

## **The Italian vocal music in the XVII<sup>th</sup> century**

Ioan ARDELEAN<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *The XVIIth century was a period of transition towards the virtuosity we shall witness during the XVIIIth century. For a hundred years that precede the great singing epoch, we notice how aria is truly formed, how the recitative shapes up more firmly, becoming more vocal and lyrical. The singer will separate little by little from the composer, virtuosity being his only reason of living. Finally, thing of the greatest importance in the history of singing, in the XVIIth century, the castrati appear, these kings of virtuosity, whose genius will create this special art of the bel canto, which for more than two hundred years raised the Italian school of singing on the first place in the world. At the end of the XVIth century and the beginning of the XVIIth we observe the elaboration of some works which, even if not in detail, analyse the art of singing.*

**Key-words:** *vocal music history; vocal pedagogy; opera; voice;*

### **1. Introduction**

The history of vocal music is a fundamental activity for transmitting information and knowledge to the next generations of singers. The present is connected to the past, and this discipline helps to establish the proper manner of vocal interpretation, but more to the point it warns and at the same time guides the students about the values of this art in the future. The challenges of the contemporary reality demand a more rigorous organising of this fundamental activity, especially since we, the pedagogues, are called upon not only to promote this art, but also to better train our students, the future artists and pedagogues. Beside the singing theory and practice, there is no other better source of training than the history of this art. For the future singers it is useful to be able to take a look in the past and see what important was within music, the vocal technique, the beautiful singing, today forgotten by so many.

### **2. Objectives**

Involving the students in examining the historic sources and, why not, in the aesthetic research, out of a desired development which points at both theory and practice, is and must be the project of every teacher.

### **3. *Dramma per musica***

The idea of unifying, like the theatre in Ancient Greece (Henderson, 1921, 99)<sup>2</sup> in a whole, word, sound and gesture, belongs to the members of the Florence Academy, but what started as an experiment, shortly became an elaborate form of entertainment, as although the aim was to recreate ancient Greek dramas, it established a new manner in the art of interpreting. The works of the composers from the beginning of the century were sung in a chain of recitatives made up by them, with some vocal ornaments, it is true but which copied

---

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Arts of the University "Ovidius" from Constanta, ardeleanioan@hotmail.com

<sup>2</sup> "The young Florentines had in mind a resuscitation of the Greek declamation, and the people of their dramas intoned their utterances with a half divine smoothness and dignity which irresistibly brings to our minds the character of the Greek sculpture."

the church music from that time, without a clear or definite form or structure, based on a text, nevertheless the occurrence of these compositions influencing decisively the history of music. The recitative was the perfect compromise between declaiming and music, superior to uttering, but freed from the restraints of the polyphonic music with ornaments considered useless, this way the plastic illustration of the poetic text becoming more and more possible, with the inspired contribution of the composer. The latter approached this new form because this theatrical style, *stile rappresentativo*, allowed him to express his qualities and to find new ways to present emotions and dramatic situations with the help of his music.

The impact on singing was revolutionary, because it used again the feminine voice, the idea of dramatic expressiveness would appear in the singing world, the singer being forced to find ways to sing well while interpreting and moving around.

The bourgeoisie, the middle class of the European society, in full development, determines that in 1637 the first public opera theatre be opened. The musical show would become thus accesible not only to royalty and the court, but also to everybody who could pay the entrance ticket. In time the costs per representation rise and there is need for a larger public, so larger public theatres are built, the cast is limited from 6 to 8 singers, and the choir is reduced, sometimes left aside completely, and more important, these opera houses needed big orchestras and singers able to project the sound with increased intensity.

#### 4. The vocal pedagogy in the XVIIth century

At the end of the XVIth century we find some works which contain technique notions of singing, and the beginning of the XVIIth century brings about the transition from polyphonic writing to accompanied monody, "thus the necessity of developing vocal technique and style." (Nicoleta Ardelean, Ioan Ardelean, 2016, 33).

