

ELABORATION: A PRIME MUSICAL AND DRAMATIC INGREDIENT IN THE PERFORMANCE OF OPERAS OF THE CLASSICAL PERIOD

Unfortunately, the study of performance practices of the Classical period is all too often concerned with elaboration as an historical fact. If this study is to be meaningful and relevant, it must rather concern itself as much as possible with applications to actual music making; elaboration must be approached as an integral part of the mode of performance, intended and expected by composers; not as an historical curiosity, and certainly not as virtuoso doodling. Elaboration is a crucial unwritten ingredient in most solo pieces of the Classical period. Performance without it, when a composer has indicated its use, can seriously misrepresent a given work.

Most of our present knowledge about performance in the Classical period is derived from tutors and treatises by established pedagogues of that time, but the information to be gained from the writings of these men is often contradictory, and sometimes very confining. In dealing with the information given in instruction books, one must remember at all times that most of these books were written to instruct either beginners or dilettantes. Because of their stated didactic purpose, and because the authors of these works tended to be somewhat cautious or conservative in their outlooks, it is absolutely necessary to explore the performance materials still extant from the period in order to gain a more accurate picture of the practice of elaboration as it was handled by the better composers and performers of the time.

Therefore, I should like to examine briefly the fermata decoration composed by W. A. Mozart for use in his aria "Al desio di chi t'adora", K. V. 577¹. As a basis for this discussion let me first call attention to the general rules laid down for fermata elaborations by Daniel Gottlob Türk, who, perhaps better than any other writer of the period, very neatly codified this area of elaborative procedure and provided a number of different solutions for various fermata types². In his commentary Türk stresses the following points:

1. one usually slackens the pace of the piece somewhat just before the fermata
2. the elaboration must be consistent with the prevailing character of the piece or section of the piece
3. the elaboration must remain within the harmony of the chord over which it is executed
4. the elaboration must not be too long; but it need not be bound by the pulse or meter of the piece

Türk's demonstrations of the practice are rather unsatisfactory because he does not trouble to place them in context. Domenico Corri, on the other hand, in his quasi-pedagogical anthology of arias with elaborations³ shows all his elaborations within the context of entire pieces.

The fermata decorations in Corri's "A Select Collection. . ." tend to be rather short and facile. Indeed, these are the sorts of decorations one would expect to find in a work designed for the edification of dilettantes and beginners, as this one was. That most of these elaborations are very short is also partially attributable to the fact that Corri's collection contains only one or two really extended arias and none at all from the bravura class.

The brevity of these decorations is in itself no bad thing. This aspect of them is in agreement with Türk's precept about duration and with Corri's cautionary remark that the proper length for an unaccompanied elaboration is to be determined by the

duration of one breath ⁴. But many of Corri's elaborations are lacking in grace and dramatic purpose, i. e., they are often not much more than a sort of "Augenmusik", thereby often detracting from the effect of a particular aria. One should not, I suppose, expect anything other than this from a third-rate composer like Corri.

We are indeed fortunate that some of the written-out elaborations by W. A. Mozart still survive, elaborations intended for the use of his wife and sister-in-law, both of whom were acknowledged better than average singers. His fermata decoration for the aria "Al desio di chi t'adora" is preserved in his own hand in the British Museum (Add. Mss. 14396, fol. 15-21). According to notations on this manuscript piano reduction ⁵ the elaboration was written by Mozart for Constanze's use in their performance of this aria.

From many points of view this document is the best imaginable example to demonstrate the ideal scope and nature of the type of fermata decoration used to round off a major structural point in the opera aria of the period.

Ex.1

m.66

Soprano

- nar. Ah ch'o - ma - i più non re - - si - sto. ah ch'o -

Orchestra

Vln.I C. di B. Vln.I C. di B. Vln.I

f p f p f p

m.69

- mai più non re - - si - - sto all' ar - - dor che in sen m'ac - -

Orchestra

C. di B. Vln.II

f p p cresc.

