

EARLY MODERN SOUNDSCAPES  
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The English traveller, Thomas Coryat, famously reported on a concert of vocal and instrumental music he had attended at the Scuola di S. Rocco in Venice in 1608. In what was a highly impressive performance, it was the singing which stood out for him:

Of the singers there were three or foure so excellent that I thinke few or none in Christendome do excell them, especially one, who had such a peerelesse and (as I may in a maner say) such a supernaturall voice for sweetness, that I think there was neuer a better singer in all the world insomuch that he did not onely giue the most pleasant contentment that could be imagined, to all the hearers, but also did as it were astonish and amaze them.<sup>1</sup>

Coryat's ecstatic response to what he heard that evening stands near the beginning of an era of almost addictive infatuation by northern Europeans with the sound of Italian art singing, something hitherto reserved to a very small number of royal and ducal courts outside Italy. Before long, drawn by the opportunities to find employment or make more money in rapidly developing 'bourgeois' countries including Austro-Germany, France, the Low Countries, and England, Italian singers became increasingly mobile. Music-lovers without the means to travel abroad were thus able to hear virtuoso singers in the flesh, stoking a near-insatiable hunger for the ecstatic and exotic allure of Italian vocalism, and creating the basis of one of Italy's most successful and enduring cultural exports.

Typical is this anonymous 'Poem on the Italian Woman Lately come into England who Sings at the Musick-House in York-Buildings' published in 1693:<sup>2</sup>

What elevating Notes are these I hear!  
A Voice! or is't the Musick of the Sphere? ...  
Pleasures unknown before it does impart,  
That warm the Spirits and dissolve the Heart.  
Methink's the Air's Perfum'd, while all around  
The little Atoms fly to catch the sound.  
Sure the charm'd Soul anticipates her Bliss,  
For ne'er was heard below a Strain like this.  
'Tis then the Language of some pitying Saint,  
Who with the Joys of Heav'n does Earth acquaint.  
(How blest are we! Alive to taste of Heav'n,  
Which is not before Death to others giv'n!).

And so on...

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities: Hastily gobled up in Five Monthe's Travels* (London: W. Stansby, 1611), 252.

<sup>2</sup> (London: Ronald Taylor, 1693).

Indeed, the story of how Italy, the land of song, in a process beginning in the sixteenth century, harnessed and packaged-up its native people's apparently natural, inborn, and irresistibly alluring vocalism and so successfully exported it, that by the late-seventeenth century it had already achieved a European hegemony of art singing that would eventually become world-wide, has achieved something of the status of a myth. This quasi-imperial domination of the vocal soundscape imaginary remained largely unchallenged – even in commercial popular music – well into the twentieth century (in an interview in 1965, for example, Frank Sinatra said of his own vocal style: 'What I finally hit on was more the *bel canto* Italian school of singing, without making a point of it'). Italian vocalism, as an international brand, arguably still holds us in thrall today: its nostalgic aura continues to cast its spell, not least as the vocal soundtrack that sells everything from passion to pasta.

Behind the myth of Italian singing's success lies, of course, plenty of fact: a rich historiography traces the material and political forces that drove the colonisation by Italian vocalism of vast swathes of European music culture through compositional genres from madrigals to opera; human migrations of Italian singers, composers, and singing teachers (many of whom were all three); and the consequent spawning of local diasporic and assimilated Italianate performance styles for native music of all kinds. By the early eighteenth century, Italian vocalism was at the centre of a dynamic network of structures of music consumption across Northern and Eastern Europe, epitomised by the rapid development of a trans-national commercial music-theatre industry and the many subsidiary economies that it either directly supported, or which spilled out from it. These include the song publishing trade; singing instruction for amateurs, particularly of the professional and upper classes; and even Protestant church music. Each was embroiled in complex hierarchies of fashion and ideology, driven by fluid dynamics of class and cultural consumption. The sound of Italian singing itself (and, to a lesser if no less effective extent, violin playing) was, ultimately, the key driver of an extraordinarily long-lived global industry that combined the essential ingredients of any successful brand: emotional power (as experienced by Coryat in 1608 and the anonymous groupie in 1693, and still going strong today); mobility and adaptability; and a seemingly indefatigable ingenuity for generating fresh products to feed its various markets.

