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USING THE MUSIC. MUSICAL MATERIALS AND EXPERT SINGERS' PRACTICES IN MONTEVERDI'S TIME

by RICHARD WISTREICH

Rank-and-file musicians rarely feature in early modern documentary sources except to record when they are appointed, on pay-days, when they leave employment, if they misbehave, or they die. But a fleeting glimpse of these otherwise anonymous servants in a text (or the background of a painting) about something else can sometimes provide an unexpected insight. Such is the case with the group of five unnamed singers who had a small, walk-on role in that iconic war of words known so well to anyone who has studied or taught a standard music-history course that deals with the 'transition from Renaissance to Baroque': the so-called 'Artusi-Monteverdi Controversy'.¹ Recall that the trouble all supposedly started when, after attending a performance in Ferrara of some madrigals composed by the then young and up-and-coming Claudio Monteverdi at the house of the nobleman and 'friend of musicians', Antonio Goretti, on the evening of November 16th, 1598, the priest and music theorist Giovanni Maria Artusi, attacked what he regarded as the composer's patent incompetence in writing unprepared dissonances, which he found 'harsh and little pleasing to the ear'. His criticisms first appeared in *The Artusi, or the Imperfections of Modern Music* (1600) which was followed three years later by the *Second Part of the Artusi* (1603).² In the first, Artusi's views are represented by one 'Vario' and the defender of Monteverdi's modern style is named 'Luca'. In the second *Artusi*, this role is taken by a real, but anonymous academician calling himself 'l'Ottuso' (literally 'the slow-witted one' – who was anything but), who had apparently written a series of letters to Artusi defending the composer, in response to the accusations against him made in the first dialogue.

From our vantage point at 400 years' remove we can now see that the entire Monteverdi-Artusi Controversy was in some ways a 'dialogue of the deaf' between two essentially irreconcilable positions, hinging, in turn, on

¹ The secondary literature on the topic is extensive; see, in particular, Claude V. Palisca, 'The Artusi-Monteverdi Controversy', in: Dennis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (eds.), *The New Monteverdi Companion*, London: Faber and Faber, 1985, 127–158; Tim Carter, 'Artusi, Monteverdi, and the Poetics of Modern Music', in: *Monteverdi And His Contemporaries*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, 171–194; Tim Carter, 'E in rileggendo poi le proprie note. Monteverdi Responds to Artusi?', *Renaissance Studies* 26 (2012), 188–155. An overview of recent literature is in Richard Wistreich, *The Baroque Composers. Monteverdi*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011, XI–XX.

² Giovanni Maria Artusi, *L'Artusi, overo Delle imperfettioni della moderna musica*, Venice: Giacomo Vincenti, 1600, and Giovanni Maria Artusi, *Seconda parte dell'Artusi overo Delle imperfettioni della moderna musica*, Venice: Giacomo Vincenti, 1603; facsimiles of both volumes, together with the third text of the controversy, Giovanni Maria Artusi, *Discorso secondo musicale di Antonio Braccino*, Venice: Giacomo Vincenti, 1608, ed. by Giuseppe Vecchi, Bologna: Forni, 2000.

music's complex status as both ,thing' and ,process'. Artusi, in the guise of Vario, focuses his attention on the faulty ideology of ,modern' music and on the literal relationships of abstract values, deploring the complete unacceptability of some of Monteverdi's written intervals, which for him were offences against the rational laws of Zarlinonian music theory; whereas, first Luca and then l'Ottuso, insist on the holistic view, that takes into consideration the performance dimension of music. As far as Luca was concerned, Monteverdi had merely incorporated into his written score representations – one might even say transcriptions – of the types of expressive dissonances and other alterations which singers and instrumentalists would normally be expected to improvise anyway in the moment of performance, in response to the text as they read it. He calls this aspect of vocality *cantare accentato*, which, in his opinion ,renders a pleasing harmony at which I marvel'; Luca maintains that such *accenti*, if sung with ,the greatest discretion and judgement', make technically ,illegal' progressions acceptable to the ear.³ But in response, Artusi maintains that however well the singers might nuance affective ornaments while performing them, whether they are written into the score or not, this does not change the fact that the dissonances:

always are and [always] will be grating, crude, harsh and insupportable to the ear. And when this song is taken from the hands of these singers, it will inevitably [still] be [insupportable] and will remain thus, because in sum, that is what it is.⁴