The most important writers at the end of the XVIth century are Lodovico Zacconi (+1627), *Prattica di Musica*, two volumes (1592 and 1619/1622?, Venice), Michael Praetorius (+1621) *Syntagma Musicum* (1615-1619, Wittemberg/Wolfenbüttel), Pietro Cerone (+1625) *Melopeo y maestro: tractado de música theorica y pratica* (Napoli, 1613) and Giovanni Battista Bovicelli (+după 1594), *Regole, passaggi di musica, madrigali et motetti passeggiati* (Venice 1594). In 1601, Giulio Caccini describes in *Le nuove musiche* his ideal of singing, that is *stile moderno*.<sup>3</sup> Important works, especially for the information they offer regarding vocality in the XVIIth century in France, are written by Marin Mersenne, also known as abbot Mersenne (1588-1648), who publishes in 1673, *Traitez de la Voix et des Chant* and in 1673, Pierre-Benoît de Jumilhac (1611-1682), publishes *La science et la pratique du plain chant*. Bertrand (Bénigne) de Bacilly, (1621-1690), was a disciple of the singer and pedagogue Pierre de Nyert, together with his master and with Michel Lambert, played a very important part in the birth of the French school of singing and in establishing a theory of singing. He taught many students, his writings about pronunciation and ornaments being recognized as major landmark in the art of singing (cf. Gordon-Seifert, 1994, 197-210). The work of reference for the French singing in the XVII-th century, where Bacilly asserts all his opinions on beautiful singing: proper pronunciation, declaiming and ornamenting, *Remarques curieuses sur l'art de bien chanter*, was written in Paris in 1668. Johann Andreas Herbst (1588-1666), one of the most important German singing theoreticians from the first half of the XVII-th century, writes *Musica practica sive instructo prosymphoniacis* (1642), reedited under the name *Musica moderna prattica, overo maniera del buon canto*, where he gives much attention to explaining the art of ornamenting with good taste. Extremely influential, with extracts from the previous study of Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma Muzicum*,

<sup>3</sup>*Stile moderno* is the notion invented by Giulio Caccini in the preface at his famous collection of madrigals, published in 1602, *Le nuove musiche*, which comprised numerous monodies.

may be considered a true guide for the art of singing in the XVII-th century. Christoph Bernhard (1628-1692), disciple of Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) - composer influenced by *seconda pratica*<sup>4</sup> - under his master guidance writes *Von der Singe-Kunst*, a book that offers many explanations about the manner of singing and ornamenting in the early German Baroque.

## 5. The voice in the XVII-th century opera

Involving the students in examining the historic sources and, why not, in the aesthetic research, out of a desired development which points at both theory and practice, is and must be the project of every teacher.

The expressive vocal style that appears is lyric, where the extreme pitch is seldom used, the training of a singer, either soprano or bass, consisting mostly in exercises of development for the extensive flexibility in perfectly executing agilities and ornaments, considered to be the most expressive qualities, the dramatic intensity and passion being expressed rather by rhythmic movement, *stile concitato*, than by amplitude and pitch.

The appearance of the recitative *secco* opens the door for a larger freedom in expressiveness, the clear accompaniment of the harpsichord being considered the most appropriate, this instrument allowing the voice to be understood. But because the tone of the harpsichord would disappear too soon, the cello is added, in order to support the continuous bass line. Later the recitative develops towards *accompagnato* or *strumentato*.

The aria which evolves from the stanza to *da capo*, is considered to be the refreshing melodic oasis situated in a desert without recitative contour. It will be highly appreciated by all the protagonists of the musical show. By the singers because they were searching for more expressiveness and virtuosity, by the composers, because they thought it to be an advantageous method, being able this way to prove their musical creativity and not just a manner to set music after a text, but the public is the one to confirm it and value it.

Based on the works of Bovicelli and Caccini we can have an idea about the training programme of future singers at that time. The disciple first had to understand the text and then to want to interpret it. The long study of the solmizations was absolutely necessary. The vocalizations were executed with moderate intensity, being used for the attack, rhythm and pitch extension, the first exercises having inserted *accenti*, then short reductions and different ornaments, especially *tremolo*. The accompaniment was used for the student to become secure of intonation. The vocal agilities were sought, but moderate coloratures were recommended. The beauty of the timbre was considered a first request for the future career. (Henderson, 1921, 103-104).

If at the beginning of the century we speak about quasi equal voice categorizing, with a predilection for high voices, where male characters are interpreted by masculine voices and almost always the female ones by female voices, along the century we notice a change of paradigm.

The influence of the castrati upon the art of singing was enormous and if we are to consider singing a special art, where music is a canvass on which there are embroidered the splendors of virtuosity and execution, we shall find at each step the traces of these great and unrepeatable singers, the glory of this golden age of singing, their names floating over the entire Italian music of this period, as a symbol of the lost art, of a school where rules have been forgotten long time ago. „The ascent of the male soprano towards the main position must be attributed not only to the general decadence of the Italian taste in a time of literary

---

<sup>4</sup> *Seconda pratica* is the historic term for a musical composition at the end of the XVI-th century or the beginning of the XVII-th. Opposed to *prima pratica*, *seconda pratica*, notion invented by the composer Claudio Monteverdi, encouraged freedom in composition, observing the rules previously set by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina or Gioseffo Zarlino.

