Bontempi, Maffei and Conrad

On Teaching Voice

Introduction & Translations

by

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Introduction

The publications of the three authors represented here, Giovanni Bontempi (1695), Camillo Maffei (1562) and Conrad von Zabern (1474), cover a wide extent in the history of singing instruction. The works of the latter two are specifically and exclusively devoted to vocal pedagogy, whereas Bontempi’s brief but famous remarks on singing instruction appear within the much broader context of his Historia Musica, a book of misleading title by today’s standard, for it treats more of the theoretical nature of music than the historical. Bontempi states that his description of vocal training was, effectively, “in the good old days” of the early seventeenth century during the reign of Urban VIII (1623-1644) and as conducted at Rome by Virgilio Mazzocchi (1597-1646). Thus, the three extracts presented here represent significantly less than the 220 years of their publications’ dates, but still a considerable length of time and a particularly interesting one for the development of singing.

The three authors also present three different perspectives on vocal training. Conrad is concerned with vocal production and aesthetics especially as relate to unison singing in plainchant choir. Maffei’s remarkable treatise is the first to treat the subject systematically from the standpoint of physiology and anatomy. Bontempi documents the breadth of training required of a professional singer in his youth, a description in many ways similar to Pier-Francesco Tosi’s description of a generation later in his Osservazioni (1723).1 Taken together the three accounts form a remarkably mutually supportive whole that presents what is perhaps a surprisingly consistent concept of vocal training and aesthetics.

The three sources are presented here in inverse order, beginning with Bontempi. There is no profound reason for this; it merely represents the translator’s interest in following vocal pedagogy backward to the origin, or at least to the earliest author, in the modern concept of the field. Both

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1 Tosi’s work is so easily available in the reprint of Galliard’s English translation of 1742 that I could not justify the time necessary to translate the large relevant portion of it for inclusion. Neither did I want merely to copy in a translation not my own. The reader should have no difficulty in obtaining a copy of Tosi for comparison. Johann Friedrich Agricola’s translation and expansion of Tosi would also make an interesting comparison, and it is available in Julianne Baird’s English translation, Introduction to the Art of Singing. This reveals the subject’s “slippery slope” and helps to justify a limitation on the sources included here.
Maffei’s and von Zabern’s complete texts appear in entirety in this same translation series for those who wish more than is given here. Bontempi’s extract is presented complete; the extract of Maffei is only a small portion of the whole; and the von Zabern selection is actually my own outline of the main body of his text plus translations of his two appendices.
The schools in Rome used to require the students to spend an hour each day in singing difficult and demanding things in order to acquire the experience, another hour in practicing the trillo, another in practicing passaggi, another in the study of literature and another in training and practicing song, both under the hearing of the teacher and before a mirror in order to become accustomed to making no inappropriate movement either in body or face or brow or mouth. All these were the occupation of the morning. In the afternoon a half-hour was spent in training in the subject of theory, another half-hour in counterpoint on plainsong or an hour in copying and setting in compositions on paper the instructions in counterpoint, another in the study of literature and the remainder of the day in practicing or playing the clavichord, in the composition of some psalms or motets or canzonettas or some other kind of songs as the individual pleased. These were the ordinary exercises of a day on which the students did not leave the house. Exercises, then, outside the house were to go frequently to sing and listen to the returning echo beyond Porta Angelica toward Mount Mario, so as to become judicious about one’s own personal pronunciation, going to sing in almost all the concerts that were being presented in the churches of Rome and observing the style of singing of many notable singers who flourished in the

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2 Many different types of ornaments have been referred to as trillo. At the time of which Bontempi speaks, the early seventeenth century, the most likely ornament intended is that as described by both Caccini in *Le Nuove Musiche* (1601) and Francesco Rognoni in *Selva de Varii Passaggi* (1620). This was the rapid rearticulation of a single pitch, sometimes with increasing speed. More elaborate forms were also known, but the ornament known by the term trill today was in the early seventeenth century most commonly called a *gruppo* or *gruppo*.

3 The word here is *lettere* whose meaning is literary works not musical literature. Other sources refer to the inclusion of literature in a singer’s training, so this is not unusual.

