

# THE STUDY OF THE BAROQUE VOCAL TRADITIONS: AN IMPORTANT TOOL IN THE DEVELOPING CLASSICAL VOICE

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## ИЗСЛЕДВАНЕТО НА БАРОКОВИТЕ ВОКАЛНИ ТРАДИЦИИ: ВАЖЕН ИНСТРУМЕНТ ЗА РАЗВИТИЕ НА КЛАСИЧЕСКИЯ ГЛАС

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**Abstract:** The topic of interest, will focus on the study of the Baroque singing traditions and specifically on the approach of the singers on matters of embellishment and improvised passages in da capo arias. It was the norm in the Baroque da capo arias for virtuoso singers (a title prominently asserted to castrati singers of the time) to add embellishments and cadenzas in order to exhibit their vocal abilities and musicianship.

I will argue that the study of those traditions will accommodate a developing classical female singer with significant vocal abilities (dexterity, agility, good breath control). Furthermore, one has important musical skills to gain, such as the development of the musical ear, improvisational skills, musical understanding and interpretation. The castrati singers were renowned for their abilities in all of these aspects. Their abilities however, were not a godsend gift to compensate the brutal manner in which they preserved their

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angelic voice, while their body followed the natural course of adolescence. They undertook a solid musical education that equipped them with the knowledge to use their voice in their favor. Their ability to improvise gave them the chance to shine on stage with breath-taking fiorituras and of course helped them to gain confidence and self-esteem. To be able to stand on stage and give a convincing performance is essential to a singer. Even more so, is the ability to gain enough confidence to grow away from the score without the fear of totally dismantling the music.

To support my argument I will attempt to exhibit the way in which da capo arias were sung, by asserting written out examples and accounts. I will focus on the importance of training the voice with perseverance and consistency to attain an ability that perhaps resembles the vocal quality of the castrati, capable to move the senses

**Keywords:** Baroque singing traditions, singing technique, da capo arias, embellishments, improvisation, castrati, Jenny Lind.

**Резюме:** Темата, която ни интересува, се фокусира върху изучаването на бароковите певчески традиции и по-конкретно върху подхода на певците по въпросите на орнаментациите и импровизираните пасажии в ариите *da capo*. В бароковите *da capo* арии е нормално певците-виртуози (титла, подчертано присъща на певците-кастрати от онова време) да добавят украшения и каденци, за да демонстрират своите вокални способности и музикалност.

Изучаването на тези традиции дава възможност на развиващите се класически певци да добият значителни вокални умения (сръчност, пъргавина, добър контрол на дишането). Освен това трябва да се придобият важни музикални навици, като развитие на музикалния слух, импровизационни умения, музикално разбиране и интерпретация. Певците кастрати са били известни със своите способности във всички тези аспекти. Техните способности обаче не са били божествен дар, който да компенсира бруталния начин, по който се

запазва ангелският им глас, докато тялото им следва естествен ход на юношеството. Те получават солидно музикално образование, което им дава знание как да използват гласа си в своя полза. Способността им да импровизират им дава възможност да блеснат на сцената със спираци дъха фиоритурни и, разбира се, им помага да придобият увереност и самочувствие. Да може да застане на сцената и да се представи убедително, е от съществено значение за един певец. Още по-важно е умението да придобиеш достатъчно увереност, за да се отдалечиш от партитурата, без да се страхуваш, че компрометиращ произведението.

В подкрепа на тезата си ще се опитам да покажа начина, по който са се изпълнявали *da capo* ариите, като посоча изписани примери и разкази. Ще се фокусирам върху важността на упражняването на гласа с постоянство и последователност, за да се постигне способност, която може би наподобява вокалните качества на кастратите, способни да предизвикат вълненето на публиката.

**Ключови думи:** Барокови певчески традиции, техника на пее-не, да капо арии, украшения, импровизация, кастрати, Джени Линд.

Studying the vocal works of great Baroque composers like Alessandro Scarlatti, Porpora, Vivaldi, Rameau Purcell, Bach and Händel, to name just a few, not only provide a classical singer with interesting repertoire, but can be used as important material for development. Specifically in the field of opera, their arias contain such wealth of melodic and rhythmic ingenuity that would significantly equip a classical singer's technic, interpretative skills and musicianship.

It takes only a glimpse on Vivaldi's score of the aria *Vedro con mio diletto* from the opera *Il Giustino*, to realize that it requires skills. His somewhat awkward but beautiful melodies contain long melismas, constantly changing rhythms with dotted values, running semiquavers, syncopated rhythms juxtaposed with angular melodic intervals and long

phrases. In addition to this, the norm was for the Baroque singer to decorate the melodic lines with trills, appoggiaturas, grace notes and even add improvising cadenzas. This required singers to be of high standard technically and musically to make justice to the work and the composer.

