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How One Learned to Ornament in Late Sixteenth-Century Italy

Timothy J. McGee

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Numerous documents from the early centuries make it clear that ornamentation was expected of all solo performers, meaning not just soloists, but also those who performed polyphonic music with one person on a part. In spite of its omnipresence during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, however, information about how novice musicians went about learning the technique is somewhat illusive. For a present-day musician wishing to recreate it or to understand how it interacted with the written music, there are several avenues that can be followed. For the earlier centuries we can compare variant versions of the same vocal composition, including ornate intabulations such as the Faenza codex and the Buxheimer manuscript, which provide instrumental embellishments.¹ There are also occasional written-out ornamentations of vocal music over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which provide a glimpse of the extent and variety of the tradition; we are fortunate that a few composers were sufficiently obsessive to ornament their own compositions; Alexander Agricola comes to mind as a good example.² But there are no formal manuals intended to instruct performers about ornamentation practices until the sixteenth century, and even those sources are not as helpful as one would wish, since they offer information about what kinds of ornaments to use, but rarely tell us where they are to be placed or how much ornamentation was expected in any one composition. One would assume that much of that kind of detail was learned through imitation and observation or taught by direct instruction from a master. It is surprising therefore, to read in some of the manuals that by studying the material included in them, the skill actually could be learned without a teacher. A close look at the instruction manuals that survive will give us some idea of what might have been expected of both instrumentalists and singers, which can be used to augment the anecdotal evidence of how one learned to ornament.

Before we take a look at that evidence, however, it would be well to look closely at the different types of compositions that traditionally received ornamentation. Until recently most general discussions of sixteenth-century ornamentation seem to have been based on the assumption that prior to the introduction of a new dramatic performance style by Giulio Caccini,

¹ Modern transcriptions in Dragan Plamenac, ed., *Keyboard Music of the Late Middle Ages in Codex Faenza 117* (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1972); and Bertha Wallner, ed., *Das Buxheimer Orgelbuch*, *Das Erbe deutscher Musik*, vols. 37-39 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1958-59).

² Alexander Agricola, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Edward R. Lerner ([S.l.]: AIM, 1961-70), vol. 5.

there was only the single, universal type of ornamentation applied to every conceivable composition type. That assumption was based on the uniformity of much of the available material included in the ornamentation sources and in the written-out examples. If we look at the instructions in the 1562 letter of Maffei, and the manuals by Ganassi (1535), Ortiz (1553), Dalla Casa (1584), etc.,³ or the written-out examples in a variety of lute and keyboard collections from the period, we find a fairly uniform set of ornamental examples, the very thing Caccini dismissed with the phrase “mere ear-tickling.”⁴ What he was referring to were the *passaggi*: quick-moving ornamental passages intended to be inserted between written notes of a composition. In modern terminology they would be called “riffs.” Instructions in these same manuals also describe another type of quick but unwritten ornament that would later be called “graces” and indicated in the music by symbols. The popularity of both of these types of ornamentation stems from the ease with which they can be supplied; on the lowest level both can be done easily without straying far from the written note. Once the performer gets the hang of it and memorizes a few dozen set formulae—which is what the manuals all suggest—it requires almost no mental work to apply them, and it has the superficial reward of dazzling the listeners.

Since Howard Mayer Brown has done an admirable job of analyzing and describing the passage-type ornamentation instructions⁵ it should be sufficient here to summarize the approach found in most of the sources. The usual procedure is for the authors to illustrate a simple interval or a short melodic pattern, and follow that with one or many suggested ways for elaborating it. The manual then proceeds to another melodic pattern followed by another set of ornamentation suggestions. This format is followed for pages and pages, usually in a systematic way through a graduated set of melodic patterns and modes. It was expected that the learner would not just practice the illustrated ornamentations but actually memorize them to the point where they could be inserted automatically when the particular basic melodic shape appeared in a composition. The writers also encourage the students to pick and choose from the patterns according to their own tastes and abilities, and to strive to advance to the point where they could personalize their ornamentations by inventing their own riffs.

This, of course, results in a fairly sterile product: ornamentation patterns applied to melodic shapes without consideration of the musical context. Just as important to the neophyte

³ Maffei letter published in Nanie Bridgman, “Giovanni Camillo Maffei et sa lettre sur le chant,” *Revue de Musicologie* 38 (1956): 3-34; Sylvestro Ganassi, *Opera intitulata Fontegara*, Venice 1535, trans. and ed. Hildemarie Peter (Berlin: R. Lienau, 1956); Diego Ortiz, *Tratado de glosas sobre clausulas ... Roma 1553*, trans. and ed. Max Schneider (Kassel: Bärenreiter: 1961); Girolamo Dalla Casa, *Il vero modo di diminuir*, 2 vols., Venice 1584, facs ed. (Bologna: Forni editore, 1970). For a complete list of the ornamentation manuals and a discussion of their contents see Howard Mayer Brown, *Embellishing 16th-Century Music*, Early Music series I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁴ Giulio Caccini, *Le Nuove Musiche*, Florence 1601 [1602], *Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era* 9, trans. and ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock (Madison: A-R Editions, 1970).

