Performing Choral Music from the Renaissance

A practical look at ways to make the performance of choral music from the Renaissance both authentic and fulfilling.
As a deer longs for founts of water, so my soul longs for you, O God.
1. The music is part of our choral heritage as an historical musical experience.
2. A body of literature that is accessible and affordable to many age and ability levels.
Rationale for Performing Renaissance Sacred Music

3. 5 Vowels for unifying.
• International Phonetic Alphabetic = LOVE

• Vowels: 5 pure vowels - open

  a = [a]
  e = [ɛ]
  i = [i]
  o = [ɔ]
  u = [u]
Sicut cervus desiderat ad fontes aquarum,

ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus.
Rationale for Performing Renaissance Sacred Music

4. Helps to teach and establish musical independence.
5. It is far removed from the oversentimentality of later music, particularly today’s music.
It's the economy text, stupid.
It's the economy text, stupid.

Perotin
It's the economy, text, stupid.

Immediate communication to the listeners
It's the economy text, stupid.

Linear and storytelling nature of the music
It's the economy text, stupid.

Word Painting
It's the economy text, stupid.

Counterpoint - new materials match the old to reinforce the meaning.
Sicut cervus desiderat ad fontes aquarum, (as the deer desires for a fount of water)

ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus. (so desires soul mine for you, God)
Rinascimento
from rinascere
"to be reborn" - Italian
Historical Background

Philosophy began in Italy with Petrarch in the 1300s.

“True, we love life, not because we are used to living, but because we are used to loving. There is always some madness in love, but there is also some reason in madness.” - Petrarch
Historical Background

The Rise of Humanistic Thought
Historical Background

Recovery of the artistic influence of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome
Historical Background

Innovation and Discovery

The Printing Press, 1440
The New World, 1492
Historical Background

Growth of commercial enterprise (Italian City-States)
Historical Background

Protestant Reformation in the 16th century
Ave Maria

- 1611 woodcut of Josquin des Prez
Melody and Texture

Melody

Often based on Gregorian Chant (cantus firmus, commonly found in the tenor)
Melody and Texture

Melody

Each part is equally important
Melody and Texture

Melody

Stepwise motion abounds
Melody and Texture

Melody

Limited Ranges
Melody and Texture

Melody

Phrasing is irregular
Melody and Texture

Melody

Dramatic words are emphasized
Dissonant and altered tones may be leaned on for their fullest effect.
Melody and Texture

Texture

Independence of voices

Points of imitation
Melody and Texture

Texture

Homophony had its place
Melody and Texture

Texture

Independent parts that result in a beautiful, blended, balanced whole
Melody and Texture

Texture

The vertical is a result of the horizontal.

This is linear music.
Ave Maria

- 1611 woodcut of Josquin des Prez
Performing Editions

• How do I select a good performing edition?
Choir Book

Palestrina’s only known autograph manuscript
Part Book
Alma Redemptoris Mater

Soprano: Alma Redemptoris Mater

Alto: Alma, Alma

Tenor: (Marian antiphon paraphrased in alto part throughout)

Bass: --

[1st Cadence]

by Jameson Marvin

Johannes Ockeghem
(c. 1410–1497)
O magnum mysterium

O magnum mysterium et admirabile sacramen tum,
O magnum mysterium

O great mystery, and wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the new-born Lord, lying in a manger!

Blessed is the Virgin whose womb was worthy to bear Christ the Lord.

Alleluia!
Rhythm and Tempo

Everything is editorial regarding tempo.

No tempos indicated

Tactus was about mm. 50 - 80
Rhythm and Tempo

Bar lines did not exist
Choir Book

Palestrina’s only known autograph manuscript
Rhythm and Tempo

The music is put together in arches, with cadences as points of repose and regathering of energy.
Rhythm and Tempo

3 Types of stress

1. Syllabic
2. Agogic
3. Tonic
The music naturally wants to group into 2s and 3s
Rhythm and Tempo

Syncopation should be handled on a case by case basis.

The metrical pulse is often clouded, or syncopated.

The inflection of the text is dominant.
Rhythm and Tempo

Tempus Perfectum
Rhythm and Tempo

Finding the tempo

1. What is the pulse note or tactus?
2. What is the smallest division of the beat?
3. Consider the text - Joyous? Sad? Contemplative?
4. What are the acoustics of the performance space?
O magna mysterium

O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the new-born Lord,
lying in a manger!
Blessed is the Virgin whose womb
was worthy to bear
Christ the Lord.
Alleluia!
Hans Leo Hassler (1564 - 1612)

Sing unto the Lord a new song:
Sing unto the Lord, all the earth.
Sing unto the Lord, bless His name;
show forth His salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the heathen,
His wonders among all people.
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Sing unto the Lord, all the earth.
Sing unto the Lord, bless His name;
show forth His salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the heathen,
His wonders among all people.
Instruments

*a cappella*

(Notice the Correct Spelling!!!)

referred to the Sistine Chapel: Palestrina, Victoria, Anerio, etc. . .
“The singers of the King [Ferdinand] sang one part of the Mass, the singers of monseigneur [Philip the Fair] the other part; master Augustin played the cornet with the singers of monseigneur, which was good to hear with the singers.”