There is, however, an important distinction to be made between, on one hand, its export in the form of professional Italian singers leaving home either temporarily or for good to ply their trade in transalpine royal courts, aristocratic salons, opera houses, and public concerts; and on the other, its infiltration of the native singing cultures of Northern European countries, either through first-generation Italians settling and setting up teaching practices to pass on the craft to (mainly amateur) native singers, or the adoption and absorption of Italianate singing techniques into local church music, vernacular song, and music theatre. From the start, aspirant emulators of Italian vocalism, often without direct contact with native practitioners, and in the absence of the obvious modern aid to imitation – recordings – turned to teaching themselves from printed music and instruction books.

Rather like the historical re-constructionists of the present-day early music movement, early modern aspirant imitators had a potentially considerable body of written materials to draw on: Italian ornamentation manuals, music theory books, and

of course, manuscript and printed music itself. Starting in the early seventeenth century and continuing through the following 200 years, this in turn generated a substantial body of vernacular pedagogical literature, notably in German and English, specifically designed to convey Italian vocalism to non-Italian readerships of would-be singers and teachers of the pre-eminent style.

How many of the 'home-grown' singing manuals travelled over the Alps before about 1620 (when this genre of print largely dried up in Italy for a century) is hard to calculate but was probably minimal; what is perhaps more useful to consider is to whom these publications had originally been addressed 'at home'. We might begin with those readers who, as members of the class that from the early sixteenth-century felt the pressure to acquire at least the rudiments of the courtly style of affective singing, thanks mainly to the influence of Baldassare Castiglione's precepts, first printed in 1528 in *Il libro del corteggiano*, for demonstrating musical accomplishment.

The Neapolitan Giovanni Camillo Maffei's 'Letter on Singing', published in 1564, explained to his target audience of courtier amateurs how to go about at least 'appearing' to be able to sing in a suitable way to pass in a Castiglionic courtly environment.<sup>3</sup> Although Maffei makes passing reference to ideals of vocal sound (apparently mainly a matter of breeding), as in almost all early treatises, there is very little about what today would be treated as fundamental – voice development. Rather, the Letter explains the rudiments of adding basic ornaments to a simple madrigal, performed either in a quartet or as a solo, by articulating them gently in the throat (that is, 'cantar di gorga'). By following Maffei's instructions, courtiers would demonstrate appropriately disciplined bodily control (in this case of the larynx) and good taste, thereby fulfilling his precept that links singing to the very essence of nobility: 'Il vero modo di cantar cavalesco e di conpiacere all'orecchia, è il cantar di gorga' – 'the true style of courtly (or 'cavalier') singing and of pleasing the ear is singing with throat articulation'. In other words, the ideal of Italian singing which spawned the global brand (if this is its origin) was, from the start intimately tied up with an oral expression of class – or perhaps, 'classiness'.

By the time we reach the kinds of systematised tables of notated ornamentation patterns for each melodic interval that form the main body of books by known professional musicians, such as Giovanni Battista Bovicelli's *Regole passaggi di musica* of 1594 or Francesco Rognoni's *Selva varii di passaggi* published in Milan in 1620 (which also contains the first ever printed table of graded and annotated vocal exercises), it suggests we are now dealing with a wider market of non-noble amateurs (both singers and instrumentalists) wanting not just to enjoy vicariously aristocrats' and professionals' music by reading from madrigal and other kinds of part-books, but also to emulate their styles of interpretation and embellishment. And it is accurately articulated, often phenomenally high-speed, florid embellishment of the basic melodic line, made possible by 'cantar di gorga' – or *dispositione* – that produced the most iconic Italian vocal signature: *passaggio* (today usually referred to as *coloratura*, or, as it was sometimes translated into English – notably by its detractors – 'quavering').