⁵ Brown, *Embellishing 16th-Century Music*.

ornamentor would be instructions as to where these kinds of riffs can be inserted in an actual melodic line, and how dense should be the ornamentation of any particular phrase. None of the manuals actually address those points at any length in prose, although several do include one or more well known fully ornamented melodies, which serve as illustrations for the placement of the stock ornament patterns. Lacking any detailed written analysis, however, the student is left to extract the principles of application from the few examples, noticing where in a phrase an ornament is inserted, and exactly which types of ornaments are chosen for placement in various melodic or cadential situations. Ludovico Zacconi, for example, presents a single full example, a motet *Quae est ista*, and states that motets are easier to ornament than are madrigals.⁶ He does not mention chansons or any of the instrumental forms, although it is clear that he intends his ornamentations to be used in those compositions as well. Nearly all of the ornamentation sources state quite clearly that they are applicable to both vocal and instrumental practices, implying that there was only a single style of ornamentation to be applied to all available forms of music.

The increasing number of such manuals as the sixteenth century progressed is evidence that little by little they were finding popularity as a source of instruction for both instrumentalists and vocalists wishing to learn how to ornament, and these manuals were intended to augment and possibly replace instruction from a teacher. Present day experience shows that it certainly is possible to learn ornamentation from the manuals, as many modern performers have demonstrated, and it undoubtedly would have been far easier during the late 16th century, when there would have been numerous opportunities for a fledgling musician to hear competent professionals exercise their craft.

There is evidence, however, that in those manuals we are seeing only a partial picture of the ornamental performance practices during this period, especially in terms of vocal music. The repertory they address does not represent all of the compositional types popular in Italy at the time, nor was the delivery of all musical forms open to the ornamental practices found in the manuals. There is ample evidence of a distinct Neapolitan vocal repertory from early in the sixteenth century; one that required a different, far more dramatic type of performance approach. In recent years John Walter Hill and Tim Carter have written about the Neapolitan style and its popularity in Roman courtly circles.⁷ As Hill has discussed at some length, that style was the basis for the “new style of singing” brought to Florence from Rome by Giulio Caccini in the 1560s; a style of delivery and ornamentation quite distinct from that applied to the repertory

⁶“Perche i Madrigali ordinariamente son piu difficili de i Motetti.” Ludovico Zacconi, *Prattica di musica* (Venice: Girolamo Polo, 1592, repr. Bologna: Forni editore, 1967), 64v.

⁷ See John Walter Hill, “Oratory Music in Florence, I: *Recitar Cantando*, 1583-1655,” *Acta Musicologica* 51 (1979): 108-136; and *Roman Monody, Cantata, and Opera from the Circles Around Cardinal Montalto*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Tim Carter, “A Florentine Wedding of 1608,” *Acta musicologica* 55 (1983): 89-107; and “Giulio Caccini’s *Amirilli, mia bella*: Some Questions (and a Few Answers),” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 113/2 (1988): 250-273.

addressed in the ornamentation sources.⁸

There are essential differences between the Neapolitan dramatic style of song and that to which the riff-type ornaments were applied. The music that received *passaggi* can be characterized as quite regular in its elements: a regular tempo which often is dance-based in terms of rhythmic organization; relatively short and even phrase periods; and a clearly sculptured melody. In contrast, the Neapolitan style is irregular. It has passages that are not kept at a regular pace; the rhythm of the melody follows the text and is often irregular; the phrase lengths are varied and often unequal; and the melodic profile often has what we would call recitative-like sections—repeated notes, and passages with limited melodic range which are intended to be sung freely in order to express the text.⁹ What Caccini brought north, therefore, was a highly developed dramatic performance style that demanded a different type of ornamentation, one that he developed and exploited throughout his career. The style has been credited to him as its originator, although he never claimed to have invented it.¹⁰

Caccini was not alone in the North as a representative of the southern style; throughout the late sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth, there was continuing contact and exchange of northern and southern singers, which was especially active among the courts in Florence, Ferrara and Mantua in the north, and Cardinal Montalto's circle of artists and patrons in Rome.¹¹ Although the basic elements of the southern style seem to have originated in monodic performance, by the late sixteenth century a number of composers had incorporated the style into ensemble compositions. In his *Discorso*, Vincenzo Giustiniani highlights the two different styles by noting that as early as the 1570s the style of monodic singing in Rome as practiced by the singers Giovanni Andrea, Giulio Cesare Brancaccio, and Alexandro Merlo was quite different from that applied to the music of Palestrina and others. He then goes on to note that composers such as Giaches de Wert in Mantua and Luzzasco Luzzaschi in Ferrara had adopted some of the dramatic monodic practices in the polyphonic music they wrote for the *concerti delle donne* in those two northern cities.¹² His description of the style as adapted to ensemble performance by the *donne*, is quite helpful in its presentation of the basic elements of the southern style:

“They increased their voices, loud or soft, heavy or light, according to the demands of the piece they were singing; now slow, breaking off with sometimes gentle

⁸ Hill, *Roman Monody*, 1:119-20.

⁹ Hill refers to the style as “recitational,” *Ibid.*, 1:75.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:58.

¹¹ See the discussion in *Ibid.*, especially 1:25-48.

