

THE TRAGICOMEDIA STYLE SHEET FOR "RECITAR CANTANDO"

This is an attempt to encapsulate the basic principles of the early 17th century reciting style — the style of Caccini, Caccalieri and Monteverdi — in a few simple rules. In particular, it begins to answer that most pertinent (and frequently heard) question: In this recitative style, which kinds of freedom are appropriate, and which are not? The first 7 rules define the limits, the following 7 suggest some freedoms.

1. LEARN THE WRITTEN RHYTHMS

In later styles the notation degenerates to a few standard patterns, relying on the singers to make up suitable rhythms. But early 17th century composers carefully notated a richly varied and subtly chosen recitation — we should respect it and only depart from it once we are sure of the underlying intentions.

2. LEARN THE BASS PART TOO

Your ideal continuo partner will play the bass just where you want it — but only if you know where that is! In particular, look for cadences with their characteristic strong-weak phrasing (always matching the articulation of the text), and for places where the bass moves underneath a held note — does it move to a dissonance or away from one?

3. ON THE BEAT OR OFF THE BEAT?

Long notes (minims, semibreves, etc.) have different effects, depending on whether they are on the beat, or across the beat with a strong beat in the middle of them. It doesn't matter if the continuo play or not on the inner beat — both singer and continuo should feel the weight of the beat in the middle of the held note. This includes every dotted note, which has a beat in the middle of it "on the dot," and tied over notes similarly.

4. AFTER THE BEAT

Many phrases begin after a short (crotchet or quaver) rest. Singer and continuo should feel the preceding downbeat together, whether or not a chord is played. (This disposes of the question "Do you play a chord there?" with the answer, "Maybe, but the beat is there anyway.).

5. ONCE A RHYTHM IS ESTABLISHED, IT JUST CONTINUES

A typical situation is a group of short notes leading to a held note, under which the bass moves. The bass will take whatever tempo it is given an continuo with it. Nearly always, the singer has the chance to set the desired tempo, if not with short notes, then with a clearly shaped long one. After that, you can't ask the continuo to play the next note in an arbitrary place. This applies also to a rallentando or accelerando — once started, it should continue organically in the other part.

6. CADENCES DON'T NEED RALLENTANDO

just the word-stress (strong-weak), best controlled by a messa di voce shape to the penultimate (strong) syllable.

7. OR ORNAMENTS EITHER

Until the piece is succeeding 100%, musically and dramatically, without ornaments, adding them can only distract everyone from the main task of understanding the music. And if it's succeeding 100% without them...

Those seven rules are the main elements of the structure of this music, which shouldn't be tampered with lightly. Ornaments (see 7) and arbitrary rhythm (see 5) are the worst sins. Now here are some ways to exploit the appropriate freedoms of the style, always with the purpose of serving and heightening the emotional content of the text.

8. FINAL NOTES ON WEAK SYLLABLES CAN BE TAILED OFF

allowing the music to repose (and singer to breathe) without disturbing the rhythm.

9. EXPRESSIVE WORDS CAN BE COLOURED

by equally expressive tone-color from both the singer and continuo.

10. NORMAL WORDS CAN BE "SPOKEN"

If there is a succession of equal notes (say four crotchets or quavers) they can be made unequal (within the regular tempo of longer beats) to allow a speech-like alternation of good and bad syllables in the voice part or in the continuo.

11. A NEW IDEA CAN HAVE A NEW TEMPO

The beginning of a new idea is often signaled by an entry after a short rest (see 4), or by a cadence at the end of the old idea. In either case, the new start needs new impulse, either simply to regain the same tempo after monetary repose, or to establish a new tempo. To achieve extra impulse or a faster tempo, delay the new impulse slightly. Good taste dictates how often and how much the tempo can change. This rule in combination with #5 means that there is always a rhythm and tempo, but not always the same one.

12. USE RHYTHM TO CONNECT PHRASES

The long phrase of thought that sometimes has to span rests in the vocal part can be made clear by letting a clear rhythmic tempo continue normally (and simply by the intention of continuing), but **NOT** by truncating long notes or rests. New ideas can be set apart by new impulse (see 11) or by making silence and repose after the cadence (see 8).

13. ALLOW TIME FOR EXPRESSIVE MOMENTS

A dangerous rule, 13! But once singer and continuo are confident that rhythm normally continues (see 1-6, 12) and that it should relax, it can be started up again (see 11) it's safe to let go occasionally. Nearly always after an expressive wallow (perhaps in an affective harmony), there needs to be a clean get-away, led from a clear impulse point (see 11).

14. EXAGGERATE CONTRASTS

Text and music are full of contrast: fast and slow, consonant and dissonant, on the beat or off the beat, articulate or legato, lilting, swinging or snapping rhythm, "spoken" or "sung," let alone all the ranges of emotional and dynamic contrast. If there is a reason to alter the written music, it is nearly always to exaggerate a contrast (perhaps by sustaining a long note and then tumbling down the following short notes — an example used by Caccini, not to make bland and homogenous what was written with contrast).

These rules are mainly addressed to singer, and most of them (1-6, 8, 10-14) concern rhythms. But they apply equally to continuo players, with the special reminder that the main job of the continuo is to provide structure and thereby support the singer's expressive delivery of the text. In particular, the giving of timely impulses (see 11) helps a singer start up again after a cadence or point of repose. The more "kick-start" is needed, the later the impulsive chord should be. Shaped arpeggios (the plucked equivalent to a messa di voce) and subtle colourings help express the long notes.

HOW TO PREPARE

SINGERS

Understand the text — not just the sense, but every word.

Learn the notes **and the rhythm.**

Learn what the bass does, too.

Practice by conducting yourself (with the warning that you must keep your hand moving all the time — smooth flowing beats, not arbitrary karate-chops!).

PLAYERS

Understand the text — not just the sense, but every word.

Learn the notes **and the rhythm.**

Learn what the singer does, too.

Practice finding the main chords and playing simple 4-3 cadences in the appropriate keys.