

The Baroque

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The Birth of a "New Music"

The singer Giulio Caccini (d. 1618) was one of several claimants to the title of inventor of a new music around the beginning of the seventeenth century. He was, in any case, one of the first musicians to turn the learned theorizing of the Camerata into a living music that could really form the basis of a new style. His songs were not without precedent: the music of the "ladies of Ferrara" (see p. 125) comes to mind, and we know from Castiglione (p. 79) that solo singing to a simple accompaniment had a long tradition in Italian courtly circles. Indeed, Caccini at times seems to paraphrase Castiglione, as when he calls for "a certain noble negligence in the singing." What, then, was new in Caccini's self-consciously titled *Nuove musiche* of 1601? For one thing, the lofty aims: Caccini knowingly made the ideals of the Camerata his own, and strove to achieve the "effects of the ancients" according to Galilei's prescription (p. 139). Caccini's idea of "speaking musically" is the origin of what became known as "recitative," the prime distinguishing feature of early opera (in whose beginnings Caccini also had a hand). And Caccini's references to a certain freedom in the handling of dissonances are related to what Monteverdi was to call the *seconda prattica*: a revolutionary approach that for the first time liberated harmony from linear part-writing. In the preface to *Le nuove musiche*, from which we give an extract below, Caccini mentions two kinds of song: besides the recitative-like "madrigal," he wrote strophic "arias" in various dance meters. Something like this pair of styles was to provide the basic framework for musical drama for centuries to come. But Caccini's ascetic approach to vocal display was to prove short-lived indeed.

In the days when the most excellent Camerata of the Very Illustrious Mr. Giovanni Bardi, Count of Vernio, was thriving in Florence, where not only much of the nobility but also the city's first musicians, intellects, poets, and philosophers met together, I can state, having frequented it myself, that I learned more from their savant speeches than I had in over thirty years' study of counterpoint. For those most knowledgeable gentlemen were always urging me, and with the clearest arguments persuading me, not to prize the sort of music which, by not letting the words be properly understood, spoiled

both the sense and the verse, now lengthening, now shortening syllables to suit the counterpoint (that mangler of poetry), but rather to adhere to the manner so much praised by Plato and other philosophers, according to whom music consists of speech, rhythm, and, last, sound—not the contrary. They further urged me to aspire that it might penetrate the minds of others, working those wonders so admired by the ancient writers, which counterpoint, in modern compositions, rendered impossible: and especially so when singers sang alone to a stringed instrument, and the words could not be understood for the profusion of embellishments on both short and long syllables, and in any sort of music whatever, provided by this means the multitude exalted them and cried them up for worthy songsters. Having, I say, observed that such music and musicians afforded no other pleasure than that which the harmony might impart to the sole sense of hearing (the intellect being unaffected so long as the words were incomprehensible), it occurred to me to introduce a sort of music in which one might, so to say, speak musically, making use (as I have said elsewhere) of a certain noble negligence in the singing, passing occasionally through a dissonance, the bass staying firm, and the middle parts reduced to instrumental harmony that expressed some affection, for otherwise they are useless. Wherefore, having made a beginning with songs for one voice alone, since it seemed to me they had more power to delight and move than songs for several voices together, I composed in those days certain madrigals and, in particular, an aria in the very style which was to serve me later for the stories put on stage with singing in Florence [i.e., the first operas]. These madrigals and this aria, having been heard by the Camerata with loving applause and with exhortations to me that I pursue my goal by that path, prompted me to go to Rome so that they might be sampled there too. There I performed the madrigals and aria at Mr. Nero Neri's house in the presence of many gentlemen who frequented it, and all can testify how much they urged me to continue my undertaking, saying that they had never before heard music sung by a single voice to a mere stringed instrument that had as much power to move the soul's affections as did those madrigals, both because of their novel style and because, it being then the fashion to sing many-voiced madrigals with a single voice, it seemed to them that a soprano thus singled out from the other parts was wholly devoid of any affection, the parts having been designed to act upon each other reciprocally. Returning to Florence, and seeing that in those days, too, musicians were accustomed to certain little songs (set for the most part to vile words) which I felt were improper and not relished by connoisseurs, it occurred to me, in order occasionally to lift men's drooping spirits, to compose some little songs by way of airs, to be used with consorts of strings; and having imparted this thought to many gentlemen of the city, I was obligingly favored by them with many rhymes in a variety of meters, all of which I set to different airs from time to time, and they have proved welcome enough to all of Italy, their style having now been found serviceable by anyone wishing to compose for a single voice, particularly here in Florence.

