

Performing Choral Music from the Renaissance

**A practical look at ways to make the performance of
choral music from the Renaissance both authentic and fulfilling.**

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RATIONALE FOR PERFORMING RENAISSANCE MUSIC

- The music is part of our choral heritage as an historical musical experience
- It is a body of literature accessible and affordable to many age and ability levels
- There are only 5 sacred vowels for unifying sound.

International Phonetic Alphabetical [IPA]

a = [a]

e = [ɛ]

i = [i]

o = [ɔ]

u = [u]

- It is a perfect vehicle for teaching musical independence
- It is far removed from the over-sentimentality of later music, particularly today's music

TEXT is the most important element of the music

- Text immediately communicates to the listeners
- Provides a linear and storytelling nature to the music
- Often incorporates Word Painting
- Counterpoint uses new materials to match the old for reinforcing text
- Phrases are derived from lines of text
- The music takes its form from the divisions of the text
- Proper word and syllable stress controls the rhythmic flow
- The natural rhythm of the text was respected and descriptive words were made more explicit by their musical treatment.

MELODY

- Often based on Gregorian Chant
- Each part is equally important - no dominating parts
- Stepwise motion abounds
- Ranges were often limited
- Phrasing is irregular
- Dramatic words are often emphasized
- Dissonant and altered tones may be leaned on for their fullest effect

TEXTURE

- Independence of voices result in a beautiful, blended, balanced whole
- Points of imitation
- Homophony was important
- The vertical harmony is a result of the horizontal

RHYTHM and TEMPO

- Everything is editorial - no tempos indicated
- Tactus was between 50 - 80 bpm
- Bar lines did not exist
- The music is put together in arches, with cadences as points of repose and regathering of energy.
- There are 3 types of musical stress accentuation: Syllabic, Agogic, Tonic
- Most music can be grouped into rhythmic 2s and 3s
- Syncopation is inherent in the independent lines
- The inflection of the text is dominant
- Tempus Perfectum v Tempus Imperfectum

Finding the tempo

1. What is the pulse note or tactus?
2. What is the smallest division of the beat?
3. Consider the text - joyous? Sad?
4. What are the acoustics of the performance space?

TONE AND TIMBRE

- Males only
- Purity of tone in sacred music is a necessity
- Compatibility of tone between voices is required
- Vibrato-less sound to match the boy sopranos
- Voice Types were different than today

DYNAMICS

- No dynamics indicated
- Most performances likely did not use extreme dynamics: pp - f
- Avoid excessive crescendo and diminuendo - long notes either intensify or decay within a dynamic
- Steady sound - more voices = more sound
- Dynamics may be used to heighten dramatic contrasts

INSTRUMENTATION

- **a cappella** (Notice the Correct Spelling!!!) specifically referred to the Sistine Chapel
- Instruments: recorders, viols, lutes, cornetti, sackbuts, shawms, flutes, drums, and bells
- Possible mix: S - Recorder or Flute; A - Viola; T - Oboe; B - Cello; Keyboard

PERFORMING EDITIONS

- Are the modernizations clearly noted (meter, note values, pitch)?
- Are the editorial marks clearly noted?
- Does the text work with the score?
- Can you compare it with an original?
- Does it give a translation?
- Is it overly edited?

SACRED	SECULAR
Liturgical	Everyday
Larger choir	One per part
Men and boys	Men and women
Functional	Non-functional, for wealthy
Benefit of the service	Benefit of the singers (entertainment)
Evenness of tone and phrasing	Lilting with variety
Smooth lines	Dance rhythms
Constant mood within work, or at least sections	Rapid changes of mood possible
Imitation abounds	Imitation not as common
Rhythm less important	Rhythm more important
Meaning of text rarely used for internal interpretation	Start with the meaning of the text
Traditional harmony	Bold harmonic expressiveness
Through composed	Repetitious/strophic
Word stress and accent	Word meaning important
Extreme legato	Articulation

REHEARSAL STRATEGIES

- Start with the meaning of the text
- Determine word stress
- Identify and rehearse cadences first
- Learn pitches first without the text
- Short rehearsal segments are preferable to longer segments
- Rehearse in Circles

CONDUCTING RENAISSANCE MUSIC

- Little conducting is necessary
- Each new line is a continuation, building upon music that came before
 - The music must change with each new line
- Discover the linear flow of each line of text in each part
- Tactus = Touch
- Common pulse, but highlight syncopations against the pulse
- Meter is what we think, Pulse (tactus) is what we feel
- Things want to group into 2s and 3s

5 PRINCIPLES OF MAKING RENAISSANCE MUSIC (Gerald Custer)

1. Textual Primacy!
2. Independent Linearity - avoid downbeats - motion is always forward except at the cadence
3. Embrace contrast
4. Arsis et thesis (anacrusis and crucis) - gathering and releasing energy (dance - raising the foot, lowering the foot)
5. Cadential inevitability - goal oriented

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