



Invited lecture/Review

Monteverdi and Seconda Pratica: Music Should be at the Service of the Word

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Abstract:

This article provides insight into the music of the late Renaissance and early Baroque in Italy. Composer Claudio Monteverdi was one of the most important figures in the music of the early Italian Baroque. We consider the events that led to the creation of the new early Baroque style – Seconda pratica - (second practice) and describe the significant changes in vocal music that took place with the aim to depart from strict counterpoint at the turn of the 16th century.

Keywords: Claudio Monteverdi; Seconda pratica; Venetian school; Madrigalisms; Ornamentation

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1. Introduction

The Early Baroque period, which overlaps with the late Renaissance, is a period in which ancient Greek literature, philosophy and ideals revived throughout Europe. Empirical science was also developing and reaching its peak. In music, this was reflected in experimentation with new approaches to composition. This led to a number of treatises and reflections on the "new music". In 16th-century Italy, there were two leading schools of composition: the Roman School and the Venetian School.

1.1. Roman School

"The Roman School was founded at the Council of Trent, which set new directions in art and reformed music. In 1545, the Council of Trent, Italy, the Catholic Church adopted its position on the Reformation that was sweeping Europe at the time. All areas of the Church were discussed, including music. It was considered necessary to correct all the anomalies in the musical heritage that had accumulated over the last three centuries, such as the use of secular melodies, instruments, women's voices and virtuoso improvisations." (Reese, 1954) The main characteristics of the Roman school are: strictly ecclesiastical style, use of Gregorian chant and conservatism reflected in the equality of voices. Any excessive ornamentation was rejected, the texts should have been intelligible, homophonic declamation, no emotionality or drama in music, and the use of instruments in church and music was forbidden. It is a fusion of the Dutch school of composition with Italian melodicism, and it adopts a *semplice* style. Despite its conservative style, the Roman School represents the height of vocal polyphony. The main forms were the mass and the motet. An important representative of the Roman school is Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, who cultivated the strict homophony of the contrapuntal style using imitation.

1.2. Venetian School

Venice, once Italy's most important trading city, has played an undisputed leading role in European history since the 10th century. It flourished in the 15th and 16th centuries. Their contribution to Italian humanism and to Renaissance art is extremely important. The Venetian school of composition is the complete opposite of the Roman school. The main characteristic of the Venetian school is the polyphony (Italian: *Cori spezzati*), the practice of performing a polyphonic composition with choirs separated in space. This technique is not new, but it nevertheless reached its peak in Renaissance Venice, with the architecture of St Mark's playing a particular role. High-impact effects were sought, which most often resulted in effective colour effects. In vocal compositions natural accentuation of words, chromaticism as a "colouring" effect and virtuoso improvisation were used. Instruments were often associated with the singing, and for the first time the prescription of a specific instrument can be found, being a characteristic of the later Baroque. The Venetian school contributed to the independence of instrumental music, the development of monody, and consequently to the development of opera. The culmination of the work of this school is represented by the composers Andrea Gabrieli (1510-1586) and his nephew Giovanni Gabrieli (1557-1613), who is considered to be the greatest representative of the Venetian school in the period of classical polyphony. Giovanni Gabrieli sought his musical expression in the colourfulness of the harmony and in the search for new sonorities in relation to the instruments. Giovanni Gabrieli is, so to speak, the herald of the early Baroque, in which Giovanni's musical tradition is summed up by Claudio Monteverdi.

2. Claudio Monteverdi

Claudio Monteverdi was born in Cremona in 1567, the first-born son of Baldassare Monteverdi (1542-1617) and Magdalena Zignani, his mother. Monteverdi's name appears in the baptismal register under the date 15 May 1567. It is known that he received his first musical training, which included studies in composition, singing and playing the viola, under the tutelage of Marcantonio Ingegneri. He soon revealed his exceptional musical abilities when he published his first collection *Sacrae cantionum a tre voci* when he was only 15 years old. His most important works are operas *L'Orfeo* (1607), *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, Nine books of Madrigals, *Vespro della Beata Vergine*, and others. Claudio Monteverdi called his own style "*Seconda pratica*". It is characterised above all by a strong

expressiveness, which is strongly linked to the text. He used the term to distinguish himself from the rigid rules of counterpoint dictated by *Prima pratica*. Although he acknowledged the *Prima pratica*, he remained faithful to his own style and adhered to the principle: "Music should be at the service of the word". The first and guiding idea is the word, which begins to acquire a superior position over music. The meanings of the words dictate the music and thus the harmony. Composers began to use dissonance in ways that do not conform to the rules of counterpoint: preparation, performance, resolution. Their intention was to use unprepared dissonances to achieve the effect of colouring the words, which thus took on a completely different dramatic quality. "Linked to the theory of affects (*affetti*), this can be considered the first form of rhetoric to be adopted in the history of music. Its aim was to "mouvere gli affetti" - to move (the emotions of) the listener. The ancient Greeks were already aware of the ability of the art of sounds (*arte dei suoni*) to influence the emotions, so theorists and musicians began to use them in their music." (Tarling, 2004)