It should be observed that passages [of embellishment] were not invented because they were necessary to the right way of singing, but rather, I think, for a certain titillation they afford the ears of those who do not know what it is to sing with affection; for were this understood, then passages would no doubt be abhorred, since nothing can be more contrary to producing a good effect.

Angelo Solerti (ed.), *Le origini del melodramma: testimonianze dei contemporanei* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1903), 56–60, Trans. P. W.

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The "Second Practice"

The new freedom of early Baroque composition was received with suspicion by conservative musicians. One such was Giovanni Maria Artusi, who in 1600 published a savage attack on certain madrigals by Monteverdi (unfairly, before the offending works had been published), in which the unnamed composer, the greatest musician of his age, was accused of vaingloriousness and even incompetence because of the licenses he allowed himself in his part writing.

Such composers, in my opinion, have nothing but smoke in their heads if they are so impressed with themselves as to think they can corrupt, abolish, and ruin at will the good old rules handed down from days of old by so many theorists and excellent musicians, who are the very ones from whom these modern musicians have learned awkwardly to put a few notes together. But do you know what generally befalls works like these? As Horace says:

'Tis the tall pine that oftenest is tossed by winds:
Lofty towers fall with heaviest crash;
Lightnings strike the mountain's peak.

In the end, since they lack a good foundation, they are eaten away by time and fall to the ground, and those who put them up are made a laughingstock.

Of course I recognize that new discoveries are not only a good thing but a necessary one. But first tell me why you want such clashes as they have written? If you would answer, "I wish them to be heard clearly, but not so as to offend the ear," then why not prepare them in the conventional way, as reason dictates? Now, even if you want dissonances to become consonances, they will always remain the opposite of consonant; they are naturally always dissonant and can become consonant, therefore, only if consonances become dissonances. We have reached the point of absurdity, but it is altogether possible that these modern composers will so exert themselves that in time they actually will find a way to turn dissonances into consonances and vice versa. But if one's purposes can be achieved by following the teachings and the good old rules handed down by authority and followed by musicians everywhere, why then go beyond their bounds in search of extravagant novelties? Don't you know that all the arts and sciences have long since been regulated by theorists and that their basic principles and rules have been handed down to us so that, as long as they are kept to, we shall be able to understand one another? Horace says:

There is a moderate measure in things, there are definite limits
Which sensible conduct should neither exceed nor fall short of.

Compositions like these, then, are the product of ignorance. For such composers it is enough to set up a great roar of sound, an absurd confusion, an array of defects, and it all comes from the ignorance which keeps them benighted.

L'Artusi, ovvero, Delle imperfizioni della moderna musica (Venice, 1600), fols. 42–43. Trans. R. T. *The Odes of Horace*, trans. A. D. Godley (London, 1898), 37. *The Satires and Epistles of Horace*, trans. Smith Palmer Bowie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 37.

It is Artusi, of course, who has become the laughingstock. Monteverdi's answer, which he issued through his brother Giulio Cesare as a "Declaration" appended to his first book of *Scherzi musicali* (1607), stresses the overriding import of the text and its expression. The phrase "the words [are] the mistress of the harmony" was to become one of the chief slogans of the era, and the term *seconda prattica* (second practice), which Claudio Monteverdi had coined in the preface to his fifth book of madrigals (1605), has been taken over by modern scholars to designate everything that sets early Baroque music apart from that of the Renaissance. (By "harmony" Monteverdi means what we would call polyphony; his *melodia*, which refers to the way the music carries the words, is translated here as "setting.")

My brother says that his works are not composed at random, for, in this kind of music, it is his goal to make the words the mistress of the harmony and not its servant, and it is from this point of view that his work should be judged. But in the event Artusi takes a few details, or, as he calls them "passages" from my brother's madrigals, without any regard for the words, which he ignores as if they had nothing to do with the music. By judging these passages without their words, my brother's opponent implies that all merit and beauty lie in following exactly the rules of the First Practice, in which the harmony is mistress of the words.