Artusi's almost throwaway rhetorical comment about the song being ,taken from the hands' of the singers once their performance is finished is for me an arresting one: not only does it provide an evocative image of a literal separation between the written musical ,material' of the song and its executors, as the five professional singers, as it were, leave the part books behind on the table and exit the room by the back stairs, but it also hints at a set of conceptions about the ,material' manifestation of music as written notation and the functional role of such musical materials in acts of making performances, that are central to any investigation of expert singers' practices in this period. In this essay, I concentrate on this aspect of expert singing practice in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, and in particular, on the highly specialised form of ,reading aloud' entailed in singing directly from notation.

When we go to a concert of art music today – whatever the genre – we are not normally surprised if solo singers, or for that matter, pianists or violinists, perform other people's compositions from memory; in fact, in some genres

³ Artusi, *L'Artusi* (see n. 2), 41r : „... passaggi, li quali, mentre che sono cantati e sonati con diuersi instrumenti, et da Cantori, che à questa sorte di Musica accentata, piena di suppositi, sono auezzi; non rende ingrata Harmonia; et me ne merauiglio“; *ibid.*, 40v: „Ma ciò vuol fatto, con grandissima discrettione, et giudicio del Cantante, acciò sempre facci buono accordo“.

⁴ Artusi, *Seconda parte* (see n. 2), 10: „sempre sono, & saranno aspre, crude, dure, & insopportabili all'udito. Et quando sarà quella cantilena fuori delle mani di cosi fatti Cantori, bisogna che sia, & appaia tale, perche in soma ella è tale“.

of classical music we expect it. But equally, we normally expect to see most other solo instrumentalists, accompanists, and especially musicians engaged in any kind of chamber music involving more than one person, to be playing from the notes, or as we say rather confusingly (but also usefully) in English, 'using the music'. To experience a string quartet, vocal group or early music ensemble perform complex ensemble music from memory is always impressive, and so rare that it might even be a little disconcerting. But to see and hear a group of singers performing polyphonic music without scores, accompanying themselves and copiously decorating the song with apparently spontaneously improvised – and yet perfectly coordinated – interventions and additions of phenomenal *cantare accentato*, and at the very same time being able to see the exact same 'improvised' *passaggi* written in a book you are holding in your hands, would perhaps be as impressive, even amazing, now, as it certainly was for those privileged enough to be invited to the innermost sanctum of the ducal palace in Ferrara in the 1580s and 90s, to be subjected to Alfonso II d'Este's favourite party trick.

As a number of witnesses relate, the ultimate thrill for special visitors to Alfonso's court was to be present when the women musicians of the *concerto delle dame* gave one of their legendary four-hour performances of selections from a repertoire of over 300 highly decorated madrigals and other songs which they sang from memory, and to be offered the score containing all their ornamentation to follow; and of course, to be dazzled and amazed both by the women's musical skills and by their beautiful deportment. The Mantuan court poet, Muzio Manfredi, suffered a suitable overload on his senses:

The signor Duke invited me to go to the music [...] and he had me given the book containing the songs which these temptresses [literally, 'devils'] were singing, but I turned down this favour, and said that I couldn't read the whole time and also look at and listen to such creatures, and that as far as I was concerned the book could be taken away. I was congratulated for my enthusiasm! I saw, I heard, I was struck dumb, I was transformed, I was disembodied!⁵

Part of the deception was that the women, while masquerading as noble amateurs were in fact all highly trained musicians. Thus, when they showed they could also sing while reading from music (a skill normally associated with professional musicians), this was a further cause of wonder. In 1582, a Ferrara courtier, Cavalier Grana, reported:

⁵ Muzio Manfredi to Ferrante Gonzaga, Count of Guastalla, January 1st, 1583: „Il Sig. Duca Serenissimo mi fece andare [...] alla musica sopranaturale [...] e mi fece dare il Libro delle compositioni, che cantavano quelle Diavoli, ma io sprezzando sì fatto favore dissi che delle Rime ne poteva sempre leggere, ma non sempre vedere, et udire cantar creature tali, et che per ciò, per conto mio, il Libro poteva riporre. Mi fu data ragion con qualche applauso dell'avvidimento mio. Vidi, udii, stupii, trasecoli, transumanai“; in: Elio Durante and Anna Martellotti, *Cronistoria del concerto delle dame principalissime di Margherita Gonzaga d'Este*, Florence: Spes, 1989, 152.

