

Scintillating baroque..



.. Serious **fun**



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Action! Action! Action!

Vox Dicentis, Musica Instrumentalis: Words outwith Song

The great variety of vocal sounds encountered today in Classical Music, rock, jazz & rap, commercial World Music & academic ethnomusicology should open our minds to possibilities for historical voice-productions outside the comfort zone of the modern Early Music scene. Written sources make it abundantly clear that the training and priorities of historical singers were utterly different from the experience of today's collegiate choristers or conservatoire graduates. Neither Kings College Cambridge nor Cecilia Bartoli offer a convincing model for the singing of the Three Tenors of the *seicento*, Caccini, Peri and Rasi.¹

Historical sources concentrate on more interesting topics than the modern obsession with the subject of vibrato. Caccini's (1601) Platonic priorities are inspiring - *la favella, e'l rithmo, & il suono per ultimo, e non per lo contrario*². These priorities structured our investigations of "Text, Rhythm, Action!" over the past three years, as we experimented with new training methods and rehearsal methodology for advanced students and international professionals.

Peri (1600) shows that even within the sound-world of his time, the new style of dramatic music required a new approach, new modes of thought, whatever the current habits of vocal production. His analysis focuses on spoken declamation, a comparison made even more strongly in the anonymous guide for a music-theatre's artistic director, *Il Corago* (c1630). Links between spoken and sung declamation also emerges in musical settings of Shakespeare texts, considered here alongside Hamlet's advice on how to 'speak the speech'.

Singers were advised to imitate actors. In the contrary direction, period treatises advise instrumentalists to imitate singers. Technical details of instrumental playing therefore offer insights into the vocal approach that was to be imitated. Indeed, historical priorities for instrumentalists strongly parallel Peri and Caccini's advice to singers.

The words sung by Rasi in Monteverdi's *Orfeo* make extravagant claims for the emotional effect singing could have on listeners, as well as exploring the psychological dangers for performers. Period commentary locates emotions in images, in the performer's involuntary physical responses, and in the audience's minds, in contrast to the 20th-century focus on sound, the performer's artistic choices, and performers' "expressivity".

We may never know what *seicento* singers sounded like. But we can be reasonably confident of how they were trained and of their priorities in performance: sound was the last thing on their minds. The highest priority was to move the passions of their audience. If emotions themselves can be the object of historically informed performance, the authentic priority is the audience's reception, not the singers' sound.

¹ All three were celebrated composers, as well as self-accompanying performers: Giulio Caccini *Le Nuove Musiche* (1601), Jacopo Peri *Le Varie Musiche* (1609) – they also published rival settings of Rinucini's libretto for *Euridice* (1600) – Francesco Razi *Vaghezze di Musica* (1608).

² Text, Rhythm & sound last of all, and not the other way around