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.

Buddy James, presenter
2012 ACDA-CA Summer Conference
ECCO Conference Center

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 Alphabetic [IPA]
    
    \[
    \begin{align*}
    a &= [a] \\
    e &= [ɛ] \\
    i &= [i] \\
    o &= [ɔ] \\
    u &= [u] 
    \end{align*}
    \]

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

**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

Buddy James, DMA

Director, Vocal and Choral Activities
California State University East Bay www.csueastbay.edu/music

Past-President and Founding Officer
National Collegiate Choral Organization www.ncco-usa.org

510.885.3128 (o) Buddy.James@csueastbay.edu