On Wednesday, after having dined, the duke passed a good deal of time listening to those ladies singing from ordinary music [presumably part-books]. Even in that kind of singing the ladies are beautiful to hear, because they sing the low parts [*le parti grosse*] an octave higher.⁶

Two years later, the composer Alessandro Striggio, visiting the court from Florence, noted the women singing *a libro* and later the Florentine ambassador reported home:

Striggio and another singer are here and some stupendous singing and playing is going on. They are astounded by the singing of these ladies and by their knowledge, for the ladies sing straight off every motet and every composition that they give them, however difficult these pieces may be.⁷

In 1610, the nineteen-year-old Neapolitan virtuosa, Adriana Basile, together with her husband, brother, sisters and children, was successfully recruited to Vincenzo Gonzaga's Mantuan court household (of which Monteverdi was music director). A clinching factor was not only her excellent harp playing and her repertoire of over 300 Spanish and Italian songs that she performed from memory to her own accompaniment on the guitar, but also her ability to read „any kind of madrigal with such assurance, that no other singer is better than she“.⁸

My final example of ‚secular music sight-singers‘ comes from a generation earlier. In 1577, the teenage prodigy, Tarquinia Molza (who would later join the Ferrara *concerto*) was specifically praised for her ability to perform difficult music straight from the book – or, in this case, two books simultaneously – exactly as written. In his *Philosophy of Love*, a eulogy of Tarquinia as a paragon of female virtue, the philosopher, Francesco Patrizi, described how:

she does something that has never been done by anyone other than [Alfonso] Ferrabosco, who sings one part and plays another on the viol, surpassing all the musicians of this and former ages by succeeding in keeping an eye on two books

⁶ Cavalier Giacomo Grana to Cardinal Luigi d'Este, September 8th, 1582: „Mercori doppo dinare, il Sr. Duca stete un gran pezzo a passare il tempo a sentire cantare quelle Dame con libri hordinarii di musica, le quale essercitando sì in quel modo fanno ancora bel sentire per che le parti grosse le cantano al' ottava di sopra“; in: Anthony Newcomb, *The Madrigal at Ferrara 1579–1597*, vol. I, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, 271.

⁷ Leonardo Conosciuti to Cardinal Luigi d'Este, July 28th, 1584: „Qui è il Striggino et un altro cantore, et si fanno cose stupende di suoni e canti: stuppiscono tuttavia del cantare di queste Dame et del sapere loro, cantando eglino improvvisamente ogni motetto, et ogni compositione che loro li diano per difficilissime che siano“; in: Durante and Martellotti, *Cronistoria* (see n. 5), 164.

⁸ Gioseppe Fachoni to Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga, May 9th, 1609: „[Adriana Basile] sona di Arpa in eccellenza, e vi canta al libro ogni sorte di madrigali con tal sicurezza che non vi è cantante nissuno che la sup[era]re è quello che è il meglio sona di chittaria beniss[i]mo e canta a la spagnola, et il tal coppia che tra le Italiani e Spagnole sa più di trecento opere a la mente“; in: Susan Parisi, *Ducal Patronage of Music in Mantua, 1587–1627. An Archival Study*, PhD Diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1989, 133.

simultaneously, the words of one and the fingering of the other: something so difficult that it is almost impossible. And because of its impossibility no other *maestro* except him has succeeded in doing it. In achieving this, signora Tarquinia easily surpasses Ferrabosco because in the difficult and strenuous passages, when the eye cannot read all the notes one by one, he resorts to counterpoint and fills those voids that the eye would leave untouched. But our Lady, remaining true to all the notes, one by one, whether minims or semi-minims, and to all the words, surmounts this great difficulty too, to the great amazement of whoever sees and hears her do it.⁹

This needs, of course, to be read within its highly rhetorical context, but it still captures the intensely complex coordination of eye, brain, hands and vocal chords that is involved in reading and performing music aloud in real time, and the sense of wonder that this act in itself can arouse.