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<sup>3</sup> *Delle lettere del Giovanni Camillo Maffei da Solofra, dove ... è un discorso della Voce e del Modo, d'apparare di cantar di Gargantua, senza maestro, non più veduto, n'istampato* (Napoli, Raymondo Amate, 1562).

And just as courtiers' music-making (to judge by Maffei's examples) was clearly a very simplified version of what 'real' musicians did, these later ornamentation methods for amateurs were likewise distillations by professionals of some of their own 'skill capital', which they were prepared to disseminate within a commercial framework.

Thus, the famed Papal chapel singer, Giovanni Luca Conforti, claims in the introduction to his pithy, but by no means undemanding *Breve et facile maniera d'essercitarsi* (of 1593), that it is written 'in compact form, such that all those who sing and play, can acquire good and pleasing *dispositione* in less than two months'.

The apogee of this trend is surely the now iconic *Le nuove musiche* by Giulio Caccini, published in Florence in 1602 with an Introduction containing possibly deliberately opaque details of the professional singer's interpretational strategies, followed by a set of 'worked examples' of madrigals and sonnets.<sup>4</sup>

Caccini's motive for publishing *Le nuove musiche* (and following it up with a second volume in 1614) is puzzling. A Roman child prodigy brought to Florence as a boy, he dug himself in at the Medici court as a chamber singer, and then proceeded to practise and promulgate the highly refined *reservata* style of courtly singing through his clearly exceptional skills as a sought-after teacher, all the while extending his own fame as a singer exclusively within courtly circles. Why would he risk publishing his secrets of spontaneous embellishment, including instructions on how to apply them? Knowing what we do of Caccini's life and personality, it could have been vanity, jealousy of his rivals, attracting wealthy pupils, or all of these (and he was also getting on in years, with an eye to his legacy).

Once the genie was out of the bottle, using the mass-distribution of print to disseminate generic figures of vocal technique and embellishment reduced to notation, with instructions about how and when to apply them, quickly fed a wild-fire of marketization of a hitherto secretive, oral tradition, and its packaging for an international mass market. However, the simple fact remains that almost all music performance skills, on account of their complex embodied materiality, are best transmitted orally and aurally, and the reading of books can only ever be supplementary. Art-singing style certainly cannot be acquired by running through exercises read from a page: it needs live exemplars, and if possible, the guidance of a teacher. As the virtuoso Roman tenor, Giovanni Domenico Puliaschi wrote in the Introduction to a volume of his songs, printed in 1618 to demonstrate in notation both his extraordinary vocal range and his improvisation skills:

if some virtuoso who has not heard me would want to know how I sing ... it would be difficult to explain in words because many vocal effects are better understood by hearing them done than by having them described.<sup>5</sup>

What is really interesting I feel, is that precisely this same conundrum lies at the heart of the phenomenon of the international migration of Italian vocalism mediated through vernacular print, and its marketing as something that might be 'acquired' by native

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<sup>4</sup> Giulio Caccini, *Le nuove musiche* (Florence: Jacopo Marescotti, 1602).

<sup>5</sup> Gio. Domenico Puliaschi, *Musiche varie a una voce* (Roma: Bartolomeo Zannetti, 1618).

singers. Thus, for the many who, unlike Thomas Coryat, could not go to Italy; or later on in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, those enthusiastic amateurs who might be lucky enough to hear an Italian opera performance in Hamburg, London or Vienna, but not have the means to study with an expensive Italian singing master in the flesh, the allure of acquiring the elixir of Italian vocal art from a relatively affordable 'do-it-yourself' manual would have been tempting.

