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Catherine Webb '97
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Performance Practice: Issues of Authentic Performance

Catherine Webb

Since the turn of the twentieth century, there has been an increased interest in performing music as it was originally heard. Empirically speaking, this idea of an "authentic performance" refers to a performance that adheres as strictly as possible to the original intentions of the composer. As scholars in the field of performance practice have discovered, however, discerning what a composer had in mind for a given piece is virtually impossible. Even in twentieth-century music, with composers such as Gustav Mahler who left little room in a score for questions concerning interpretation, certain elements deter performances from being truly "authentic." Ensemble size, acoustical variance in performance settings, and the temperament of individual performers on a given day may contribute to a deviation from what the composer had in mind. If these difficulties arise when dealing with music from this century, the problems associated with establishing guidelines for authentic performance of Renaissance music must be even greater; this music dates from a time before printing became widespread, when there were no recordings on which to base an interpretation of a given piece, and when composers were generally part of the performing ensemble.

Authenticity, then, becomes a question of relativity rather than purity, making authentic performances possible only in a general sense. Through analysis of general performance techniques and performance settings of a musical era, one can gain a general idea of how pieces from that era should be performed in modern situations. Text underlay (the way in which text is set to music) and application of ***musica ficta*** (implied accidentals) as applied to Renaissance vocal music are examples of common issues associated with authentic performance.

The problem of setting text with music is not new to performers of this century. Performers of the fifteenth century also

dealt with the complexities of text underlay; the scribe copying the music would often place all of the text at the beginning of a musical phrase rather than setting each syllable to a corresponding note.[1] This practice occurred for several reasons, including economical ones (paper was not to be wasted),[2] but perhaps the most logical reason for this disregard of specific text setting is the lack of emphasis given the text during the fifteenth century. Composers probably did not consider the text as they wrote; the task of assigning any specific underlay was left to scribes. The earliest known theoretical discussion of how to set the text dates from the mid-fifteenth century and declares that "there is no logic in how to adjust words to a melody beyond [that in] the mind of him who has to notate it."[3] In other words, Renaissance scribes, as well as modern editors, were given a rather free rein when placing the text under the music.

There are several guidelines for modern performers to follow when attempting to set text to fifteenth-century music. These guidelines are based on treatises that actually originated in the sixteenth century, but can generally be applied to music of the fifteenth century as well. Giovanni Lanfranco (*Scintelle di musica,* 1533), Gioseffo Zarlino (*Le intitutione harmoniche,* 1558), and Gaspar Stoquerus (*De musica verbali libri duo*, c. 1570)[4] instructed both choirs and composers in the most effective ways to align text with music properly:[5]

1. Long notes receive long syllables; shorter notes should be grouped with longer ones and therefore should receive unaccented syllables.
2. The first note of a piece and the first note after a rest should receive a syllable.
3. The final note should receive the final syllable.
4. Ligatures receive only one syllable on the first note.

Although there are some exceptions to this rule, generally when the last note of a phrase is a member of a ligature, the final syllable is assigned to the first note of the ligature.

5. If there are more syllables than notes the notes must be subdivided.
6. Dotted notes generally should not be subdivided.
7. Repeated notes on the same pitch must receive individual syllables.
8. If there are many notes left at the end of a phrase, the last note is assigned to the last syllable, and the remainder are sung with the last unaccented syllable.
9. In passages with a long-short-long (♩.♪♩) rhythm, the short note does not receive a syllable, nor does the long note following it unless there are not enough notes to fit the text. In this case, all three notes are assigned syllables.

Still, it is extremely difficult to infer how fifteenth-century composers felt their texts should be set. Though applying the above guidelines retroactively may lead to a generally accurate performance of Renaissance literature, performers must be careful to consider variations in geographic location and varying conventions of Latin pronunciation throughout western Europe.[6] Every choir across the continent may have had a unique style of performance, and every composer had a different scribe with his own style of setting text. It is easy to see how a single "authentic" performance becomes nearly impossible, even with established guidelines.

