

Performance Practice Review

Volume 6
Number 2 *Fall*

Article 6

1993

Mersenne on Vocal Diminutions

Margaret Seares

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Seares, Margaret (1993) "Mersenne on Vocal Diminutions," *Performance Practice Review*. Vol. 6: No. 2, Article 6. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199306.02.06

Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol6/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Current Journals at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Baroque Ornamentation

Mersenne on Vocal Diminutions

Margaret Seares

Après avoir expliqué la maniere d'arranger, d'escire, de lire, d'enseigner, d'apprendre, et de composer la Musique dans la premiere partie de ce livre, j'ajoute la maniere dont il faut orner, et enrichir les Airs, et les Chants pour les mettre dans leurs perfection, afin que l'on ne puisse plus rien desirer qu'une excellente voix pour les reciter, dont je descris les qualitez dans la proposition qui suit.

Having explained the manner of arranging, writing, reading, teaching, understanding, and composing music in the first part of this book I am adding the manner in which one should ornament and enrich Airs and Songs in order to bring them to perfection, so that one only needs an excellent voice to sing them, the qualities of which I shall describe in the proposition which follows.¹

So begins the second part of Book VI of Marin Mersenne's *Harmonie universelle*. Book VI is entitled *De l'art de bien chanter*, and its second part is subtitled *De l'art d'embellir la voix, les récits, les airs, et les chants*.² As

¹Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle* (Paris, 1636-7). Facs. ed. (Paris: Centre national de recherche scientifique, 1965), 353.

²Récits were vocal sections inserted at important structural or dramatic points.

such it provides a rare insight into French vocal practice of its time, and indeed is among the few treatises dealing with interpretation of French vocal music during the first half of the 17th century. Yet it is hardly a "singer's manual" as such, but rather, a didactic work addressed variously to the composer and to the teacher. This becomes obvious when one looks at the titles of *Propositions*, into which the book is divided. *Proposition V*, for example, bears this heading:

Expliquer la maniere de connoistre si la voix proposée est bonne, et quelles sont les qualitez qu'elle doit avoir.

An explanation of how to recognize whether the proposed voice is a good one, and what qualities it should have,

whereas *Proposition VIII* aims at the following:

Découvrir les industries qui servent à trouver et à composer de bons Chants, et des Airs de toutes sortes de façons.

Discovering the needed background to fashion a pleasing song and to compose Airs in a variety of ways.

Nonetheless, within the various *Propositions* one encounters valuable details that paint a more vivid picture of musical performance than the general tone of the work might lead one to expect.

Proposition V (the first in Part Two) goes into the most important qualities a good voice should possess, namely accuracy, precise intonation, and suppleness. It then proceeds to the importance of flexibility in the rendering of passagework and diminutions.³ The *dessus* (treble voice) is deemed particularly significant in this respect, " . . . *d'autant qu'elle fait ordinairement les diminutions* . . ." (inasmuch as it normally performs diminutions). Nothing in the context indicates whether this refers to a "treble" within a consort or a solo song. A large corpus of vocal part-music was published in France in the first quarter of the 17th century,⁴ and Mersenne's comments may indicate that the French, like the Italians,

³By *diminutions* Mersenne had in mind the characteristic technique of breaking down longer note values into smaller *floriturae*.

⁴For a summary of this literature see Margaret Seares, "French Part-Songs of the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," *Studies in Music* 15 (1981), 36-50.

continued a tradition of embellishment in polyphonic music.⁵ However, the continuation of the sentence casts a certain ambiguity on Mersenne's meaning:

... d'autant qu'elle fait ordinairement les diminutions, et qu'elle fait paroistre la beauté du sujet, et de la lettre qu'elle recite: de là vient que plusieurs ayment mieux entendre le recit d'un bon Dessus, qu'un concert entier . . .

... inasmuch as the treble normally makes the diminutions and that it [elle] presents the beauty of the subject and of the text it recites, it emerges that many would rather hear the *recit* of a good treble than an entire Concert.