4 The expression here is “di vita,” literally “of life,” which seems peculiar in the modern sense. This seems likely to be an idiomatic expression. The *Cambridge Italian Dictionary* (1962), which is far the best of modern Italian-English dictionaries in regard to archaic and obsolete expressions emphasizes the physical nature of the word and also recognizes a specific sense of “the waist.” For this reason I translate it as “in body.”

5 Improvisation over a plainsong melody had been a standard part of professional vocal training since the Middle Ages.

6 The translation of *accento* as “pronunciation” is probably a bit too bland and the reader should probably infer a more fully musical sense in the word, such as in English only a circumlocution can convey, like “vocal quality and expression.”
pontificate of Urban VIII,\textsuperscript{7} practicing upon those [styles] and giving an account of it to the teacher when he returned home, who [the teacher] then, primarily to impress upon the students’ minds, would make the necessary analysis and would give necessary advice about it. This was the practice and this the school that we had on music harmony in Rome from Virgilio Mazzocchi, renowned professor, and Maestro di Capella of St. Peters at the Vatican, who has given new light upon this science.\textsuperscript{8}

\textit{Maffei, Lettera I, excerpt (1562)}\textsuperscript{9}

Now, I am going to present to Your Lordship the rules that ought to be maintained for singing by \textit{gorga}.

Let the first rule, then, be that the one who wants to embrace this ability ought to flee from affectation\textsuperscript{10} as from a mortal enemy, for the reason that to the degree that it [affectation] is a greater offense in music than in other arts, so to that degree ought one to practice it with the less pretentiousness. Nor do I need for this to adduce other argument than the very experience that I witness every day, since many for knowing how to sing four little notes with a little [33] grace while they sing, become so infatuated with themselves that the bystanders make jokes about them and, after having sung, they go making passage by foot through the city no less than they had made passages by the \textit{gorga}, and go about so haughty and proud that rather [are they] shunned than respected by everyone. Now, let him flee from this self-satisfaction without letting it be known that he makes or wants to make a profession of it.

The second rule is that the time when one ought to practice this should be in the morning four or five hours after eating because the time during which the stomach is full, the vocal cords of the throat

\textsuperscript{7} Urban was pope from 1623 to 1644.
\textsuperscript{8} Virgilio Mazzocchi (1597-1646) was a composer who held a variety of positions in sacred music culminating as Maestro di Capella of the famous Julian Chapel of the Vatican.
\textsuperscript{9} The entirety of Maffei’s first letter can be found in this same Historical Translation Series.
\textsuperscript{10} Maffei apparently means “pretentiousness” or perhaps “melodramatically” in the sense of exaggerated emotion. The second rule of the second set of rules confirms that the technique of singing \textit{gorga} does aim at communicating the meaning of the words.
cannot be so clean and clear as is required to send forth a clear and serene voice, which is necessary more than any other thing whatever for singing *gorga*.

The third rule is that the place where one ought to practice should be in a space in which the solitary echo responds, just as are some shadowy valleys and cavernous rocks in which, because it responds to the one producing the sound, [thus] singing with the one who sings, it will be possible [34] easily to demonstrate whether the passaggi are good or not and do duty to a living voice.

The fourth is that one must not make any movement in other parts of the body, 11 except for the aforesaid cartilage *cimbalare*, because those appear ugly to us who while they sing *gorga* shake their heads, or tremble with their lips and move the hands or feet. We have to persuade ourselves that when we do similar things we probably appear ugly to others. Of these we see many who, either because of little trouble taken in the beginning [of study] or because they haven’t realized the bad practice, are unable in any way to stand still when they sing; so let them be given notice of it.

The fifth rule is that one ought to hold a mirror before the eyes, so that when looking into it one may be advised of whatever ugly emphasis one may make when singing.

The sixth is to extend the tongue so that the tip comes and touches the root of the lower teeth.

The seventh is to hold the mouth open and precisely not more than one holds it when speaking [35] to friends.

The eighth, one should very gradually push the breath with the voice and take great care that it not issue through the nose or across the palate, both of which would be a very great error.

