614; you can see that it contains a long chain of semi-quavers in the middle of the page that can only make sense at very high speed (Figure 6).

Parole Del S. Gabriello Chiabrera. 3

N darno Febo il suo bell' oro eterno E Cin tia mi dif-

ue la il puro argento Ch'io lontano da voi nul la non scerno E mon in dar no

lusinghe uol vento E tra bell'herbe di ruscell' il suo

no Ch'io lontano da voi nul la non sento volta carta

Figure 6. 'Indarno Febo il suo bell' oro eterno', in *Vaghezze di musica* (Venice: Angelo Gardano, 1608), p. 157.

The singer on the recording of this piece is one of my early role-models, Nigel Rogers. Before we listen to Nigel perform it, here is a short example of the singing he eventually found to serve as inspiration and *his* model, the old art of *cantar alla gorga* having otherwise entirely died out: it is part of a classical *rag bihag* sung here by the great Ajoy Chakrabaty.

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 3 *Rag bihag*  
MUSICAL EXAMPLE 4 'Indarno Febo'

So, to conclude: how far have we got with answering my question? First, any claims to the real possibility of reconstructing historical singing *as it would have sounded* in the past are spurious and a forlorn hope. But we can consider 'reconstruction' in the way that cultural and social historians do, as a project of collecting fragments from which to make informed guesses that are always provisional and subject to change as the interpretation of the evidence changes. It is, I hope now clear, that if we want to make a serious claim to be practising 'historically-informed' singing we must adhere to basic principles of historical rigour – maintaining a lively curiosity and openness to changing our practices as evidence changes, yes; but not just cherry-picking evidence that fits our pre-conceived ideas or tastes and ignoring what does not. So, when we go to all the trouble of using exactly the appropriate breed of early eighteenth-century *oboe da caccia*, carefully copied from the original, down to the wood and reeds, to accompany a super-charged falsettist using a completely modern technique to perform a Bach aria, let's be clear about its methodological hybridity and any claims we make for its 'historicity'.

Should we hold singing to the same standard of historical proof as instruments? To answer this, we must return to the inherent intangibility and ephemerality of voices, that militates against the kinds of organological clarity that instrumentalists can, at least theoretically, enjoy. On the other hand, the voice is a phenomenally flexible instrument and amenable to experimentation that most instrumentalists can only dream of (I think here, for example, of my professional lutenist friends who must own upwards of six or seven instruments just to cover the relatively short time span of their repertoire, while I carry my instrument around with me and I don't even need a case).

Would we want to sing and hear Palestrina, Monteverdi, Bach, Handel, or Mozart with a wide range of very different techniques and vocal productions, which would, in turn, quite possibly entail new vocal timbres that could well go right against our desire to sing as beautifully as possible and also upset the expectations of our audiences? Well, as we have seen, even with Adelina Patti, aesthetic values are in almost constant flux and taste is subtle and fragile. One of the most ubiquitous descriptors for the best voices in the early modern period, for example, was the word 'sweet' – it is almost impossible to imagine or interpret this utterly contingent historical descriptor without recourse to our own very subjective sense of what it means to each of us.

Finally, there is, of course, absolutely no obligation for anyone to engage with historical sources or even with history at all – there is nothing whatsoever 'wrong' with re-imaginings of old music or performances that deliberately go against historical knowledge, and they are perhaps even more powerful if you know what you are choosing not to invoke. Perhaps ultimately, it's only important to avoid making claims about being 'informed', if one is not.