"First Practice" refers to that style which is chiefly concerned with the perfection of the harmony; that is, in which harmony is not ruled, but rules, is not the servant but the mistress of the words. Its founders were the first to write down music for more than one voice, later followed and improved upon by Ockeghem, Josquin des Prez, Pierre de la Rue, Jean Mouton, Crequillon, Clemens non Papa, Gombert, and others of those times. It reached its ultimate perfection with Messer Adriano [Willaert] in composition itself, and with the extremely well-thought-out rules of the excellent Zarlino.

"Second Practice"—which was originated by Cipriano de Rore, later followed and improved upon by Ingegneri, Marenzio, Giaches de Wert, Luzzasco, still more by Jacopo Peri, Giulio Caccini, and finally by yet more exalted spirits who understand even better what true art is—is that style which is chiefly concerned with the perfection of the setting; that is, in which harmony does not rule but is ruled, and where the words are mistress of the harmony. This is why my brother calls it "second" rather than "new," and "practice" rather than "theory," for its understanding is to be sought in the process of actual composition. Thus, it is my brother's aim to follow the principles taught by Plato and practiced by the divine Cipriano and those who have followed him in modern times, which are different from the principles taught and laid down by the Reverend Zarlino and practiced by Messer Adriano.

Claudio Monteverdi, *Tutte le opere*, ed. G. Francesco Malipiero, X (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1929), 69–72. Trans. R. T.

Monteverdi's account of how he invented the *tremolo* well illustrates the basic tenets of early Baroque neoclassical musical philosophy: the aim of the composer, no less than of any other artist, is *imitazione della natura*, the imitation of reality. For musicians the way to do this was to copy speech, which was the embodiment of the

passions of the soul. And the principles by which this was accomplished were those of the orator—music became once again an art of rhetoric. The spectacular results Monteverdi obtained with his discovery may be heard in his *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* from the eighth book of madrigals (*Madrigali guerrieri et amorosi*, 1638), from whose preface the following extract is taken:

It has seemed to me that the chief passions or affections of our mind are three in number, namely anger, equanimity, and humility. The best philosophers agree, and the very nature of our voice, with its high, low, and middle ranges, would indicate as much. The art of music clearly points to these three in its terms "agitated," "soft," and "moderate" [*concitato, molle, temperato*]. In the works of past composers I have been able to find examples of the soft and the moderate, but I have never found an example of the agitated style, although Plato describes it as "the harmony which would fittingly imitate the speech and inflections of the brave man going to war" [see p. 7]. In view of this I have exerted myself with no little diligence and effort to recover this style.

Since according to all the best philosophers the fast pyrrhic foot was used for agitated, warlike dances, and the slow spondaic foot for their opposites, I took the whole note and proposed that one whole note correspond to one spondee. Dividing this into sixteen sixteenth-notes, struck one after the other and joined to words expressing anger and scorn, I could perceive in this brief example a resemblance to the emotion I was seeking.

At first, the musicians, especially those whose task it was to play the basso continuo, thought it ridiculous to strike a single string sixteen times in one measure, and so they reduced it all to one stroke per measure, thereby producing the spondee instead of the pyrrhic foot, and destroying all resemblance to agitated speech. Be assured, therefore, that the basso continuo must be played just as written, along with the other parts.

Monteverdi, *Tutte le opere*, VIII (1929), unpaginated. Trans. R. T.

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The Earliest Operas

The *seconda prattica* (see the preceding selection) was soon put to what was considered the most exalted possible use: the revival of ancient Greek tragedy. These early musical dramas, the first real operas, were the work of Florentines and originally served the same purposes and were performed at the same kinds of functions as the older Florentine *intermedii* (see p. 97). They are described below by Marco da Gagliano (1582–1643), court composer to the Medici, whose *La Dafne* (from whose preface we quote), produced in Mantua for the wedding of the young prince Francesco Gonzaga in January 1608, was a resetting of the libretto of the earliest opera of all.

I think it may not prove useless to remind the reader how and when spectacles of this kind originated; which without any doubt, having been received with so much applause at their birth, will sooner or later attain to much greater perfection, perhaps to the point that one day they may be likened to the celebrated tragedies of the ancient Greeks and