and artistic decline, but also to the fact that public's taste was leaning towards the admiration for ornaments." (Lemaire, Lavoix, 1881, 306). "A few words about the famous *evirati*. Around the end of the XVIth century on the Italian stage would appear the castrati, *the third sex*, who were given the soprano and contralto roles. The majority of arias composed at the end of the XVII-th century, but mostly in the XVIII-th, was destined to them." (Nicoleta Ardelean, Ioan Ardelean, 2016, 33). Rodolfo Celetti, analysing the vocality in the time of Tosi, famous singer and pedagogue, underlines their remarkable devotion and professionalism. (Celletti, 1967, 676-684)<sup>5</sup>

In spite of their huge reputation, the castrati were not the only ones to gain glory in the XVIIIth century. The female singers, thanks to an amazing voice stretching, or through a technique that can equal that of the male sopranos, succeed in imposing themselves.

Facing the virtuosity overrun, a big part of the decorative and instrumental structures are eliminated from the opera so that the vocal inventiveness is not disturbed in art and suppleness.

At the end of the century the main voices were soprano, alto (castrati and female) and a few tenors, the bass being almost inexistent, except for the *buffo* characters. The only reason in assigning the roles to the interpreters was that the most important ones had to be assigned to the best singers, regardless of their sex.

The virtuous element had such a great value for the assigning that it ignored the principle that the interpreter's gender had to match the one of the character. "Italians were considered the most brilliant singers. The Italian model of singing and of the Italian school of singing after 1600 became compulsory for almost the entire Europe. The reason was the increased popularity and spreading of the Italian opera." (Nicoleta Ardelean, Ioan Ardelean, 2016, 33)

The Venice correspondent for the literary newspaper and magazine *Mercure de France* says the Italians love high voices but despise the bass and that the best voices are very well paid, sometimes with fabulous amount of money. The voices are crystal clear, pure, solid and bold. After a grand aria, the public shouts: Viva bella! Viva, ah, cara! Sia benedetta. And when the singers leave the theatre, the gondolieri, with equal enthusiasm, call for blessings for the praised heads. (Henderson, 1921, 164-165). He barely names the composers, but speaks widely about the singers and thoroughly describes the scenery. This correspondence asserts the fact that lyrical drama is more and more abandoned by the Italians and that the interpreter had no other competitor than the scenographer. (Lemaire, Lavoix, 1881, 290)

From the social point of view, these Italian singers are privileged, because they receive the status of noblemen, the most exclusive palaces, turned into real Music Academies, where vocal works were interpreted at the highest level, open their gates, the most illustrious families make terrible efforts so that the greatest singers of the moment sing in front of their guests.

## 6. Conclusions

In the XVII-th century opera, cantata and oratorio emerge, there are important changes in the vocal art, the vocal technique and pedagogy develop rapidly and a little later we witness the reactions of the public taste to the new pleasant way of spending leisure time. It is important to notice the fact that opera, above all vocal genre, along its entire history,

<sup>5</sup> „Giacché l'altro punto di forza dei castrati fu che l'orchiotomia, precludendo certi rapporti, certi obiettivi dell'uomo normale - uno per tutti: la famiglia - fatalmente li destinava ad assumere, nel mondo dell'opera, una funzione che potremmo quasi definire sacerdotale. Di qui studi ed esercitazioni di particolare rigore che assorbivano praticamente tutta la giornata del neofita”

constantly represented the biggest challenge for the singers. Opera, the longest active duration of any musical form, becomes a fertile place for musical creativity and performance: the secular world of the musical theatre.

We nourish the hope that this material will incite to a more thorough and welcome research, for both teachers and students, especially for the future music doctoral students.

## **7. References**

- Ardelean, Nicoleta and Ardelean, Ioan. 2016. *Bel canto, origins and becoming until the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century*. Bucharest: Musical Publishing House.
- Rodolfo, Celletti. 1967. „La vocalità al tempo del Tosi”. *Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana*, anno IV: 676-684.
- Gordon-Seifert, Catherine Elizabeth. 1994. *The Language of Music in France: Rhetoric as a Basis for Expression in Michel Lambert's Les Airs de Monsieur Lambert (1669) and Benigne de Bacilly's Les Trois Livres D'airs (1668)*. Michigan: University of Michigan.
- Henderson, William James. 1921. *Early History of Singing*. New York: Logmans, Green and Co.
- Lemaire, Théophile; Lavoix, Henri. 1881. *Le Chant, ses principes, son histoire*. Paris: Heugel et fils.