The ninth, one should want to associate with those who sing *gorga* with great facility because the [sense of] hearing allows into the memory a certain image and conception which provides no small help.

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11 This is consistent with Maffei’s implicit aesthetic in which the singer strives to communicate the meaning of the words but without undue exaggeration of emotion.
The tenth is that one ought to do this exercise, breathe very frequently without doing as some do who, in one or two times, don’t get to the end of their goal. They give up suddenly and are aggrieved with Nature that she has not given the sufficiency and disposition\textsuperscript{12} to them that is required for it. Whence, they attribute to her what ought to be attributed to their own laziness, and, in my judgment, make a great error. Therefore, I make most certain that a student warned by an echo in the voice and advised by the mirror in regard to emphasis and aided by continuous practice, and equally by hearing those who sing with facility, will acquire such a [36] disposition (dispositione) that he will be able easily to apply passaggi in all kinds of madrigals and motets.

But, because some notated examples are required for these my rules, by means of which one may be able in making passaggi to acquire the disposition for gorga gradually, by this printing of the notes below and reducing to one brief series as much as I have already said in the stated rules. I say that the student after the time when he has digested his meal will be conducted to some resonant valley or cave or other place and also after having a mirror before his eyes, and will have extended his tongue in the said manner, and will have held his head firm and every other part of his body, he should want with these notes very gradually to push his breath, carrying in his mouth the letter “o” for the reason that I will explain below.

\textsuperscript{12} The term dispositione became very important in connection with vocal physiology. It comes to be used fairly broadly, even including the garganta technique. Here Maffei means to communicate a physiological development of the vocal organs such as to enable good voice production, including garganta. Significantly, the implication of Maffei’s entire discourse is that this disposition can be developed or improved from a rudimentary state, at least to some degree, contrary to others who said that it was entirely a matter of natural endowment.
Conrad von Zabern, *De modo bene cantandi* (1473)

Outline of the Treatise

I. The first precept is to sing in good ensemble, which is to sing in such a way that the voices of all the singers proceed in the same movement of time equally and simultaneously.
   a. This requires mutually diligent attention from all members of the choir.

II. The second precept is to sing with correct rhythm so that no more time is spent on one note than on others.
   a. Do not draw out the higher notes of the song.
   b. Mistakes are most frequent and greater among the higher notes.
   c. Do not sing the higher notes with a louder voice.
   d. Do not extend rests contrary to the measure.
   e. One chorus must conform itself to the other in measure.

III. The third precept is to sing moderately, which is to sing neither too high nor too low.
   a. When the song is in high range, start the initial pitch lower.
   b. When the song is in low range, start the initial pitch higher.

IV. The fourth precept is to sing variably, which is to execute the song according to the demands of the [specific liturgical] time.
   a. Sing variably in regard to speed.
      i. On festivals sing very gradually.
      ii. On ordinary Sundays and small feasts sing in a moderate measure.
      iii. On ordinary days sing more quickly.
   b. Sing variably in regard to character. On festive days sing higher and more joyfully for the sake of greater liveliness.
   c. Sing different types of services on the same day in different ways.
i. On the same day a high office should be sung more solemnly than a private service.

ii. The office of the dead and vigils and vespers should be sung lower and less joyful than the other offices not concerning the dead.

iii. Offices of joyful matters should be sung more joyfully than those of sins and tribulations.

iv. When a holiday falls on an ordinary day, whose office is special and ought not be omitted,
   it is fitting to sing a double office, as in the case of Advent, Lent or Ember Days, with the feast sung more solemnly and the ordinary day more freely so as to preserve a proper difference.

V. The fifth precept is to sing with fidelity, which is to sing so that anyone of those singing together should remain in the form of the notes as transmitted by the fathers.

   a. Follow traditional performance practice.

      i. Do not break up the notes into [ornamental passages].

      ii. Do not go off in any way a fifth above or a fourth below.

      iii. Do not perform in the manner of discant.

   b. Maintain proper decorum.

      i. All should uncover their heads at the same time when it is properly to be done.

      ii. Likewise, all should bow the head and kneel at the same time.

   c. Secular melodies should never be introduced and sung to sacred texts.