The use of the pronoun *elle* suggests that the performer is a female treble singer rather than simply a treble voice (*dessus*), whose gender is masculine in French. What emerges is that diminutions appear to have been an established part of the performance of the treble voice in solo song and in the more declamatory *recit*—a point neglected by many 20th-century singers of this repertory. Indeed, the matter of embellishment of a given line figures in Mersenne's *Proposition XXVIII* (Part 4):

Donner des exemples de la diminution et de l'embellissement des Chants, et la methode de faire de bons Chants, et de les embellir par la diminution.

Examples of diminutions and of embellishing song, and how to create good songs and embellish them with diminutions.

In this *Proposition* Mersenne includes a number of musical examples showing ways in which the vocal line of a song might be ornamented in the performance of the second and subsequent verses. These examples provide ample testimony to the fact that the French *airs de cour* of the early 17th century should not be performed simply as written, other than in the first verse. Rather they require the same sort of careful thinking and working out of embellishment as do, for example, the (later) slow movements of the solo violin sonatas of Corelli.

⁵See Howard Mayer Brown, *Embellishing Sixteenth-Century Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), particularly ch. 3 concerning the embellishment of Italian polyphonic music.

Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle* (facs. ed., 411)

Proposition XXVIII (musical examples)

*Air de Monsieur Boesfet.**Chant simple.*

Esperer plus mes yeux De reuoir en ces lieux la beauté que j'a-
dore,
re, Le Ciel jaloux de mon bon-heur, A rayé ma naissante aurore
par sa ri-gueur.

Diminution de Monsieur le Bailly.

Les pleurs n'ont plus de lieu Dans le cœur de ce dieu Dont
le feu me de-u- re. re. Le Ciel jaloux de mon bon-
heur, A rayé ma naissante aurore par sa ri-gueur.

Autre diminution de Monsieur Boesfet.

Les pleurs n'ont plus de lieu Dans le cœur de ce
dieu Dont le feu me de- uo- re. re. Le Ciel jaloux
de mon bon-heur, A rayé ma naissante auro- re par sa rigueur

It is at first rather puzzling to encounter these examples in a book that had hitherto been devoted to a discussion of prosody.⁶ But Mersenne also uses these examples to show " . . . *que le temps des syllabes et l'ordre des mouvemens n'y est pas observé . . .*" (that the length of syllables and the order of rhythmic patterns is not observed here), even though in a previous *Proposition* (XXXIII) he had established the "correct" prosody for the first verse of the song. Apparently he was referring to Bailly's and Boesset's diminutions, wherein we find different lengths and stresses to several words. For example, in line 2, *dans* and *ce*, which according to Mersenne's rules should be long and short respectively, are set in this way by Bailly, but appear in quite the opposite fashion in Boesset's example. Likewise the words *adore*, *ciel*, *a ravy*, and *par* in Boesset transgress the rules for good prosody established earlier by Mersenne. Thus it would appear that, in this period, composers and singers were less concerned about good prosody than their later compatriots. What is also made clear in the examples of embellishment provided by Mersenne here, is that diminutions (as well as other specific ornaments) are not restricted to particular evocative or pictorial words of the text, but are just as likely to occur on pronouns, articles, and other parts of speech. In short, embellishment is indiscriminate as far as both the prosody and meaning of the text is concerned. Again, this would suggest a quite different approach to that of the latter part of the century, when Lully did his best to discourage indiscriminate ornamentation in performances of his vocal music.

It can be seen, then, that in the pages of Mersenne's tome may be found many valuable clues to the unlocking of the beauties of the great corpus of lute songs which flowed from the pens of French composers of the first half of the 17th century.

⁶In Book VI, Part 4, Mersenne takes up a discussion of French prosody in terms of classical quantitative meter in the tradition of Antoine Baïf and his Académie de Poésie et de Musique. Mersenne discusses the concept of long and short syllables in French verse and proceeds to list those syllables which should always be long and those which are shorter in length.