¹² Vincenzo Giustiniani, *Discorso sopra la musica*, ca. 1628, *Musicological Studies and Documents* 9, trans. Carol MacClintock (Rome: AIM, 1962), 69.

sighs, now singing long passages legato or detached, now groups, now leaps, now with long trills, now with short, and again with sweet running passages sung softly, to which sometimes one heard an echo answer unexpectedly. They accompanied the music and the sentiment with appropriate facial expressions, glances and gestures, with no awkward movements of the mouth or hands or body which might not express the feeling of the song. They made the words clear in such a way that one could hear even the last syllable of every word, which was never interrupted or suppressed by passages and other embellishments. They used many other particular devices which will be known to persons more experienced than I.”¹³

That style, as practiced and promoted by Giulio Caccini, his family and students, was highly respected and wildly popular, both in Italy and in foreign courts.¹⁴ In 1583 Giulio visited the court of Ferrara where he impressed Duke Alfonso II with his singing and was himself impressed by the famous *concerto delle donne*. This resulted in a request shortly afterward that he add his style of ornamentation to madrigals written for the *donne* by Alessandro Striggio.¹⁵ In 1592 he was again invited to Ferrara to perform for the Duke and to coach the *donne* in his singing style.¹⁶ In 1605 he, his wife and two daughters were invited by Maria de’ Medici to perform in Paris at the court of Henry the IV, where they were the recipients not only of much praise, but also lavish gifts. They remained at the French court for approximately six months and during that time had impressed the Duke of Lennox, who in turn invited them to London to entertain the Queen of England. Permission to travel to England was not granted, and the family returned to Florence, stopping along the way in Turin for a short time, once again to much acclaim and many gifts.¹⁷

It is clear that Giulio was not just demonstrating his talents on these visits, but also teaching his style of performance to local singers. In a letter relating details of his 1592 visit to Ferrara, Caccini tells us of the Duke: “Since he enjoyed my manner of singing, today he begged me (this was the word he used) to favor him both by teaching his three ladies something with these *accenti* and *passaggi* of ours and by writing a few diminutions on a favorite bass of his.

¹³ Idem.

¹⁴ For contemporary quotations about Caccini’s singing see Warren Kirkendale, *The Court Musicians in Florence During the Principate of the Medici* (Florence: Olschki, 1993), 154-8.

¹⁵ See Anthony Newcomb, *The Madrigal at Ferrara, 1579-1597*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 1:56.

¹⁶ Ibid, 58.

¹⁷ Tim Carter, “Caccini, Giulio” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 4, ed. Stanley Sadie (London, New York: Macmillan Publishers, 2001), 769-75.

Thus for three hours I taught some *Arie* to these ladies in the presence of His Highness.”¹⁸

On a more local level, in addition to the many Florentine court singers who were his students, Caccini also taught in the community. He regularly visited the convent of Montedomini to teach singing to the nuns,¹⁹ and in a letter of 1597 he singles out one of the nuns, Sister Clarice Baldovinetti, as being especially talented, and states that he taught her and the other nuns *i gorgiamenti*—ornamentation. The occasion for his letter was to complain that the Vicar had canceled his permission to visit the convent because the singing of the nuns had become so popular that many citizens were flocking to the convent to hear them, and the archbishop thought it was improper.²⁰

More striking evidence of the popularity of the dramatic singing style can be seen from the contest held in Rome in 1623 between two of the most famous singers of the early seventeenth century, Francesca Caccini (“La Cecchina”) and the Roman trained singer Adriana Basile (“L’Adriana”). There was a difference of opinion among members of the Medici circle as to which of the two singers was the more talented. To resolve the dispute the poet Giovanni Battista Marini, a member of the circle, produced an *ottava rima* on the subject of Adonus, and the two sopranos were invited on successive evenings to demonstrate their talents before a distinguished audience by improvising both melody and accompaniment without having seen the text beforehand. The judgement was that “La Cecchina” had the superior musical understanding (*di molto più sapere e padrona dell’arte*), whereas “L’Adriana” had a better voice and ability to express (*alquanto migliore voce et artificiosa negli affetti*).²¹ The deciding factor, which caused the listeners to declare Francesca Caccini the winner, was her ability to match her performance to the text, the element that was usually singled out to praise her father’s performances.

We do have some references as to how one might learn to perform in Giulio Caccini’s style. The introduction in his second volume of songs in 1614 states that he has added to his publication ornamentation not often seen in print. Because of this, he claims the edition is so

¹⁸ Quoted in Newcomb, *The Madrigal at Ferrara*, 1:58.

¹⁹ Vocal and instrumental performance by nuns in a convent was apparently not unusual. Bottrigari praises the performances of nuns in Ferrara at the church of St. Vito, and singles out their talented *maestra* who is also a nun, and although he says that the performance is unusual because of its quality, he does not imply that the practice itself is unusual. Hercole Bottrigari, *Il Desiderio* (1594, repr., Forni editore Bologna, 1969); Translation of second ed. 1599 by Carol MacClintock ([n.p.]: AIM 1962), 59-61.

²⁰ Caccini’s letter is found in ASF: Mediceo filza 882, fol. 456, Giulio Caccini in Firenze to Belisario Vinta 1 December, 1597. Reproduced in Warren Kirkendale, *The Court Musicians in Florence During the Principate of the Medici*, 132. Also see ASF: Mediceo, filza 882, fol. 457, in which the vicar replies and explains the problem.

²¹ The information is included in a letter from Antonio Galli to the Medici court, 11 November 1623, ASF: Mediceo, filza 3645. A portion of it is printed in Ellen Rosand, “Barbara Strozzi, *virtuosissima cantatrice*: the Composer’s voice,” *JAMS* 31 (1978): 241-81, at 254, n. 31.

helpful, a singer can learn the style without further assistance from him: “it is shown that with this new way, and practice in it, all the delicacies of this art can be learned without having to hear the composer sing; adorned with diminutions, tremolos, trills, and new effects for the thorough training of anyone wishing to be an expert in solo song.”²² Since the material in the second publication does not differ from that of his first in 1602, Wiley Hitchcock has argued convincingly that he was referring to the earlier collection of songs as well,²³ allowing us to use information in both sources in order to identify the elements of his style.