The study of Baroque vocal works in general by classical singers is perhaps a more complex procedure than the study of more contemporary works. It involves the study of material which is not documented in adequate detail which makes it harder to get a clear idea of the composer's intentions. At the time, composers relied on copyists to copy their music and a true edition of their works final form or a recorded performance does not exist. Through time, a lot of material was also lost and so little remains for the singer/performer to rely on. Even the composer's own authentic manuscripts would prove to be mere guidelines for the performer. Baroque composers never wrote down anything like they intended to be heard, but relied strongly on the taste and ability of their performers. The procedure of realizing a work from score developed during the rehearsals and the actual collaboration of the composer, producer musicians and the singers. Therefore when singers approach Baroque vocal works, their aim should not be to reproduce an „authentic” performance, but to move the senses and to communicate the music to the audiences of his or her own time. Nevertheless, adhering to practices that were followed in the Baroque style according to descriptions from discovered documents, for example, in reference to embellishments and interpretation, would prove significant for the developing singer and to merge nicely with the style.

In earlier Baroque operas, arias followed a syllabic and strophic form and were quite short, but this increasingly gave way to the da capo aria, which is in the so called ternary form, in an A-B-A' pattern. By the 1690s this design was a standard. Arias became longer and were better developed. The ABA' form followed in da capo arias allowed the composer to introduce contrasting materials A and B, usually in contrasting keys, that helped to convey the emotions of the text more convincingly. Whereas the recitatives served in moving on the plot of the libretto, the arias were the part where emotions were experienced. Singers were expected to show raptures of passion, agony, grieving lament and other

affectations according to the arias text. Arias were supposed to express a certain emotion (*Affekt*), that was contrasted in the second part in order to rekindle the flame in the return of the A section.

In Händel's wonderful aria *Cara sposa* from his opera *Rinaldo* the hero declares his love for his beloved Almirena and pleads in a lamenting manner for her return, after being captured by the sorceress Armida. The second shorter section, still in the tonic, enters with a slightly faster tempo. Here Rinaldo deviates from his weeping tone with shorter phrases and agitated semiquavers. The courageous character of Rinaldo appears as he gains powers to defy the spirits of Erebus (darkness) with a modulation to the dominant key for the second half of the section. The scene is then set for the reprise of the A section.

The return of the A section in da capo arias, allowed the virtuoso singers to demonstrate their abilities both technically and emotionally by adding embellishments to the existing music, but also demonstrating their skills in improvisation by adding running fiorituras and virtuosic cadenzas. The repeat was notated by the composer with the da capo sign and was not repeated with embellishments written in by the composer, since it was expected from singers to add their own gems of creativity. It was the moment of the virtuoso singer to shine on stage. Pier Francesco Tosi (c.1653 – 1732) a castrato singer, composer, and writer on music, in his treatise, *Opinioni de cantori antichi, e moderni* 1723 writes concerning the da capo aria:

In the first (A section) they require nothing but the simplest Ornaments of a Good Taste and few, that the Composition may remain simple, plain and pure; in the second they expect, that to this Purity some artful Graces be added, by which the Judicious may hear, that the Ability of the Singers is greater; and in repeating the *Air*, he that does not vary it for the better, is no great Master. [Cyr, 1992]

Unfortunately, there is not a lot of surviving illustrations of cadenzas or added embellishments in scores, to guide singers how to approach them. Tosi, in his writings, does provide some suggestions and guidelines. He stresses the importance of appoggiaturas and mentions the addition of trills and mordents concerning embellishments. When it comes to cadenzas though, he favored somewhat more conservative

and shorter lines. Mary Cyr, in her writings on Baroque performance, mentions that there are surviving illustrations of cadenzas by the soprano Faustina Bordoni and the castrato Carlo Broschi (known as Farinelli) that are long and elaborate. On one occasion Farinelli was said to have added 7 cadenzas to one single aria. It is a matter of personal taste, however it should not completely distort the grounds set by the composer or retract from the style of the music.

Händel was known for his mastery of creating beautiful melodies that vary in mood, shape and rhythm. He was a great inventor and improvisator. This is evident in many of his works, in the way he reuses and develops material in his compositions, or in pieces where he adds improvisations, like the harpsichord improvisations in Armida's aria *Vo far guera* and even in his pasticcio works where he reused material either his own or by other composers and transformed them to adapt to a new work. The study of his vocal works by classical singers are definitely an essential tool in developing technically and emotionally, but also in terms of improvisation. His already elaborate melodies provide the singer with a solid foreground to develop melodic and rhythmic awareness and inspiration. In his *Essays on Opera* (pages: 25-27), the English musicologist Dean Winton asserts excerpts of two different copies of Händel's aria entitled, *aria dell Opera di Amadigi*. In the excerpts there is evidence of Händel's creativity in improvising. It is not certain why the two copies exist, perhaps to help a less experienced singer, but material like this can be used by singers as examples. Below I assert parts of the manuscripts depicting Händel's melodic ingenuity on the phrase „*e vieni a consolar quest' alma amante*”. The top line is the Crysander manuscript and the bottom the Fitzwilliam. Notice how he replaces the triplet melody in bars 40-42 with flowing quavers that lead to an alarming 9<sup>th</sup> instead of a 7<sup>th</sup> in bar: 43. (Fig.1)