m.72

- cen - - - de, all ar - - dor che in sen m'ac - cen - - -

Orchestra

Vln.I C. di B. Vln.I

V I V I

Vln.II

The image shows a page of a musical score. At the top, there is an 'Elaboration' section in 3/8 time, starting at measure 76. Below it is the 'Soprano' part, which has a fermata over a note in measure 76 and the syllable 'de.' in measure 77. The 'Orchestra' part has a fermata over a note in measure 76. Below the Soprano part, there are two systems of music. The first system starts at measure 57 and includes the lyrics 'Chi d'a - mor gli af - fet - ti in - ten - de, com - pa - ti - sca il mio pe - nar, com - pa -'. Below this is a 'C.di B.' (Corno di Bassetto) part with a dynamic marking of *p* and a note that says '...in m.60 only'. The second system starts at measure 62 and includes the lyrics '- ti - sca, com - pa - ti - sca, com - pa - ti - - - sca il mio pe - nar.' Below this is a 'Vln. I' (Violin I) part with a dynamic marking of *p*. Measure numbers are indicated at the beginning and end of various sections: m.76, m.57, m.77, m.62, m.82, m.66, and m.86.

Abbreviations: t = appoggiatura; C.di B = Corno di Bassetto; Vln.=Violin
 Sources: Voice part - British Museum Add. Mss. 14396, fol. 15 - 21
 Orchestra - Alte Mozart G. A. (Leipzig, 1879) Ser. 5/17, p. 418-420

One observes at a glance that this decoration fulfills all the requirements set forth by Türk; but it far exceeds Türk's specification. Perhaps the most immediately striking detail of this elaboration is that it functions as the melodic climax of the section of the aria of which it forms the conclusion, with the emphasis it places on *g*' by prolonging and surrounding it.

For more than ten measures preceding the sustained *c*'⁶, the vocal line remains rather confined to the "tessitura" *f*'-*f*' without ever reaching a decisive high point. (Nor does the music following the fermata ever gain a melodic high point above *f*'). What a marvelous touch that the decoration exceeds the *f*' and then moves on, in a short space, to stress the otherwise ignored "low" pitch of these phrases, *c*', by leaping down to it and creating a point of cadential repose upon it!

In addition to making high and low melodic climaxes which fulfill dramatic necessities in this area of the aria, the decoration also introduces chromatic inflections which fulfill a necessity for contrast. The completely diatonic scheme in the phrases preceding the fermata confines itself to the principal triads of the key of F major. The fine chromatic shadings in the elaboration relieve this monotony and serve as well to enhance and animate the entire decoration, heightening the inconclusiveness of the half cadence with the introduction of the "*b* \flat " and "*f* \sharp ".

"M'accende", the text over which the fermata is executed, must have played an important role in the composer's mind in shaping the decoration as he did. Indeed, text painting is an important technique in this aria sometime before the fermata. The music for the text from m. 66 to the end of the fermata ("Ah! ch'omai più non resisto all'ardor che in sen m'accende") shows a gradual weakening of resistance to the flame, which flickers and glows in the orchestra, finally bursting forth briefly in the elaboration, only to die down again quickly at its conclusion.

Still two other aspects of fermata elaboration deserve attention: the rhythmic and the metric. These two components are, I feel, two of the most important in terms of the impact a decoration can and should have on the performance of an aria. But, in order for them to operate well, those aspects we have already observed must first be in good order.

The rhythmic function of the fermata is at once negative and positive. On the negative side, a fermata of the type in KV 577 brings about the cessation of the pulse at the end of a major structural section of an aria. Such an interruption of the rhythmic flow of a piece is a necessary foil to continuous motion. On the positive side, note values in a fermata decoration are various and often do not correspond at all in time to those of the work into which they are introduced, thus making a sort of digression on a micro-rhythmic level.

In much the same manner that the metrical freedom of secco recitatives provides a telling dramatic contrast to the more rigorously controlled metrical plans of arias, so fermata decorations provide a release from the metrical fetters in the interior of an aria. This release or freedom within the aria is crucial to achieving the fullest realization of expressive power.