From Caccini’s statement we can infer that in his opinion, previous to the publications, the only way one could learn his style of interpretation was to study directly with the master, and in fact, there is some evidence that this was the way things were done, as is clear in several of the anecdotes reported above. Certainly Caccini’s wives, daughters and son learned the style in this manner. He also claims to have taught his style to Vittoria Archilei, another of the Florentine court virtuosi shared with Cardinal Montalto, as well as numerous other singers.²⁴ His fame as a teacher was such that in 1603, as a part of the employment negotiations between the Gonzaga court in Mantua and the father of the thirteen year-old soprano Caterina Martinelli (“La Romanina”) in Rome, it was proposed that she first travel to Florence and stay with the Caccinis for a while in order to learn first-hand from the master.²⁵ The arrangements were eventually changed and she went directly to Mantua to stay with Claudio Monteverdi and his wife, but the original arrangement tells us again that direct contact with the teacher was considered to be important in order to learn the dramatic style of singing.

We also have information regarding the way in which Ginevra Mazieri learned her part as La Tragedia for the 1600 presentation of *Euridice*. Although the bulk of the music heard during the first performance of that opera was written by Jacopo Peri, Giulio Caccini had insisted that all singers who were under his control would sing the music that he wrote. That would certainly include Ginevra, who did not study directly with the master himself, but with his son, Pompeo Caccini. The part Ginevra was to learn, the Prologue, consists of exactly twelve bars of music, to which she was to set seven four-line verses of text. Pompeo was sent to her home in the months preceding the October performance in order to instruct her in the proper manner of presenting it.

²²“Nelle quali si dimostra, che da tal Maniera di scrivere con la pratica di essa si possano apprendere tutte le squisitezze di quest Arte, senza necessità del Canto dell’ Autore; Adornate di Passaggi, Trilli, Gruppi, e nuovi affetti per vero esercizio di qualunque voglia professare di cantar solo.” From the title page of the 1614 publication. Reproduced in Giulio Caccini, *Nuove Musiche e Nuova Maniera di Scriverle* (1614), Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era 28, ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock (Madison: A-R Editions, 1978).

²³ Idem.

²⁴ For more discussion of singers shared between Florence and the court of Cardinal Montalto see Hill, *Monody*, 1:42-7.

²⁵ See Edmund Strainchamps, “The Life and Death of Caterina Martinelli” *Early Music History* 5 (1986): 159-60.

There is no record of exactly how many hours were required to teach the young Florentine singer this seemingly small quantity of music; in Ginevra's mother's lawsuit it is claimed that "he [Pompeo] had frequented her house for a long time." In the course of the singing instructions, however, the two young people became enamored of one another, which resulted in Pompeo being sued for paternity in February of 1601, four months after the performance.²⁶

If we believe Caccini's 1614 statement, once his material was available in print, it was no longer necessary to consult a teacher in order to learn his performance style. A close look at the music in both the 1602 and 1614 publications, however, does not inspire much confidence in his claim. The printed music actually contains only a small quantity of the details necessary to perform in a way that is described in the contemporary accounts and in Caccini's own remarks about the style. What has been added to the songs in the 1602 collection is mainly the notation of short, irregular rhythmic ornaments for selected syllables (mostly the penultimate syllable of a text phrase), along with a few extended *passaggi*, and a few symbols for *trillo* (rapid reiteration of a single pitch) or *gruppo* (a modern trill). In the second collection there is an increase in the quantity of short rhythmic ornaments and short *passaggi*, as well as more variety of rhythmic groupings within them. He also includes a few *cascade*, a quick-moving descending ornament that was discussed, but not notated in the earlier collection. In neither collection, however, does he indicate the other ornaments discussed in the preface of his first publication: *esclamazioni*; *intonatione della voce*; *messa da voce*, although it is clear from his instructions that they are to be added by the singer. And at no point is there any indication of the wide range of dynamics and vocal inflections that were the most distinctive element of the style; the kind of dramatic presentation described by Giustiniani in the quote above, and which Marin Mersenne tells us distinguished the Italian singing style from the French:

"The Italians in their recitatives they observe many things of which ours are deprived, because they represent as much as they can of the passions and affections of the soul and spirit, as, for example, anger, furor, disdain, rage, frailties of the heart, and many other passions, with a violence so strange that one would almost say that they are touched by the same emotions they are representing in the song; whereas our French are content to tickle the ear, and have a perpetual sweetness in their songs, which deprives them of energy."²⁷

The addition of *passaggi* to written music could already be found in earlier ornamentation manuals as well as other manuscripts and publications (including Caccini's ornamentations for the Ferrara *donne*), and symbols indicating "graces" had been around for

²⁶ For details of the suit and transcriptions of the documents, see Timothy J. McGee, "Pompeo Caccini and 'Euridice': New Biographical Notes," *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 26 (1990) [1991]: 81-99.