All of these examples feature extraordinary female virtuosos at highly sophisticated courts, and therefore the 'exceptionality' of their skills must be understood in the context of a variety of prevailing discourses of elite culture, which not only relished the marvelous, but also prized inversions of normatives such as the prevailing assumption that virtuoso skill is a male preserve: the example of Tarquinia Molza is explicitly based on this device. Nevertheless, we can also read them for practical performance evidence. Each highlights in some way the accuracy and faithfulness with which these paragons of music reading, both at sight and from memory, rendered the music as it had been written down. Thus, the singers of the *concerto* are remarkable on one hand for the amazing accuracy of their memorizations, which appear to be spontaneous but in reality must have involved copious rehearsal; on the other hand, the act of reading from music is astounding *because* it is done at first sight. If the witnesses thought that Tarquinia had already rehearsed and learned her self-accompanied interpretation of the written music, then the fact of her 'reading' simultaneously from two part books during the performance would, presumably, have been far less remarkable.

Interestingly, none of these sources mentions the spontaneous application by the singers of elements of *cantare accentato* in addition to the notes they were reading off the page, but other evidence suggests it is likely that they would have done so. Thanks to technical innovations in music printing and

⁹ Francesco Patrizi, *L'Amorosa filosofia* (ca. 1577): „fa cosa inaudita dopo tutti i secoli fuor che in Ferabosco, il quale canta una parte et suona un'altra nella viuola. Con che ha superato tutti i musici e de' nostri e de' passati tempi, convenendo in ciò in uno stesso punto di tempo havere l'occhio alle note di due libri et alle parole dell'uno, et alle dita de' tasti: cosa che è tanto difficile, che tiene quasi dello impossibile. Et perciò la sua impossibilità non è stata fin hora da alcun maestro superata fuorché da solo costui. Et questi è poi stato dalla signora Tarquinia di gran lunga superato. Con ciò sia che il Ferabosco nelle difficoltà e ne' passi stretti ove l'occhio non può supplire al bisogno di vedere tutte le note ad una ad una, ei ricorre al contrapunto e riempie que' vacui che l'occhio converrebbe di lasciare non tocche. Ma la signora obligandosi a tutte le note ad una ad una per minime o semiminime che sieno, et a tutte le parole, supera anco questa difficoltà sì grande, con grande stupore di chiunque la vede a ciò fare et ode.“, in: Durante and Martellotti, *Cronistoria* (see n. 5), 135–136.

developments in print culture in general in the decades around 1600, there is a considerable body of printed evidence of *cantare accentato* in musical materials that describe in notation some of these aspects of virtuoso singers' performative interventions in the pre-composed *res facta*. Examples include: the soprano Vittoria Archilei's *passaggi* for the setting of Giovanni de' Bardi's 'Dalle più alte sfere', as sung in the 1589 Florentine *Intermedii* and subsequently printed;¹⁰ the engraved publication in 1601 of Luzzasco Luzzaschi's madrigals for the Ferrarese *concerto delle dame* from the 1580s and 90s, complete with all the ornamentation notated (and possibly reproducing some of the repertoire experienced by Muzio Manfredi);¹¹ Giulio Caccini's inclusion in *Le nuove musiche* of not only copious examples of his own styles of *cantare accentato* but also, reproductions of the ornaments as sung by others of its illustrious stars, including Melchior Palontrotti, the Neapolitan bass on secondment from the Sistine Chapel in Rome and the tenor, Francesco Rasi, in a strophic aria from his stage music for *Il rapimento di Cefalo*, performed in 1600 in Florence;¹² and finally, we might even include here the parallel plain and ornamented text of Orfeo's aria, 'Possente spirto' in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, which is usually assumed to represent in some way the singing of Rasi, who created the role.¹³

These prints are intentionally 'de-descriptive' of the singing of specific performers, records or graphic representations of acts of performance, as it were, rather than being necessarily 'notationally pre-scriptive' of future renditions. But the inclusion of intentionally prescriptive ornamentation in 'standard' printed performance materials increases considerably from the 1580s onwards, perhaps as much because typographic technology allowed it, as necessarily signifying a sudden compositional innovation. Such notation begins to become a feature, for example, of madrigals by composers such as Giaches de Wert, Luzzasco Luzzaschi and Luca Marenzio – requiring expert singers for their successful realisation, certainly, but strongly implying that *all* the notes are

¹⁰ Cristofano Malvezzi, *Intermedii et concerti, fatti per la comedia rappresentata in Firenze ...* [Venice: Giacomo Vincenti 1591], ed. by Daniel Pickering Walker, *Musique des intermèdes de „La Pellegrina“*. *Les fêtes de Florence, 1589*, Paris: CNRS 1986, 2–8.