The emergence of sixteenth-century composers such as Josquin Desprez and Adrian Willaert (Willaert was especially influential in the sixteenth-century circle of theorists; his opinions form

the basis for the three aforementioned treatises[7]) lead to a lessening of the ambiguous treatment of the text setting. Music of the so-called *ars perfecta* (literally meaning, "perfect art," this term refers to the compositional style common to the late 1400s) tended to be rhythmically and texturally unified, lending itself easily to greater textural clarity. Text underlay in early sixteenth-century music becomes much more specific, since composers and scribes were more direct in their notation of underlay. Consequently, modern editors are free to move beyond how the text was set and can examine how the text was reflected in the music using the common practices of *musica reservata*, a style of music that strived to display the meaning of the text within the melodic lines.

Another problem with performance practice of Renaissance music is the application of *musica ficta*. Editing music from this period requires an understanding of when and how accidentals were applied; unfortunately, the guidelines in this instance are more vague. Up through the end of the Renaissance era, it was not considered necessary to notate accidentals;[8] the assumption was that singers would apply *ficta* where necessary. Whether application of accidentals was completely at the discretion of the performers is unclear, but this possibility is supported by the fact that some accidentals were not notated. As with text underlay, every choir may well have had its own rules for the application of *ficta*. Once again, there are no simple solutions to the problem of how to resolve *ficta* for Renaissance performers or modern editors. In fact, Giovanni Spataro expressed his frustration with *ficta* and its applications in a letter to Pietro Aaron written in 1524:

> the musician or composer is obliged to indicate his intention, in order that the singer may not chance to do something that was never intended by the composer. . . . The

> singer is not to be expected, on first reading, to sing the proper notes in the places where this sign [♭] may occur, inasmuch as it may belong there, or may not belong there.[9]

Though there were no uniform rules for the application of accidentals, theorists have defined two basic reasons for applying *musica ficta*. The first general application of *ficta* is said to be *causa pulchritudinis* ("because of beauty"),[10] and is seen frequently with the emergence of cadence points in the late fifteenth century. The second, *causa necessitatis* (or "because of necessity"),[11] arose from the Renaissance concern for consonance and dissonance. *Ficta* was applied out of necessity to prevent *mi* and *fa* from sounding simultaneously, resulting in a diminished octave or fifth.[12] Unfortunately, even this avoidance of tritone cannot be thought of as gospel truth; Zarlino expressed his concern with nonharmonic cross-relations of imperfect octaves and fifths in the sixteenth century, implying that such dissonance was common practice during the late Renaissance.[13]

The complexities involved in unearthing performing techniques of just these two aspects of Renaissance vocal music are seemingly endless, and text underlay and *musica ficta* are only the surface of the issue. While the difficulties involved with this type of research might seem to outweigh the benefits of an authentic performance, they should not be viewed negatively. Instead, scholars and performers alike should view the field of performance practice as a way of transcending history. By coming as close as possible to the composer's original intent, modern performers may empathize with the performers of four hundred years ago. Modern musicians can better appreciate and respect the musicians of the past as we learn to play the lute or organ from tablature and sing works with contrasting mensuration or unwritten applications of *musica ficta*.

Empirical authenticity may not be possible with the amount of research that has been done thus far, but relative authenticity is an asset to modern performance of Renaissance music. Until genuinely authentic performances become possible, musicians should continue to use the resources available and strive to realize the composer's original intent.

Notes

[1]Elizabeth Phillips and John-Paul Christopher Jackson, *Performing Medieval and Renaissance Music* (London, 1986), 51.

[2]Ibid.

[3]D. Harran, quoted in Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie, *Performance Practice: Music Before 1600,* (New York, 1989), p. 190.

[4]Howard Mayer Brown and James W. McKinnon, "Performing Practice," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments,* ed. Stanley Sadie (London, 1984), iii: 45.

[5]Timothy McGee, *Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide* (Toronto, 1985), 26-29.

[6]Brown et al, *Performance Practice: Music Before 1600* (New York, 1989)149.

[7]Ibid. 149.

[8]Ibid. 107.

[9]Margaret Bent and Lewis Lockwood, "Musica Ficta," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments,* ed. Stanley Sadie (London, 1984), ii: 715.

[10]Brown, et al, *Performance Practice: Music Before 1600,* 114.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid. 115.

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