²⁷ Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle, contenant la Theorie et la Pratique de la Musique* (Paris: Cramiosy, 1636, Vol. II), 354-60; translated in Carol MacClintock, *Readings*, 173.

several hundred years. Caccini's claim to novelty in terms of written-out ornamentation, therefore, really was restricted to the shorter rhythmic passages and the *cascade*, which he states should be performed exactly as notated.²⁸ This alone would not be much help to an aspiring singer attempting to learn the Neapolitan/Caccini dramatic style without the aid of a teacher. Many additional elements are necessary, including an ability to interpret affect, and especially the execution of *sprezzatura*, that illusive term that Caccini himself emphasizes is so important to the graceful execution of a song. He does discuss these elements in the preface to his 1614 work where he names three things necessary for those who would learn to sing well and with expression: affect, variety of affect, and *sprezzatura* (*affetto, la varietà di quello, e la sprezzatura*). He goes on to elaborate a bit on these elements, describing affect as the ability to express the meaning of words by use of a variety of dynamics that match the emotion of the words, and *sprezzatura* as the charm rendered to a song by the performance of the written notes with some freedom. *Sprezzatura* is a difficult word to translate, it is usually translated as "negligence," or "nonchalance." In context Caccini seems to be referring to the insertion of short, quick-moving ornaments, but the way he chooses to explain his idea is interesting:

“*Sprezzatura* is that charm given to a song by the rapid succession of several eighth or sixteenth notes on various tones, which, when done at the right time relieve the song of a certain restricted narrowness and dryness and make it pleasant, free, and airy, just as in common speech eloquence and fluency make pleasant and sweet the matters being expressed. And with respect to this eloquence, I would liken to the rhetorical figures and shadings, the *passaggi*, *trilli*, and other similar ornaments, which can be introduced sparingly in every affect.”²⁹

What is being described is a specific type of melodic-rhythmic ornament, but unfortunately the statement is unclear as to the particulars of when it is used and where it is placed. In this case, as with all of his statements about the dramatic ornaments, it is difficult to imagine how any singer could learn this style without considerable additional help. But a hint as to where some of that additional assistance could be found lies in Caccini's comparison of some of the ornaments to rhetorical figures and shadings. These were a part of the area of rhetoric known as oration, a subject widely taught in Italian schools, and therefore an area quite familiar

²⁸ For a summary and discussion of what Caccini claims about his singing style, see Hill, *Monody*, 1:58.

²⁹ “La sprezzatura è quella leggiadria la quale si da al canto co'l trascorso di più crome, e simicrome sopra diverse corde co'l quale fatto à tempo, togliendosi al canto una certa terminata angustia, e secchezza, si rende piacevole, licenzioso, e arioso, si come nel parlar comune la eloquenza, e la fecondia rende agevoli, e dolci le cose di cui si favella. Nella quale eloquenza alle figure, e à i colori rettorici assomiglierei, i passaggi, i trilli, e gli altri simili ornamenti, che sparsamente in ogni affetto si possono tal'ora introdurre.” See photo reproduction in Caccini, *Nuove Musiche*, ed. Hitchcock, preface (no page nos.). I am grateful to Guido Olivieri for assistance with this difficult passage.

to all singers.³⁰ Caccini in turn, is counting on the readers' knowledge of oratorical techniques as a way to understand affect as well as how to use the other ornaments.

Rhetorical delivery was usually associated with another dramatic vocal style and repertory that already was present in Florence when Caccini arrived: the *cantare all'improvviso* tradition, which was widely practiced throughout Italy, and which would seem to be closely related to the Neapolitan style. By looking closely at the rhetorical style as it related to the dramatic style of the *cantare all'improvviso* tradition, it is possible to obtain a clearer idea of what Caccini was trying to tell singers about his dramatic style of ornamentation.

The heritage of *cantare all'improvviso* was the ancient tradition of the village bard and later, the troubadour; the practice of improvising simple melodies to enhance poetry. It was a tradition that was still present to some degree in all areas of Europe in the late Middle Ages, and which continued to have a rather high profile in Italy as late as the seventeenth century.³¹ In the mid-sixteenth century there was even a debate in Florence at the distinguished Accademia Fiorentina, in which the speakers identified the *all'improvviso* style as a national Italian product as contrasted with written polyphony, which was identified as Northern European—foreign.³² Delivery of poetry *all'improvviso* was highly dramatic, and it was that tradition which was referred to in terms of the rhetorical style in music treatises of the time. Nicola Vicentino, for example in his *L'antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica* of 1555, states:

“The experience of the orator teaches us this, for we observe the method that he adopts in his oration, that now he speaks with force, and now soft, now a bit slower, now a bit faster, and by this means greatly moves the listeners, and this method of changing the pace greatly affects the spirit. And thus one should sing improvised music³³ in such a

³⁰ On rhetoric and schools see Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300-1600* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989); and Albert Rabil, ed., *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1988).

³¹ On the history of the tradition see Ezio Levi, “I cantari leggendari,” *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana*, Suppl. #16 (1914), and James Haar, “Improvvisatori and Their Relationship to Sixteenth-Century Music,” in his *Essays on Italian Poetry and Music in the Renaissance, 1350-1600* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 76-99. On reasons for its demise in the seventeenth century see Ivano Cavallini, “sugli improvvisatori del Cinque-Seicento: persistenze, nuovi reportori e qualche riconoscimento,” *Recercare* I (1989): 23-40.

³² Robert Nosow, “The Debate over Song in the Accademia Fiorentina,” *Early Music History* 21, (2002): 175-221.