3. Madrigalisms

The end of the Renaissance is marked by a refined and extravagant style called Mannerism. It appeared simultaneously in music, painting, sculpture and literature. Mannerist painters no longer used regular shapes, pure and clear colours, or a linear representation of space in their works, as was typical of Renaissance painting, but their figures are elongated, twisted, as if caught in some inner cry. If we look for example at the pictures of Michelangelo Caravaggio: *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, or *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, we can clearly see the characteristics of Mannerist painting. "The play with colours and shadows, the menacing faces, the introvertedness, the seriousness. Music bears the main characteristics of Mannerist painting too. Mannerism was manifested in music through the effects that composers used to emphasise their own feelings, the atmosphere of a piece. These effects are called madrigalisms (**Figure 1**) because they come from the modern expressive madrigal." (Busettini, 2015). Chromatic progressions, unprepared dissonance, ornaments, sudden pauses, harmonic contrasts and tempo changes were used to illustrate the lyrics. They served as means of expression and had the aim to move the listener (*muovere l'affetto del'animo*). Ornaments served as expressive devices, colouring the words and giving them a certain accent, an emphasis. Composers did not always write them down in musical notation, as they were part of free improvisation.

3.1. Interval of diminished quart

Diminished quart (**Figure 1A**) is an interval whose use has been prohibited in strict counterpoint. Composers love it and often use it to emphasise important passages that express deep restlessness. It is often used in isolation for this very reason. It is used in pieces with a slow character to emphasise bitterness and pain. The example (**Figure 1A**) is from Act 2 of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. Here Orfeo learns that his beloved Eurydice has died and now mourns her death. Monteverdi condenses all Orfeo's pain by jumping down of the interval of diminished quart on the very important words "Tu se' morta" - You are dead (my life, and I live?) And he emphasises the pain once more with a semitone movement.

3.2. Descending semitone

In affect theory, the descending semitone (**Figure 1B**) is used to represent a sigh, a sob. Composers have used this effect to emphasize the drama of the text, the moment. In the aria "Messaggiera" from *Orfeo*, Monteverdi used the falling semitone on the word "sospiro"-meaning sigh-and added a dramatic note by using an eighth-note pause followed by another semitone progression.

3.3. Trillo

Ornaments served as expressive devices, colouring the words and giving them a certain accent, an emphasis. Usually, composers did not always write them down in musical notation, as they were part of free improvisation. Unlike instrumental music, the term *trillo* in 17th-century vocal music referred to the rapid repetition of the same note (**Figure 1C**).

Figure 1. Madrigalisms. A: diminished quart, B: descending semitone, C: trillo, D: groppo, E: ribattuta di gola, F: cascata, G: tirata.

3.4. Groppo

The groppo or gruppo (Figure 1D) is our modern trillo, used at the end of long phrases or cadences. It consists of an alternation between the downbeat and the main note and is started gradually. In vocal music, the "groppo" or "gruppo" is what we understand today as a trill. It consists of a second of alternating motion. It is performed gradually at first and then continues at an accelerated speed, most often ending in a decomposition. Trills are most often used at the end of pieces on cadenzas or as an intermediate figure during the piece itself.

3.5. Ribattuta di gola

Ribattuta di gola is a vocal ornament also found in literature for keyboard instruments. It is mainly created for doing *accelerando*, as it consists of an initial slow dotted movement (on the interval of a second) which gradually increases. Often the ribattuta results in a trill (Figure 1E).

3.6. Cascata

A cascata (Figure 1F) is an ornament characterised by a rapidly descending movement. Most often this fast passage consists of 16 notes. Giullio Caccini also calls it a "caduta" and in "Le nuove Musiche" he describes four types of "cascata".

3.7. Tirata

While the Renaissance style provided few leaps incorporated in lines of gradual movement, in the Baroque period the melodic leap gave emphasis to the notes that follow. This affect, which comes from the modern vocal madrigal, was a device for emphasising the text at a particular point with a stronger and more sonorous voice; as a contrast, it was usually followed by a softer and gentler passage (Figure 1G).



7. Conclusions

Claudio Monteverdi was one of the most important figures in the music of the early Italian Baroque. Vocal music in the 17th century dictated the way in which instrumental compositions were written and performed. The *Seconda prattica* and the parallel development of monody had a direct influence on the creation of instrumental music.

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