-from the chronicle of Antoine de Lalaing at a Mass in Toledo in 1502
Size of Choirs

The Bavarian Court Chapel Choir with Lassus
Sing joyfully unto God our strength. Sing loud, sing loud unto the God of Jacob. Take the song and bring forth the timbrel, The pleasant harp and the viol. Blow the trumpet in the new moon! Even in the time appointed and at our feast day. For this is a statute for Israel, and a law of the God of Jacob.
Tone and Timbre

- Men only
- Purity of tone
- Compatibility of tone between voices
- Vibrato-less
- Voice Types were different than today
Dynamics

- No dynamics indicated
- Most performances probably did not use extreme dynamics: pp - f is a good starting point
- Avoid excessive crescendo and diminuendo - long notes either intensify or decay within a dynamic
- Steady sound - more voices equal more sound.
- Used to heighten dramatic contrasts
Sing joyfully unto God our strength.
Sing loud, sing loud unto the God of Jacob.
Take the song and bring forth the timbrel,
The pleasant harp and the viol.
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and a law of the God of Jacob.
O Nata Lux

O Light born of light
Jesus, redeemer of the world
Mercifully deem us worthy
To offer prayers and praise

You who once deigned to become flesh
For the sake of your lost ones
Grant that we become members
Of your holy Body
O Nata Lux

O Light born of light

Jesus, redeemer of the world

Mercifully deem us worthy

To offer prayers and praise

You who once deigned to become flesh

For the sake of your lost ones

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## Sacred v Secular

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liturgical</th>
<th>Everyday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Larger choir</td>
<td>One per part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men and boys</td>
<td>Men and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>Non-functional, for wealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit of the service</td>
<td>Benefit of the singers (entertainment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evenness of tone and phrasing</td>
<td>Lilting with variety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smooth lines</td>
<td>Dance rhythms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant mood within work, or at least sections</td>
<td>Rapid changes of mood possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitation abounds</td>
<td>Imitation not as common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythm less important</td>
<td>Rhythm more important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning of text rarely used for internal interpretation</td>
<td>Start with the meaning of the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional harmony</td>
<td>Bold harmonic expressiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through composed</td>
<td>Repetitious/strophic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word stress and accent</td>
<td>Word meaning important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme legato</td>
<td>Articulation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Il est bel est bon

He is handsome and fine, my husband is,
There were two gossiping women in the village,
Saying one to the other, do you have a good husband?
He doesn't scold me, or beat me either.
He does the chores,
He feeds the chickens
And I take my pleasure.
Really you have to laugh
to hear the cries of the chicks and hens:
Co, co, co, co, dae, little flirt, what's this?
He is handsome and fine, my husband is,
There were two gossiping women in the village,
Saying one to the other, do you have a good husband?
He doesn't scold me, or beat me either.
He does the chores,
He feeds the chickens
And I take my pleasure.
Really you have to laugh
to hear the cries of the chicks and hens:
Co, co, co, co, dae, little flirt, what's this?
Hark, all ye lovely saints above,
Diana hath agreed with Love,
His fiery weapon to remove. Fa la.
Do you not see
How they agree?
Then cease, fair ladies; why weep ye? Fa la.

See, see, your mistress bids you cease,
And welcome Love, with love's increase;
Diana hath procured your peace. Fa la.
Cupid hath sworn
His bow forlorn
To break and burn, ere ladies mourn. Fa la.
Hark, all ye lovely saints above,
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To break and burn, ere ladies mourn. Fa la.
Fair Phyllis

Fair Phyllis I saw sitting all alone
Feeding her flock near to the mountain side.
The shepherds knew not,
they knew not whither she was gone,
But after her lover Amyntas hied,
Up and down he wandered
whilst she was missing;
When he found her,
O then they fell a-kissing.

note: 'hied' is a form of the archaic verb 'hie' which means 'to hasten or hurry';
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note: 'hied' is a form of the archaic verb 'hie' which means 'to hasten or hurry';
The white and sweet swan
dies singing, and I,
weeping, approach the end of my life.
Strange and diverse fates,
that he dies inconsolate
and I die happy.
Death, that in dying
fills me wholly with joy and desire.
If in dying I feel no other pain,
I'd be content to die a thousand times a day.
The white and sweet swan
dies singing, and I,
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Strange and diverse fates,
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Rehearsal Techniques

• Start with the text meaning
• Rehearse cadences first
• Learn metrics first without the text
• Short rehearsal segments are preferable to longer segments
• Rehearse in Circles
Conducting Sacred Music

- Little conducting is necessary.
- Each new line is a continuation, building upon music that came before. The music must change with each new line.
- Discover the linear flow of text in each part.
- Tactus = Touch (Common pulse)
- Meter is what we think, Pulse (tactus) is what we feel. Things want to group.
5 Principles (Gerald Custer)

1. Textual Primacy!
2. Independent Linearity - avoid downbeats - motion is always forward except at the cadence
3. Embrace of contrast
4. Arsis et thesis (anacrusis and crucis) - gathering and releasing energy (dance - raising the foot, lowering the foot)
5. Cadential inevitability - goal oriented
The Beans

- I Fagiolini