³³ Vicentino's phrase here for improvised music, *Musica alla mente*, contrasts it with *cantare super librum*, meaning to sing composed music. It is frequently mistranslated as “memorized music,” but see Ernst Ferand, *Die Improvisation in der Musik* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1938), Chapter V; Rodolfo Baroncini, “A mente e a libro,” in *Artisano e sonador: formazione, status e competenze dello strumentista del'500*, ed. Mauro Odorizzi and Maurizio

way as to imitate the accents and effects of the different parts of the oration. If an Orator would attempt to make a beautiful oration without [adopting] the rules of its accents, pronunciations, words delivered now quickly or slowly, some softly, some loudly, the effect will not move the listeners. It must be the same in Music because if the orator is to move the listeners with the abovementioned rules, so much better the Music recited with the same rules accompanied by well ordered harmony; it will be far more effective.”³⁴

Gioseffo Zarlino, in his *Sopplimenti Musicali* of 1588, goes even further, making it clear that there is a difference between the two kinds of repertory—written song and improvised song. According to Zarlino, the extremes of rhetorical practices are to be applied only when performing in the improvised style, but they can only be used in moderation when singing composed songs. It is interesting too that he makes a clear distinction between “a singer when singing,” and “a singer when reciting.”³⁵

“Therefore, just as it is allowed that in reciting, according to the material that he draws upon, an Orator sometimes does not just speak, but when he would wish to convey fear and terror he explains his concept with a loud and horrible voice, yelling and exclaiming; and when he wishes to provoke commiseration [he speaks] with a subdued and lowered voice. Thus is it not inappropriate to a musician to use similar devices—high and low, now loud and now subdued, when reciting his compositions? Our scholars perhaps would say, that it is one thing to sing and another to orate or to harangue, and that it is not good for a Musician when singing to adopt these devices that an Orator uses in his Orations. Very well, I too have said as much above: I do not say that a singer while singing should yell or roar, because such a thing would have neither proportion nor dignity, but I say that it is allowed to him [when he functions] as a reciter, in that case

Tomasi (Trento: Comune di Trento, 1996), 9-19; and Imogene Horsley, “Improvisation, II Western Art Music,” in *The New Grove Dictionary* (London: MacMillan, Publishers, 1980), XII:99.

Nicola Vicentino, *L'antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica*, 1555. “La esperienza, dell’Oratore l’insegna, che si vede il modo che tiene nell’Oratione, che hora dice forte, & hora piano, & più tardo, & più presto, e con questo muove assai gl’oditori, & questo modo di muovere la misura, fà effetto assai nell’animo, & per tal ragione si canterà la Musica alla mente per imitar gli accenti, & efetti delle parti dell’oratione, & che effetto faria l’Oratore cherecitate una bella oratione senza l’ordine de i suoi accenti, & pronuntie, & moti veloci, & tardi, & con il dir piano & forte quello non muoveria gl’oditori. Il simile dè essere nella Musica. perche se l’oratore muove gli oditori con gl’ordini sopradetti, quanto maggiormente la Musica recitata con i medesimi ordini accompagnati dall’Armonia, ben unita, farà molto più effetto.” Translation mine.

³⁵ The difficulty of finding a word that correctly describes the oratorical-based singing style has caused enormous amounts of confusion, usually resulting in the erroneous translation of the Italian word *recitare* as “recite”—speak. Instead, it should be translated in some way to reflect that it is a chant-like musical rendering, later adopted in operatic performance as “recitativo.” See discussion of this point in Timothy J. McGee, “Dinner Music for the Florentine Signoria 1350-1450,” *Speculum* 74 (1999): 95-114, at 96-8.

whatever is allowed to a reciter of Tragedy and Comedy...thus if the reciter is permitted these things for the enjoyment of his listeners, so must the singer be allowed to use some of them in singing.”³⁶

What is being discussed by both writers is the insertion of dramatic elements into an oration in order to underline the emotion of the text—that is, its affect—and that the singer should choose from these same techniques for the same purpose; exactly what Caccini was describing in his statement about understanding affect and variety of affect.³⁷ Zarlino’s distinction between the *recitativo* style of delivery and the *cantare* style is instructive from a number of points of view. It tells us that a dramatic singing style was well established prior to any sixteenth-century importation from Rome and Naples; that it was closely related to the dramatic style of orators; and that well before Caccini and the southern dramatic style traveled north, there was already a clear distinction between a “singing” style and a more dramatic “reciting” style, although the writers agree that “singing” should include in moderation some of the dramatic ingredients of the other.³⁸ That these dramatic, oratorical elements were present in the Roman reciting style in the late fifteenth century is recorded in a 1489 letter from Angelo Poliziano to Pico della Mirandola, describing a performance by Fabio Orsini at his father’s palace in Rome:

“He filled our ears, or rather our hearts, with a voice so sweet that...I was almost transported out of my senses... His voice was not entirely that of someone reading, nor entirely that of someone singing: both could be heard, and yet neither

³⁶ Gioseffo Zarlino, *Sopplimenti Musicali*, Venice, 1588. “Percioche si come all’Oratore, nel recitar è concesso, secondo le materie che tratta tallora, non dirò palare; ma con alta voce & horribile, gridando & esclamando, esprimere il suo concetto; & questo quando parla di cose, con lequali egli voglia indur spavento & terrore; & tallor con voce sommessa & bassa; quando vuole indur commiseratione, cosi non è cosa disconvenevole al Musico, d’usar simili atgtioni, nell’acuto & nel grave, hora con voce alta, & hora con voce sommessa, recitando le sue Compositioni. Dirrano forse questi nostri Sapiienti, ch’altra cosa è il Cantare & altra è l’Orare ò Ringare, & che non stà bene al Musico nel cantare, ch’ei usi quei modi, che usa l’Oratore nella sua sua Oratione: Stà bene; questo hò detto anch’io di sopra; onde non dico, che’l Cantore cantando debba ne gridare, ne far strepito: percioche non è cosa habbia ne proportione, ne decoro; ma dico che à lui è concesso, come recitatore in quell’atto, quello che si concede à i Recitatori delle Tragedie & Comedie: ...cosi se questo si permette al Recitante per il comodo de gli Ascoltanti; si permetterà anco al Cantore alcune attioni nel Cantare.” Translation mine.