¹¹ Luzzasco Luzzaschi, *Madrigali per cantare e sonare a uno, doi e tre soprani*, Rome 1601, facsimile reproduction Florence 1987.

¹² Giulio Caccini, *Le nuove musiche*. Florence: Marescotti, ²1601, ed. and trans. by H. Wiley Hitchcock, Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1970.

¹³ See Tim Carter, 'Possente spirto. On Taming the Power of Music', *EM* 21 (1993), 517–523, 517. For further examples, see Richard Wistreich, 'Vocal Performance in the Seventeenth Century', in: Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 398–421. On the wider implications of the 'music printing revolution' around 1600 for the relationship between performance and its representation in notation, see Tim Carter, 'Printing the New Music', in: Kate van Orden (ed.), *Music and the Cultures of Print*, New York: Garland, 2000, 3–37.

integral to such a performance.¹⁴ Monteverdi's own published music is particularly notable in this regard, and also innovative, at least in the degree of its expressive implications. Indeed, Artusi implies that the degree and particular style of Monteverdi's inclusion – one might even say ‚appropriation‘ – of singers' generic *cantare accentato* into the text of his performance materials may still have been relatively novel in 1598.

Modern singers will, I think, agree that the vocal parts of all Monteverdi's published music, from the Fifth Book of Madrigals onwards, become remarkably directive – perhaps we should now rather say, ‚prescriptive‘ – about ornamentation: consider, for example, the quantity of notated *passaggi* in the florid duets in the Seventh and Eight Books of Madrigals. But what of a print such as the 1610 *Vespers* and the notation of the trio, ‚Duo Seraphim‘, for example? Should we read this primarily as a representation of the performance style of music he wrote for the great virtuoso tenors with whom he worked in Mantua, such as Francesco Rasi and Monteverdi's own former student, Francesco Campagnolo, and thus demonstrating its suitability for the ‚chapels and chambers of princes‘? Or is it genuinely prescriptive for future performance, as today's performers naturally assume, when they study and rehearse until they can, rather like the ladies of the *concerto delle dame*, reproduce every last thirty-second note precisely as written and thereby satisfy a modern (and possibly anachronistic) obsession with ‚accuracy‘ and ‚faithfulness to the composer's text‘?

So, turning now to professional rank-and-file court singers and specifically, to evidence of the role of written materials in their performance practices, what do we really know about such performers' skills? Putting aside for a moment the evidence of the notation itself (including diminution manuals and treatises), which is often the only kind of source material which we look at closely, what other information do we have to draw on? In terms of ‚witness reports‘ there are perhaps few sources with more (potential) authority than Monteverdi's two or three surviving audition reports. They survive in a number of letters that the composer wrote as part of his duties as one of Italy's most experienced and respected *maestri di cappella* and are full of interesting information about what a singer needed to be able to do in order to get a top job at the most elite establishments, such as those where he had responsibility for recommending musicians for service: the court of Mantua and S. Marco

¹⁴ Anthony Newcomb has identified this ‚feature‘ of vocal writing in madrigals by composers associated with North Italian courts of the period, and specifically their apparent response to the particular vocal style of the Ferrarese *concerto delle dame*, as a defining mark of a minor compositional revolution in the late 16th-century madrigal, that he calls „the luxuriant style“ – a model of compositional genre analysis that has, as yet, been largely uncontested by musicologists; see Richard Wistreich, „Il soprano [...] è veramente l'ornamento di tutte l'altre parti“. Sopranos, Castratos, Falsettists and the Performance of Late Renaissance Italian Secular Music“, in: Corinna Herr, Arnold Jacobshagen and Kai Wessel (eds.), *Der Countertenor. Die männliche Falsettstimme vom Mittelalter zur Gegenwart*, Mainz etc.: Schott, 2012, 65–78.