VI. The sixth precept is to sing with refinement, which is to sing without coarseness, for which constant self-criticism is the required foundation.

   a. Do not aspirate vowels that have no “h.”

   b. Do not sing through the nose.

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13 It should be noted that the Latin is potentially ambiguous here, but this represents Von Zabern’s syntactic order.
c. Distinguish different vowels carefully.

d. In melismas retain the same vowel constantly throughout.

e. Do not allow the voice to go off pitch in ascending or descending.

f. Do not strain or force the voice.

g. Sing appropriately to the range of the voice.
   
i. Do not sing with an open throat or strong voice on higher notes.
   
   ii. Do not sing with one uniform voice throughout the range, low, middle, and high.
       1. Use a heavier voice for the low range.
       2. Use a medium voice in the middle range.
       3. Use a light or subtle voice in the high range, which enables the singer to sing higher.

   iii. Failure to adapt the voice to the range leads to injury.
       1. It burdens and fatigues the voice.
       2. It induces hoarseness and makes the voice unsuited for singing.

h. When songs correspond to each other make sure that the ending of one corresponds to the beginning of the next.
   
i. Such as the last Kyrie eleison to the Gloria.
   
   ii. Such as the antiphon to the psalm.

i. Do not sing lethargically but with life and feeling.

j. Pay attention to proper deportment.
   
i. Stand still and do not move around or lean in one direction.
   
   ii. Do not raise your head too high or incline it or prop it with your hand.
   
   iii. Do not deform your mouth.
Appendix I

On Performing Psalmody Blamelessly

Since it does not suffice for the good regimen of the choir in song that it sings according to the six precepts for singing well, which in this specific little work are explained lucidly, if the psalmody itself is not sung well and blamelessly, whereas the greatest part of the seven canonical hours are performed in this. For this reason I have decided here to add something by which they seem sufficiently lacking in large part.

These things, then, follow, which come in psalmody to be diligently observed.

• Let not the following verse begin before the end of the preceding one.
• Do not omit making the accompanying rest in the middle of the verse.
• Do not read by word but by syllable.
• Never at all abstain from the closing in the middle and end of the verse.
• Preserve the measure uniformly throughout,
• Excepting the first syllable of the verse, which is slightly extended.
• Do not sing too fast or too slow.
• Nevertheless, proceed in varied way according to the demands of the time.
• Never neglect the correspondence of choir to choir.
• Guard against a perceptible decline [in intonation] in all intervals
• Let the work never be made so as to begin too high.
• The manner of intoning must be provided for correctly.
Appendix II

On the Manner of Blameless Lection in Choir

Whatever is Assigned to be Read by One Only

Since for the good order of a choir in singing, everything up to this point is not sufficient, since by observation of the six precepts for singing well the psalmody may be sung well, according to the method treated above, except this third also be taken care of, that specifically all such things as are assigned to be read by only one person in the choir should be read blamelessly, lest when it is done otherwise it would bring ignominy upon all the choir. For this reason here I append this summary and quite specific instruction on the subject.

Thus, some precepts for this follow.

• Preserve well a single pitch throughout, apart from the places for rests.
• Make breaths appropriately in suitable places where there are no true rests.
• Read words completely, distinctly, clearly and syllabically and without haste.
• Separate the closes on rests and at the end completely.
• Do not ascend too high nor tend too low but maintain in the proper range of the voice.
• Perform all this in a full voice but even so not too clamorous.
• Read neither too slow nor too fast.
• Do not violate the measure noticeably either in rests or beyond them.
• Do not utter rests more strongly nor with any emphasis than the others.\(^{14}\)

\(^{14}\) I am uncertain of the meaning of this phrase, or how it is possible to utter a rest, the words being *pausas vociferare*. The word *vociferare* clearly indicates something audible. Had von Zabern used the verb *pronuntiare*, which by this time had come to mean “perform,” it would have been more nearly understandable. Instead he has chosen the verb more closely related with the production of an actual sound.