³⁷ A comparison of musical performance with oration also appears as Count Bardi’s part of the dialogue in what Claude Palisca considered to be the most influential music treatise of the period, see Vincenzo Galilei, *Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music*, trans. Claude V. Palisca (New Haven: Yale 2003), 350-1. Michael Praetorius also discusses the Italian singing style in terms of oration, and continues on to cite the publications of Giulio Caccini and Giovanni Battista Bovicelli; see the quote in MacClintock, *Readings*, 163-70.

³⁸ Mersenne, in his *Harmonie universelle*, also associates the dramatic style of singing with oration. See translation in MacClintock, *Readings*, 163-70.

separated one from the other; it was, in any case, even or modulated, and changed as required by the passage. Now it was varied, now sustained, now exalted and now restrained, now calm and now vehement, now slowing down and now quickening its pace, but always it was precise, always clear and always pleasant; and his gestures were not indifferent or sluggish, but not posturing or affected either.”³⁹

Given the long history and widespread popularity of the *cantare all'improvviso* tradition and its relationship to oration techniques, it can be seen that a model for dramatic singing performance had long been established throughout Italy. Its continuing popularity into the seventeenth century can be seen in the duel between Francesca Caccini and Adriana Basile who were improvising music to poetry, and although Adriana was judged to have the superior voice, it was Francesca who was better at representing the particular affects of the poem.

Since we are aware of the steady exchange of singers among the most prominent northern courts and both Rome and Naples, we might wonder what really was Caccini's claim to performance fame; what was it that he incorporated into his performances that garnered so much praise for himself and his students.⁴⁰ Throughout much of this discussion I have treated Caccini's style and the Neapolitan/Roman recitative style as more or less the same, but this certainly was not entirely true. While the basic dramatic elements appear to have been the same, Caccini undoubtedly developed a very singular style which was different enough from the southern tradition that in 1607 two of Cardinal Montalto's singers, Ipolita Recupito and Melchior Palontrotti, were sent from Rome to Florence for three months to study the recitative style with Caccini.⁴¹ Apparently what they wanted to learn was neither a part of their previous training nor available in Rome at the time. And if we recall that Caccini also was credited with teaching Vittoria Archilei as well as other prominent Roman-trained singers, it is clear that his style must have differed from the southern monodic style in significant details.⁴²

If we take our cue from Caccini's publications, two elements seem to be emphasized;

³⁹ Nino Pirrotta and Elena Povoledo, *Li due Orfei: da Poliziano a Monteverdi* (Torino: Edizioni RAI, 1969), 46; English translation by Karen Hales, *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 36. I am indebted to Allan Atlas for passing on this reference.

⁴⁰ See Tim Carter's question as to "the extent to which Caccini's style departs from established practice." in "On the Composition and Performance of Caccini's *Le nuove musiche* (1602)," *Early Music* 12, (1984): 209; reprinted in Carter, *Monteverdi and his Contemporaries*, Variorum collected studies series (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000).

⁴¹ See Tim Carter, "A Florentine Wedding of 1608," *Acta musicologica* 55 (1983): 101.

⁴² Although it would not seem to be a factor with reference to the singers named here, John Walter Hill points out that many of the Roman singers trained in the monodic style could not read music, whereas those who could read, were trained in the polyphonic tradition, "Training a Singer for *Musica Recitativa* in Early Seventeenth-Century Italy: the Case of Baldassare," *Musilogia humana: Studies in honor of Warren and Ursula Kirkendale*, eds. Siegfried Gmeinwieser, David Hiley and Jörg Riedlbaur (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1994), 345-57.

first of all, there are the written-out irregular rhythmic patterns: the jagged, stuttering, emotional rhythms that he directs the singers to execute exactly as written and which, if coupled with appropriate oratorical devices, would have a very dramatic effect. And the second element is *sprezzatura*, described as sudden activity, a basic element in oratorical delivery that also was present in the *cantare all'improvviso* tradition, and which Caccini claims to have adopted into his performances. In fact, Giustiniani tells us this in his *Discorso* when he describes the style used in Roman representations as “recitative,” and credits Caccini as one of the singers who “were almost the inventors of the style.”⁴³ Caccini’s style can be described as one based on the dramatic monodic style of Naples and Rome, combined with other recitative elements present in the *cantare all'improvviso* tradition and the dramatic devices present in rhetorical oration. From all accounts, it must have been a highly ornate and emotional delivery.

At the end of the sixteenth century, therefore, there were two separate styles of ornamentation, which I would like to refer to as *passaggi* and dramatic delivery. *Passaggi*, which also included graces, was practiced in what the theorists referred to as the “singing” style, meaning music I described earlier as “regular” in its construction. The dramatic style was practiced in monody where the irregular pace and construction would allow application of some of the techniques of oration. To complicate matters, the monodic, dramatic style also included *passaggi* and graces, and there is evidence that some of the elements of the dramatic style were transferred to the “singing” style as well, including ensemble performance.