in Venice, but very likely applicable to other comparable institutions. They suggest that normally, singers were tested for evidence of the timbre, size, range and disposition of their voices, usually with reference to the quality of their *trillo* and other elements of *cantar di gorgia*, and the clarity of their words; overall musical competence; and sensibility to, and suitability for the particular requirements of different performance spaces and musical genres.¹⁵

But it is a hardened professional, the courtier and retired cornetto virtuoso, Luigi Zenobi, who, in his so-called 'Letter on the Perfect Musician', written to an as-yet unidentified prince, offers the most detailed analysis of the skills expected of male rank-and-file musicians in Italianate courtly households around the turn of the 17th century. Apparently responding to the question of how one should judge singers suitable to be employed in a prince's music establishment, Zenobi provides a wealth of information about the different requirements of singers, covering vocal range, voice placement, timbre and also, particularly relevant to this investigation, a systematic break-down of particular technical skills. Simply put, these divide into those associated, on one hand with being able to read all kinds of written musical materials and, on the other, the processes of intervention in the composed *res facta* during performance, through altering rhythms, adding notes, creating dissonances and other expressive articulations. In the latter category, Zenobi allows, and indeed requires, maximum freedom and copiousness of ornamentation, rhythmic alteration and expressive dissonances, particularly from those singing soprano, but also altos, tenors and basses, provided they do it idiomatically for their respective voice parts. We can recognize some of what he describes from the large literature of 'diminution manuals' and other treatises which nowadays form the basis of our modern attempts at *cantare accentato*, although the sheer level and range of what Zenobi requires, confirms, I suggest, that most of these treatises need to be understood as providing considerably simplified, or at least highly selective, accounts of the complex mechanics and sophisticated stylistics of late-Renaissance expert singing.

But in the context of the principle focus of this essay, it is Zenobi's detailed list of the specific reading skills a singer needs to do his job properly which is of particular interest. It seems that a court-based rank-and-file singer's principle job is the stylistically correct performance of written-down music, as it is put in front of him; and Zenobi is referring here to the most advanced and difficult repertoire. Zenobi's list begins with the proviso that the singer 'must not be ignorant of counterpoint', although he has previously hinted that for most singers this knowledge was only superficial:

¹⁵ See Richard Wistreich, 'Monteverdi in Performance', in: John Whenham and Richard Wistreich (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Monteverdi*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 261–279, 268–272.

Musicians are those who are experts in counterpoint, either sung or written [... who] sing securely, direct well, and compose like masters [...]. Singers, on the other hand are those who sing the high, middle, or low parts.¹⁶

Zenobi continues: singers need to be able to sing all note-values securely, including lines composed in eighth and sixteenth notes; handle accurately big leaps such as sixths, sevenths, ninths and even elevenths, 'now slow, now fast'; he must read accurately music that is 'strangely dissonant', syncopated, and chromatic, and perhaps all three at once. He must be able to recognize all time signatures and note values, and all (or at least most) proportions and passages in *sesquialtera* (interestingly, he adds 'in both new and old music'). Furthermore – and confirming that he means sight-reading in the moment of performance, and not pre-rehearsed interpretation – the singer must be able to detect and make instant corrections to errors in the score while singing, without losing his place or help from others. In other words, this list of skills strongly implies that in normal circumstances professional rank-and-file musicians were expected to perform directly from their part books, at sight.¹⁷

Indeed there is evidence that in elite establishments for sure, and possibly more generally, professional singers normally rehearsed notated music only in the 'unusual' context of theatre music, which, of course, required the musicians to sing from memory and be integrated into the staging. In the Sistine Chapel, for example, pieces newly copied were sung through once by the choir to check for errors in the score and thereafter reading mistakes in performance attracted fines.¹⁸ This practice of sight-singing in the Roman churches without rehearsal impressed the French musician, André Maugars on his visit to the city in 1639:

these Italian musicians never rehearse together, but sing all their parts at sight; and what I find most impressive is that they never sing the same motet twice [...] so that one is certain of hearing a new piece every day¹⁹

When Monteverdi sent the music of his substantial and complex sung *balletto* „Tirsi e Clori“ from Venice in November, 1615, he asked the court secretary in Mantua, Annibale Iberti, whether he could – presumably exceptionally – „let

¹⁶ „Musici sono quelli intendono eccellentemente il Contrapunto, o cantando, o scrivendo [...] canta securo, rimette bene, e compone da Maestro. Cantanti, o Cantori si chiaman quelli, che cantano le parti alte, mezzane, o basse“; text transcribed in Bonnie Blackburn and Edward Lowinsky, „Luigi Zenobi and His Letter on the Perfect Musician“, *Studi musicali* 20 (1994), 61–107, 98.