Crysanter manuscript

40

Crysanter manuscript

Fitzwilliam manuscript

e vie - ni a - con - so - -

6 6

42

-lar - quest' al - ma a - man - - te

lar - quest' al - ma a - man - - te

6 6 6 4 5

The Castrati, like the aforementioned Tosi and Farinelli, were considered to be virtuoso singers, the highlights of the Baroque opera scene. They were male singers castrated in boyhood so as to retain a soprano or alto voice. This brutal custom took place because women were banned from singing in the church. High music was therefore assigned to either falsettists (young boys) or eunuchs/castrati. Employing young boys (falsettists) was an unsure business, since they could not retain their voice during puberty. Additionally, they didn't possess the desirable quality of the voice and did not attain the range of the soprano. This became the reason for the growing preference of employing castrati. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century castrati were the 70% of all male opera-singers and some enjoyed great fame and acknowledgment. A man's vocal cords thicken during puberty so they lose a good deal of agility. This was not the case with the castrati. On the contrary, their voice possessed agility, flexibility and beauty combined with a man's power and stamina due to larger lung capacity. It is worth quoting the opinion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century historian Enrico Panzacchi (1840-1904) after listening to one of the last surviving

castrati:

„What singing! Imagine a voice that combines the sweetness of the flute, and the animated suavity of the human larynx – a voice which leaps and leaps, lightly and spontaneously, like a lark that flies through the air and is intoxicated with its own flight; and when it seems that the voice has reached the loftiest peaks of altitude, it starts off again, leaping and leaping still with equal lightness and equal spontaneity, without the slightest sign of forcing or the faintest indication of artifice or effort... [Heriot, 1927, p. 36-37]

Castrati usually came from ‘humble’, poorer families. If the boys showed signs of a good voice and a natural affinity their families sold them to music teachers or institutions, in order to survive. Others saw it as a good investment and raised the money themselves, to sponsor their education. In cases such as the famous castrato Farinelli, it is believed that he was castrated to prevent a malignant illness. However, the social and ethical reasons and impacts of this phenomenon are another chapter of study. The point to be reached is that their abilities were not a god-send gift to compensate the brutal manner in which they preserved their angelic voice. The castrated boys underwent rigorous and sound musical education and training with important masters of the time, like Nicola Porpora, Pistocchi and Bernacchi.

In a record and analysis by Rockstro and Goldschmidt on the singing method of the 19<sup>th</sup> century virtuosa Swedish singer Jenny Lind, they parallel her abilities to the lost art of the castrati. Her beautiful singing, technical skills, virtuosic cadenzas resemble the characterizations made to the singing of the castrati. After experiencing vocal problems, Jenny Lind moved to Paris to study with the vocal master Manuel Garcia. She reports in letters that the slow singing of scales and arpeggios, the awfully slow practice of the shake and other cadenza-like technical exercises all bear significant fruit. The high importance of solfeggio is also noted. Jenny Lind trained with perseverance and dedication. In combination to her talent and inner self she became known as the „Swedish Nightingale”.

Singers very often avoid technical work such as scales and arpeggios, solfeggio or other technical passages. They consider them tedious and unnecessary. In the contrary, they strengthen the voice, develop agility,



evenness and flexibility. They also help in intonation and the right placement of the voice. Practicing long, florid passages with persistence will also develop another important factor for good singing and strong, solid technique, the breathing. Good breathing will enhance the phrasing and bring the voice to a whole other level. In some arias, like *Cara sposa* and *Vedro con mio diletto* mentioned earlier, good breathing is vital in the phrasing of long passages and hence they would be good training material. Additionally, solid technique, a flexible, agile voice and assured intonation are ingredients for greater musicianship and the basis for improvisation. Improvisation requires knowledge of the music as a whole, so more rigorous study of the score is also essential. The ability of the castrati to improvise ingenious lines gave them the chance to shine on stage with breath-taking *fiorituras* and of course helped them to gain confidence and self-esteem.

It is often the case that classical performers are accused for relying too closely on the score of the music. The practice of improvisation necessitates a move away from the score, a fact that develops musicianship and music memory even further. A modern example of this, is jazz music. Jazz singers practice scatting, vocalizing sounds and syllables that are musical, but have no literal translation. They usually imitate the sound and melodic improvisations of instruments and take turns in pieces to show off their skills in improvisatory passages. A similar practice is evident in a story of the great castrato Farinelli. The story places him in an improvisatory battle with a trumpeter during a piece. Farinelli justified his fame and surpassed him in ingenuity and stamina. Jazz singers of course, need to have a good musical ear, as well as knowledge of the style, form of the piece and the sense of the harmonic progressions accompanying the scatting. Similar to classical singers, they too benefit from practicing scales, arpeggios and melodic passages of the jazz style.

In essence, any style of music will help develop the voice to some extent. Baroque vocal works perhaps takes it a step further, to realms of greater mastery and a broader sense of musicianship. This is not to replace the determined and rigorous technical work that is required from any good vocal training. We live in times of great speed and extreme technological developments, but there is no app that can be downloaded

to instantly develop a classical singer. It takes time, perseverance, hard work and the constant search and development of one's inner self. The result should reach the ear of the listener like the flight of a lark and the sweetness of the nightingale's song.

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