Performance Practice: The Key to Understanding the Renaissance Style

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During the past 40 years, musicologists and choral scholars have discovered and published a vast amount of information pertinent to the performance of Renaissance, and other pre-1750 early music. Performing ensembles specializing in this repertoire have become part of the musical mainstream, and although not every group aspires to produce authentic or historically accurate performances of this repertoire, most performers no longer view Renaissance music solely through the prism of the 19th century. Now more than ever, performers are cognizant of, and often strive to emulate, the performance practice, style, and tone color of Renaissance music.

Unfortunately, established performance traditions are difficult to change. Further, the perception still exists that historical research into performance practice is only pertinent to specialized ensembles, and is not applicable to the typical college/university, community, school or church choir. As I hope to demonstrate below, this is simply not true.

Although the study of musical performance is commonly referred to as "performance practice," the plural, *performance practices*, more accurately describes the variety of contexts and conditions under which vocal music was composed and performed during the period from ca.1430 to 1600. While

scholars have enumerated some general stylistic similarities in the music of the time – enough to call this 170 year time span a historical style period – the exact nature of performances during this era depended on a variety of factors including the type of music (sacred or secular – liturgical or non-liturgical), context (church or court – inside or outside) and geography, among others. Unless one is performing the specific repertoire, of a specific time period, of a specific place, scholars and performers can do no more than connect the historical and geographical dots and reveal some general trends that influenced the music composed and performed during this period. There is no such thing as Renaissance performance practice, but, rather, a multitude of performance traditions that share several commonalities.

Rather than providing a restrictive set of rules for performers, research has the potential to inspire the modern performer to explore and experiment with the rich and varied performance practices of the Renaissance. There will always be a place for liturgical reconstructions and performances by *collegium musica* or period-instrument ensembles. Directors of non-specialized ensembles, however, should not let the fear of "performing incorrectly" keep them from performing Renaissance music. Performance practice research can both illuminate stylistic aspects of the music and provide practical guidelines for performance that can be utilized by *any* choral ensemble.

Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie's *Performance Practice: Music Before 1600* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1989) is an excellent resource for the student of performance practice. In the introductory chapter to the section on Renaissance music, Brown eloquently discusses the many issues that surround the performance of an early vocal or instrumental work. Brown states that "[m]usicians have to make a number of fundamental decisions before they can offer a convincing performance of whatever 15th– or 16th-century composition they

choose to play or sing, regardless of whether they use a modern edition, a manuscript or printed book from the Renaissance, or a facsimile or pseudo-facsimile of such a source" (p. 147). Brown considers several of these issues – text underlay, *musica ficta*, type (voices or instruments) and number of voices per part, ornamentation, tempo and proportion, pitch, articulation and vibrato – that informed performers must address prior to performance.

According to Brown, a division of duties and responsibilities exists between the scholar and the performer. The scholar of performance practice, for example, determines how performance issues were resolved at the time the music was written, while the modern performer decides if the solutions proposed by the scholars are practical, and if they can (or should) be applied today to contemporary performances. In other words, the modern scholar, or the editor of early choral music, is expected to routinely make interpretive decisions that during the Renaissance were made by the performer.

My first suggestion to the modern choir director, therefore, is to find a reliable and authoritative edition of the music selected for performance, or to create your own edition. A trustworthy editor will always clearly delineate between the original material and any editorial alterations. Furthermore, a good editor will always cite the manuscript sources that were used in creating the edition, and will explain the editorial methods and procedures. Lastly, the editor will provide original note values, mensuration, pitch, and clefs – often in an *incipit* measure at the beginning of the piece. When preparing a piece for performance, performers should consult a variety of editions if available, including a composer's collected works. In short, a competent editor of choral music can authoritatively resolve most of the issues pertinent to the musical text, objective elements like pitches, durations, tempo, and proportion.

In several cases – most notably *musica ficta* and

ornamentation, scholars, through necessity, now notate elements of the music that were improvised extemporaneously by performers during the Renaissance. Unless the modern performer is able to read mensural notation and understands the parameters that govern ornamentation or *musica ficta,* the work of the scholar is essential in order to decipher the notation and guide the interpretation of the musical text. While some may argue that notating ornamentation or *ficta* negates its essential characteristic – the fact that it was improvised – performing notated ornaments and *ficta* is preferable to omitting these important aspects of the performance.

An equal partner to the musical text and one that is often overlooked by performers is knowledge of musical context. When the performance conditions of Renaissance choral music are investigated, we find that Renaissance composer/performers are very similar to their modern counterparts: *us*. Always practical, the Renaissance composer was impacted most by the financial resources provided by the church or court that employed them. Extravagant occasions at wealthy courts allowed composers to produce extravagant music. Likewise, composers at small parish churches or less affluent courts composed music appropriate to their context. Every piece of music served a specific and unique function, be it liturgy, ceremony, or amusement.

The type and number of voices that participated in a performance of Renaissance music is perhaps the most hotly debated and widely discussed topic related to performance practice. Unlike modern performers who are trained to meet the demands of the repertoire, Renaissance composers wrote music that, at least initially, corresponded to fit make-up and limitations of their ensembles. While knowing the number and gender of singers employed by the Sistine Chapel, and the fact that no organ was present in the Chapel, for example, may reveal information regarding the tone color of the ensemble,

simply replicating the number of singers will not necessarily result in an “ideal” performance of a Palestrina motet. Likewise, composers who had access to instruments often doubled voices *colla parte* with instruments to add color, but oftentimes, simply to reinforce a part. Modern performers, therefore, would be better served working to achieve the proper balance between the parts, modifying the vibrato rate of the singers, and insuring the proper articulation, rather than slavishly following a roster of singers and instrumentalists. In sum, if the modern performer is guided by practicality, they can achieve and communicate the appropriate style of Renaissance music regardless of the size of the ensemble. The performance practice informs the style, which, in turn, enlivens the performance.

The advances in, and accessibility of, research in the performing practices of the Renaissance and other historical periods have enabled choral directors and choirs to explore the varied textures and timbres representative of each particular style period. Where it was previously accepted that choirs cultivated a signature sound, and imposed the sound on to the repertoire, choral directors are now encouraged to train their singers to perform choral music from various historical periods with stylistic integrity. Although old performance traditions die hard, and style-appropriate choral performance is far from being universally accepted, if we can accept the premise that each period of choral music has its own unique sounds, the trend towards stylistically-informed choral performance has the potential to energize and invigorate the choral profession.

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