¹⁷ Ibid., 80; 96.

¹⁸ Jean Lionnet, „Performance Practice in the Papal Chapel During the Seventeenth Century“, *EM* 15 (1987), 3–15, 12.

¹⁹ „[...] ces Musiciens Italiens ne concertent jamais, mais chantent tous leurs parties à l'improviste; et ce que je trouve de plus admirable, c'est qu'ils ne chantent jamais deux fois les mesmes Motets [...] de sorte qu'on est assuré d'entendre tous les jours de la composition nouvelle“; André Maugars, *Response faite à un curieux sur le sentiment de la musique d'Italie, escrite à Rome le premier octobre 1639*, Paris ca. 1640, ed. by Joël Heuillon, Paris: GKC, 1992.

the singers and players see [the music] for an hour before His Highness hears it".²⁰ On another occasion, in 1607, he had deputised his assistant, Don Bassano Casola, to hold a rehearsal of a new and particularly difficult piece with „the other gentlemen singers“ before performing it, remarking that otherwise „it is greatly damaging to the composition itself, as it is not completely understood on being sung the first time“. ²¹ I raise the question of rehearsal (or the lack of it) here, because I want to emphasise the idea that rank-and-file singers presumably expected to read all the notes in front of them from part books as they performed, and this would include notated *passaggi* and other ornaments written by the composer and, in printed books, painstakingly type-set (recall Zenobi's mention of eighth and sixteenth notes).

Even when preparing theatrical pieces, what little evidence we have of historical rehearsal techniques in Monteverdi's time suggests that as today, singers, like contemporary actors, prepared and memorised their own individual parts (which would, presumably, have included cues) in isolation from the rest of the cast; but that, unlike today, the time spent in detailed musical ensemble rehearsals under a music director was minimal.²² I offer here one example only, from the most detailed source we have for court music-theatre production techniques in Monteverdi's time, the anonymous treatise called *Il Corago* (which translates roughly as „The Intendant“) from around 1630.²³ Discussing the question of how to coordinate the instrumentalists and singers in complicated chorus sections of a staged production, the *Corago* proposes that at least one player, preferably the *sonatore principale*, should sit where he is able to see and hear the stage, in order to lead the musicians, particularly during rehearsals. He adds that especially difficult passages should be „practised more than once“, and if there are still a few occasions where a beat proves to be absolutely necessary then, he reluctantly concedes, it will

²⁰ „Se, avanti anco del'Altezza Serenissima Sua lo sentisse, lo facesse per un'ora vedere alli signori cantori e sonatori, sarebbe cosa ottima“. Letter of November 21st, 1615; in: Claudio Monteverdi, *Lettere*, ed. by Éva Lax, Florence: Olschki, 1994, 45.

²¹ „[...] è di molto danno a quella composizione musicale, come, nella prima volta che vien cantata, non viene intesa interamente“. Letter of July 28th, 1607; in: *ibid.*, 19; see also Anthony Pryer, „Monteverdi, Two Sonnets, and a Letter“, *EM* 25 (1997), 357–371.

²² One famous example of this is the case of the castrato, Giovanni Gualberto Magli, who took part in the first production of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. Magli arrived in Mantua very late in the rehearsal period and knowing only a fraction of his music; see Iain Fenlon, „The Mantuan *Orfeo*“, in: John Whenham (ed.), *Claudio Monteverdi. Orfeo*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986 (Cambridge Opera Handbooks), 1–19. For equivalent evidence of the ways that actors on the London stage may have rehearsed in the same period, see Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 and Tiffany Stern and Simon Palfrey, *Shakespeare in Parts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

²³ Paolo Fabbri and Angelo Pompilio (eds.), *Il Corago*, Florence: Olschki, 1983; partially translated in Margaret Murata (ed.), *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History*, vol. IV, New York: Norton, 1998, 121–126; see also Roger Savage and Matteo Sansone, „Il Corago and the Staging of Early Opera. Four Chapters from an Anonymous Treatise circa 1630“, *EM* 17 (1989), 494–511.