Thus, the principal purpose of the annotated translation of Pier Francesco Tosi's iconic *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni* (1723) into German by Johann Friedrich Agricola in 1757 as *Anleitung zur Singkunst*, and its successors such as Johann Adam Hiller's *Anweisung zum musikalischen-zierlichen Gesange* in 1780 were justified as serving the reform of German opera singing, but these books also fed a hungry amateur market for packaged Italian singing instruction.

A good example is Wolfgang Caspar Printz, composer, theorist and small-town Kantor of Triebel in Brandenburg, who confidently proposed in *Musica Modulatoria Vocalis* in 1678 that even 'village urchins from the meadows', provided they had the requisite 'Lieb und Lust zu singen' and given the right instruction, could acquire, in the words of Michael Praetorius, writing sixty years earlier, 'der jetzig Newen Italienischen Manier zur guten Art im singen' ('the latest new Italian style of good singing').<sup>6</sup> Using Printz's book, a literate choirmaster, who may well never have heard an Italian singer, could in theory teach the full gamut of Italianate voice production and interpretative *affects* from an instruction manual complete with notated examples of stylistic embellishments and associated operating instructions, effectively transforming what in sophisticated Italian professional practice were matters of highly individualistic interpretation and taste, into a set of rules to turn country lads into refined singers *à l'italiano*.

Printz explains that once the choirboy has made his naturally 'Grob bäuer=isch Stimme' (rough, peasant-voice) acceptably 'lieblich' or 'sweet' by singing German motets both indoors and at outdoor burials, he will be ready to learn to execute the 'gentle *trilletto* and the more marked *trillo*', iconic vocal ornaments made in the throat, that require the lightest and most flexible control to execute. However, Printz concedes that these cannot be learned from books alone, and that the boy will need to imitate such singers (presumably older boys) who can already sing such *accenti* 'recht lieblich' ('really beautifully') as, again in Praetorius's words, 'one bird learns from another'.<sup>7</sup>

The apparent success of the 'Italian-style vocal method books' is surely their materialisation of the idea, wittingly or not, that the essence of Italian singing – what Coryat so assiduously observed as 'a sweetness, that ... give[s] the most pleasant contentment that could be imagined' – lies not in having a specifically *Italian* voice but rather a matter of learning and applying various kinds of embellishments to the basic melody of a song, that can in theory be performed by any voice, regardless of national origin, provided it has been tamed and suitably civilized. This makes it much more amenable to transfer through the medium of a printed manual, drilling and practice – something quantifiable, and thus saleable.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma Musicum*, vol. III, (Wolfenbüttel: Elias Holwein, 1619), p. 230.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Caspar Printz, *Musica Modulatoris Vocalis oder Manierliche und zierliche Sing-Kunst* (Schweidnitz: Christian Otels, 1678).

But such a hard confrontation between the brand identity of a semi-mythical Italian vocal sound that could only be conveyed by suitably endowed natives, and its potential materialisation as a mass-production model available to anyone capable of reading a book, was (and in many ways continues to be) fought out at the perennial anxious frontier of *authenticity* – the real thing versus cheap knock-off.

In the Introduction to his *The Singer's Praeceptor* published in 1810, the fashionable early nineteenth-century Italian Edinburgh singing teacher, Domenico Corri, gently mocks those who think the elusive *bel canto* can be reduced to a few technicalities, and uses the fancy mystique of Italian vocality to persuade the budding student that she is going to need to buy a lot of reassuringly expensive lessons:

Scholar: I wish to receive some instruction in the art of singing.

Master: a singer, like an orator, will form to himself a peculiar distinguishing manner, but the command of a good style can only result from taste, aided by judgment and experience, which will teach you to introduce embellishments with propriety...

Scholar: What are the embellishments of singing?

Master: I see that you, like all other beginners, are impatient for the ornaments and graces, and are more inclined to direct your attention to the superficial than the solid, but the substance should be well formed before you think of adorning it; and recollect, that the firmest bodies take the finest polish.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Domenico Corri, *The Singer's Praeceptor or Corri's Treatise on Vocal Music* (London, 1810).