That Türk's advice about the rendering of note values in his illustrations is sound⁷, is easily demonstrated by performing our Mozart elaboration strictly in time. Such a performance is shocking in its lack of grace and vitality; but a performance such as the one I have indicated in Example 2 does have grace and thrust, and seems to suit the situation well. In spite of the speeding

Ex.2

The musical notation shows a single melodic line on a treble clef staff. It begins with a half note, followed by a series of sixteenth notes. Above the staff, several markings indicate performance directions: 'hesitatingly' (with a dotted line), 'speeding' (with a dashed line), 'slower' (with a solid line), 'hesitatingly' (with a dotted line), 'speeding' (with a dashed line), 'slowing' (with a solid line), and 'prolonged' (with a fermata symbol). The notes are mostly eighth and sixteenth notes, with some quarter notes.

and slowing, the uneven metrical structure of the elaboration has not been damaged, for the agogic accents and the organization of the sixteenth-note groups create metrical units of varying lengths. How needful it is in this aria that the elaboration break down the almost cloying emphasis on the downbeats, particularly in the five measures preceding the fermata! Hence, while a fermata is, in effect, a rhythmic cessation, the decoration of that fermata is a sort of rhythmic-metric development or, if you will, digression.

In sum, a suitable decoration in an operatic aria in the Classical period must be integrated into the piece at hand and must serve the musical and dramatic ends intended by the composer. To achieve this suitability heed must be given to:

1. the text
2. the spirit of the piece and the specific area where the decoration is to be introduced
3. the melodic and harmonic contexts
4. the rhythmic-metric scheme of the elaboration in relation to its surroundings
5. the duration of the singer's breath and his personal technical capabilities

It is the obligation of the knowledgeable and well trained singer to be aware of these points and to execute a fermata elaboration as an integral and meaningful part of an aria; not to use this moment for idle-minded virtuoso display. In our thinking we most overcome the notion of the fermata elaboration as a quirk of the period and begin to understand it as a musical and dramatic necessity where composers have called for its use.

Footnotes

- 1 An additional aria for "Le Nozze di Figaro", KV 492, composed for the Vienna revival of 29 August 1789, to replace Susanna's "Deh vieni non tardar".
- 2 D. G. Türk, "Klavierschule, oder Anweisung zum Klavierspielen", Leipzig/Halle 1789, 299-308.
- 3 D. Corri, "A Select Collection of the Most Admired Songs, Duets, &c. from Operas in the highest esteem. . .", Edinburgh and London ca. 1780, 3 vols. Vol. 1 "Italian Songs, Rondeaus, Duets, &c."
- 4 D. Corri, "The Singers (sic) Preceptor", London 1810, 2 vols. Vol. 1, p. 75.
- 5 a) In the hand of Vincent Novello on the first page of the source:
"This Manuscript is the identical Copy from which Mozart used to accompany his wife, when she sang this beautiful composition. He also wrote a little cadence for her which is still to be found in his own hand-writing at the end of the Song. Madame Mozart was so kind as to present me with this very interesting M. S. when I had the gratification of visiting her at Saltsburgh, in August, 1829. V. Novello".
b) In the hand of Constanze Mozart under the elaboration on the final page of the source:
"Questa è la Scrittura di mio defonto Marito Mozart chi ha fato per me e che il Signor Novello averà la bona grazia di prendere da me, Constanza Nissen Salisburgo il 3 agosto 1829".
- 6 The "messa di voce" would have been applied to this sustained c". Cf. G. Mancini, "Pensieri, e Riflessioni Pratiche sopra il canto figurato", Vienna 1774, 100.
- 7 Türk, op. cit., 301. "Die Dauer der Töne lässt sich nicht genau bestimmen, daher kann man hin und wieder etwas länger verweilen, andere Stellen hingegen ein wenig geschwinder spielen, je nachdem es der Affekt erfordert".

Wilhelm Dupont

REFLEXIONEN ZUR LOKALEN MUSIKFORSCHUNG

Mancher Städte musikalischer Ruhm wird gerne mit nur einem Namen verbunden. Als Geburtsorte großer Meister oder deren Wirkungsstätten festigte sich ihr Ansehen in aller Welt. Bonn und Beethoven, Salzburg und Mozart sind ebenso beredete Beispiele wie Leipzig und Johann Sebastian Bach.

Rang und Ruf anderer Musiker werden dadurch oftmals zu stark überschattet, ihre Anteile am gesamten Geschehen vergangener und jetziger Zeiten nicht mehr richtig erkannt. Die Musikgeschichte aber konstituiert sich nicht allein aus ihren „Heroen“; auch die „Kleinmeister“ tragen zu ihrem dynamischen Wogen wesentlich bei. Erst im Vergleich mit der Gesamtheit musikalischer Äußerungen werden die wahren Zusammenhänge klarer erkennbar, zuweilen nebensächlich anmutende Belege mitunter