

Aurelio Virgiliano

Il

Dalciemel

a

(MS source ca. 1600)

Translated by Sion M. Honea

Translator's Preface

Aurelio Virgiliano's *Il Dolcimelo* is an unfortunately incomplete manuscript that exists in only one copy held by the Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale in Bologna. The manuscript is in three "books," the first devoted to instruction in passaggi and diminutions for voice and instruments. The second book contains diminutions on various musical genres, including madrigals, canzonas and ricercate, but exclusively for instruments. The third book is, in some ways, the most interesting, or at least most historically important, of all because it is an illustrated introduction to instruments, providing instrument ranges and in some cases fingering charts. It is particularly famous for providing the first diagram of slide positions (four) for the trombone.

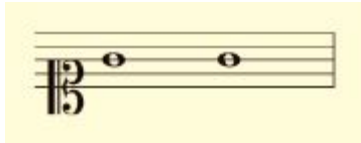
In the present connection of the practice of vocal diminution this source arrives only late on the scene, sometime around 1600 give or take a few years. In a sense it is, thus, rather conservative, but this proves to be a considerable benefit to anyone studying the history of the technique, for Virgiliano gives a set of ten rules for making diminutions that superbly well distill the essence of the technique. As such, it proves to be an excellent starting point for anyone making a first acquaintance with the practice.

Rules for Diminution

1. A diminution ought to proceed by step as much as possible.
2. All the diminished-notes (minute)¹ ought to be one good and one bad.²
3. Those diminished-notes that leap ought to be all good.
4. The note of the subject needs always to be sounded at the beginning, middle and end of the tactus (*battuta*). When this does not prove convenient in the middle, one ought at least to sound near that place what would be consonant with it [the subject note] and never dissonant, except at the fourth above.
5. When the subject proceeds upward, the last note of the diminution ought even to go down, and go up when the contrary.
6. It will be a good style to make an octave run either down or up, when it proves to be convenient.
7. When one leaps an octave, one ought to do it up and not down so as not to run into the other parts.
8. The diminution ought never to move from the subject more than a fifth up or down.

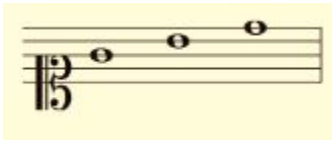
¹ My sense is that the term *minute* in the sources most often means those notes resulting from the diminution of a larger value note, but it seems also at times to be used to indicate an entire passage of diminution. The context usually gives a fair idea of which.

² At this time in music history the reference to “good” and “bad” can have two possible references, either individually or simultaneously. It likely means that “good” is a consonant on an emphasized part of the beat, while “bad” is a dissonance on a weak part of a beat. As indicated this is very early in the time when music was moving into a concept of weak and strong beats and parts of beats. Later the terms good and bad would become standard terminology among many authors.

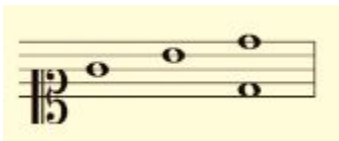


9. Only on these two middle G can the diminution move from the subject by six steps above or seven steps below. But this is acceptable only in a passage of rapid sixteenth-notes.

10. When two thirds up [i.e., two consecutive ascending thirds]



are found it will be acceptable to be able to make use of a fourth below, because the octave will be of the upper third as



and so to the contrary when two descending thirds [i.e., two consecutive descending thirds] are found, one can do the same as