As for how the two styles of ornamentation were learned, we have direct statements that both could be learned without a teacher: the *passaggi* instruction manuals claim that all that the singers and instrumentalists needed to do was to methodically practice and memorize the riffs, which could then be transferred to anything they were performing, and although they didn’t give similar exercises for learning graces, those ornaments were described very generally in prose and said to be easily inserted. And of course we have Caccini’s statement that by merely obeying exactly what he had written in his two publications and recalling oration techniques, a singer would have everything necessary to reproduce that style. Of his “three essential elements” for graceful performance, affect, and variety of affect probably could be adopted from a knowledge of oratorical practices, but there is no mention of how anyone could learn *sprezzatura*.

There is substantial reason for us to seriously doubt some of the printed claims about learning ornamentation without a teacher—especially with reference to Caccini’s style. Given the non-specific nature of the *passaggi*-type ornamentation, it is definitely possible that instrumentalists could have learned quite a bit from the manuals; it is probable that the memorized riff approach was exactly what would have been learned from a teacher. But however easy this might have been for instrumentalists, it is clear that not all singers were capable of spontaneously inventing their own ornamentation. Even the highly praised and highly talented members of the *concerto delle donne* of Ferrara who sang from memory, had all of their

⁴³ Giustiniani, *Discorso*, trans. MacClintock, 77.

ornaments written out, a fact reported in a 1584 letter from Alessandro Striggio.⁴⁴ (Presumably these were mostly *passaggi*-type, although they undoubtedly also included some of the new dramatic ornaments that they had learned from Caccini's first visit a few months earlier.) This is supported by the quote above from Giustiniani that Luzzaschi and Wert were writing out ornaments for the *donne* in both Ferrara and Mantua. And as positive as were some of the authors of the various manuals as to the ease of learning ornamentation from their publications, even Marin Mersenne, while promoting his book as a source of learning ornamentation, admitted that the *trillo* could not be learned without a teacher.⁴⁵

There is no doubt that for singers certain elements could be transferred from rhetoric, and that the ubiquitous examples of the *cantare all'improvviso* singers in the piazzas would also have provided models for the irregularity of recitative delivery. But it would certainly seem unrealistic to think that one could develop an understanding of how to transfer these rhetorical models to a specific song without a long period of training with an expert teacher. It would even have been possible for a singer to independently learn the individual dramatic techniques associated with this kind of delivery as well as the other vocal ornaments, but to associate the many vocal nuances correctly with the appropriate oratorical gesture in recitative ornamentation would have taken long hours of study and direct contact with someone who knew how to apply them.⁴⁶ I am inclined to agree with the statement of Cesare Marotta, composer for Cardinal Montalto and husband of singer Ippolita Recupito, who explained in a letter of 1614 that the reason he taught singing by rote was that there were too many elements of the monodic style that could not be notated.⁴⁷

There is evidence that instrumentalists also ornamented in the dramatic style. Francesco Rognoni, in his manual of 1620, advocates that instrumentalists adopt Caccini's techniques in their solo playing,⁴⁸ although exactly how this was done is difficult to understand since Caccini's ornamentations were intended to be direct expressions of the text. Nevertheless, there are extant examples of instrumental ornamentations from the early seventeenth century that would appear to include some of the dramatic gestures discussed above: irregular and jagged rhythms; sudden bursts of movement that just as suddenly cease; a style quite different from the continuous-

⁴⁴ Alessandro Striggio in a letter of 29 July 1584. ASF: Mediceo 768, fol. 44. Published in Newcomb, *The Madrigal* as document 57 and translated on p. 54.

⁴⁵ Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle*, translated in MacClintock, *Readings*, 170.

⁴⁶ On the subject of rhetorical gestures in English lute songs and their performance see Robert Toft, *Tune Thy Musicke To Thy Hart* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

⁴⁷ The letter is reproduced and discussed in Hill, *Monody*, 128-9.

⁴⁸ See Stewart Carter, "Francesco Rognoni's *Selva di varii passaggi* (1620): Fresh Details Concerning Early Baroque Vocal Ornamentation," *Performance Practice Review* 2 (1989): 5-33.

motion *passaggi*.⁴⁹

As the various anecdotal accounts have pointed out, and in direct contradiction of published claims, at the end of the sixteenth century the most common method of learning ornamentation would seem to have been contact with an expert teacher. This was especially true for singers, including even those who were professionals, could read music, and who also played instruments. It is not difficult to understand why this was so for the dramatic monodic style with its complex text-related affects, but surprisingly, it would also seem to have been true for the *passaggi*-type ornaments. Singers were far more reliant than instrumentalists on external assistance for all types of ornamentation. For instrumentalists the situation appears to have been somewhat different, with self-instruction by way of published manuals playing a much larger role, perhaps because of the predominance of the *passaggi* style in instrumental ornamentation.

Throughout the sixteenth century and on into the seventeenth, writers continued to criticize the excessive use of both styles of ornamentation, complaining bitterly about the meaningless *passaggi* that obscured the melody and/or text, as well as the distraction of overly dramatic delivery, but the argument was always about quantity; the basic idea of the importance of ornamentation remained intact. A singer or instrumentalist who wished to receive the admiration of the audience knew that one way or another, expertise in ornamentation had to be learned. For the majority of them that meant finding an expert teacher.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Comparative examples of these can be found in Richard Erig, with Vironika Gutmann, *Italian Diminutions* (Zurich: Amadeus Press, 1979).

⁵⁰ A version of this paper was read at the conference Pedagogy of the Renaissance at Johns Hopkins University in June 2005.