have to be given in the performance by someone, but very discretely, because the audience would be seriously irritated if, in his words, 'they had to watch someone waving up and down constantly for two or three hours'.²⁴

In conclusion, I would like to begin by making it clear that none of the evidence I have presented here is intended to provide the basis for a new manifesto for performance practice that advocates less rehearsal. We live in a contemporary musical culture that values lengthily pre-prepared performances and memorised interpretations much more highly than stunning feats of sight-reading, however impressive they may be. I suspect that we would now consider Tarquinia Molza's performance more a kind of circus act than an aesthetically pleasing musical experience. Nevertheless, the ability to create excellent performances of highly complex music 'at sight' is a perfectly normal aspect of professional practice in a number of contemporary genres, including orchestral, jazz and choral session work, although not so commonly in early music. (Interestingly I have myself spent over thirty years working as a musician all over Europe and had to put up with sometimes quite vicious jibes about the 'English disease' which equates good sight-reading ability with shallowness of musical intent – something I would vigorously dispute). I am also not suggesting that professional singers never practised in Monteverdi's day; rather that the modern idea of musicians holding ensemble rehearsals in order to decide on common and consistent interpretations, let alone having them dictated by a *maestro*-conductor, would probably have been as alien to them as it would be to improvising jazz musicians today.

What I do want to suggest is that we should pay much closer attention to aspects of the 'act of reading' itself, both intellectual and physiological, and explore the sense in which 'reading aloud' is both a highly skilled and potentially very creative process, perhaps nowhere more so than in the specialised sphere of music. As the cultural historian of reading, Roger Chartier, reminds us, 'Reading is not uniquely an abstract operation of the intellect: it brings the body into play, it is inscribed in a space and a relationship with oneself and with others', and goes on to point out that in the early modern period, reading aloud was both the usual and therefore normal way in which people encountered written texts and that it was also an important aspect of the construction of 'sociability and intimacy'.²⁵ Performances of ensemble music from musical materials are, in fact, collective 'readings aloud' of a spectacular and physiologically dynamic variety: 'embodied readings' *par excellence*. And then in her landmark essay, 'Music – Drastic or Gnostic?', Carolyn Abbate

²⁴ '[...] che sia anche sempre veduta dallo spettatore, il che gli è di soverchia molestia dovendo per due o tre ore sempre rimirare quell saliscendolo molto sconcio'; Fabbri and Pompilio, (eds.), *Il Corago* (see n. 23), 89. See also Wistreich, 'Monteverdi in Performance' (see n. 15), 267.

²⁵ Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books. Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994, 8; for further discussion of this topic, see Richard Wistreich, 'Music Books and Sociability', *Il Saggiatore musicale* 18 (2011), 230–244.

provocatively challenged us musicologists to raise our heads momentarily, as it were, from our relentlessly hermeneutic encounters with musical objects and processes (which she called ‚gnostic‘ activities) and find new ways to engage with the ‚drastic‘ – the act of performance itself.²⁶ Indeed, the enigmatic Ottuso was proposing something not dissimilar in 1603, when he suggested to Artusi:

You must remember that the singer is the soul of the music, and it is he who, in sum, represents the true meaning of the composer to us, in which representation, according to the variety of the subject, the voice is sometimes reinforced, at other times sweetened. For this reason you have to hear this manner of clever composition sung by expert singers. Your Lordship's grounds [for criticism] would then cease to exist.²⁷

Performers, too, might profit from constantly calling into question the ways that we engage with the musical materials from the past that we now take so easily in our stride, in order to avoid falling into the trap of conforming to normative processes that owe more to the 19th and 20th centuries than those of the 19th and 17th.

²⁶ Carolyn Abbate, „Music – Drastic or Gnostic?“, *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), 505–536.

²⁷ Artusi, *Seconda parte* (see n. 2), 19–20: „si ricordi, che essendo il cantante l'anima della Musica, et quello in somma ci rapresenta il vero senso del Compositore, nella qual representatione secondo la diversità del soggetto, la voce alcun volta va rinforzata, altre volte raddolcita, per questo bisogna udire simil maniera di compositione spiritosa da cantanti non ordinarij, dal che cessa il fondamento di V. S.“