The Materiality of Early Modern Ensemble Music-Making

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Rank-and-file musicians rarely feature in early modern documentary sources, and then only to record when they are appointed or dismissed, on pay-days, if they misbehave, or they die. But before they disappear again into the obscurity from which they emerged, a fleeting glimpse of these otherwise anonymous servants in a text or painting can sometimes stimulate questions apparently completely peripheral to its main subject matter. Such is the case with the group of five unnamed singers who have a small, walk-on role in that iconic war of words known so well to anyone who has taught or taken a standard music-history course that includes the so-called 'Artusi-Monteverdi Controversy'.

Recall that the trouble all started when, claiming to having heard a performance of some as-yet unpublished madrigals by Claudio Monteverdi, the priest and student of Zarlino, Giovanni Maria Artusi published a blistering attack on what he regarded as the composer's incompetence in egregiously violating the rules of counterpoint. Beginning with *Artusi, Or the Imperfections of Modern Music*, published by Giacomo Vincenti in 1600, a furious pamphlet war ensued which, as suggested by Tim Carter, may have been abetted, or at least encouraged by Vincenti and his rival, Ricciardo Amadino (who was also Monteverdi's publisher), to fuel a confected confrontation between, in one corner, the conservative forces of mainstream music and in the other, the iconoclasts of the new avant-garde.[1] In 1607, Giulio Cesare Monteverdi, responding on behalf of his brother, announced that Claudio's promised rebuttal was imminent (although in fact, it never appeared) and, riffing on Artusi's own title, would be called *Seconda prattica, or the Perfections of Modern Music*. Whether or not Vincenti and Amadino deliberately set out to use an abstruse argument about matters of music theory to fuel a 'war on woke', it could hardly have produced a more potent pair of buzzwords: the neat, but entirely theoretical, division of compositional modes belonging either to '*prima*' or the '*seconda*' *prattiche*. And these two abstract terms are the shorthand we *still* teach to this day in order to simplify a whole raft of complex developments in musical genre and performance style that occurred during that equally neat historical construct, the so-called 'transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque'.

Artusi's pamphlets are cast in typical Renaissance dialogue form: the author creates a pair of fictional characters who expound the subject matter as a kind of theatre script, perhaps to make complex technical arguments more digestible. To help animate their two-dimensional characters, dialogues often begin with a brief anecdote that sets the scene and provides a framing narrative for the ensuing conversation. A typical example is Thomas Morely's *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* and its famous opening scene, in which the character Philomathes is invited to a smart London dinner-party where, in an excruciatingly mortifying moment, he reveals his lack of a critical social skill when partbooks are brought out at the end of the meal and he has to admit that he can't read music: "everyone began to wonder. Yea, some whispered to others, demanding how I was brought up". Next day, with his tail between his legs, Philomathes begs his schoolmaster to make

[1] Tim Carter, 'Artusi, Monteverdi, and the Poetics of Modern Music', in Nacy Kovaleff Baker and Barbara Russano Hanning (eds.), *Musical Humanism and its Legacy: Essays in Honor of Claude V. Palisca* (Hillside. NY: Pendragon Press, 1992), pp. 171–94.

good his ignorance, and so follows Morely's theoretical treatise, cast as a series of conversations between teacher and pupil.

In the first *Artusi* the author is represented by Vario, 'a gentleman from Arezzo who is very skilled in music' in conversation with 'Luca', an Austrian, who tells Vario the following story:

> Yesterday, sir, after I had left Your Lordship and was going towards the Piazza, I was invited by some gentlemen to hear certain new madrigals. Delighted by the amiability of my friends and by the novelty of the compositions, I accompanied them to the house of Signor Antonio Goretti, a nobleman of Ferrara, a young virtuoso and as great a lover of music as any I have known. I found there Signor Luzzasco and Signor Hippolito Fiorini, distinguished men, with whom had assembled many noble spirits versed in music. The madrigals were sung and repeated, but without giving the name of the author. The texture was not unpleasing. But, as Your Lordship will see, insofar as it introduced new rules, new modes, and new turns of phrase, these were harsh and little pleasing to the ear'.[2]

Vario proceeds to dissect the faulty ideology of these examples of modern music, deploring in particular the complete unacceptability of Monteverdi's unprepared dissonances, carefully set out in a number of music examples reproduced in the text in short score (but without words), which for him demonstrated offences against the rational laws of Zarlinonian music theory. However, Luca seems to come to the defence of the composer by pointing out the key role played by expert singers in nuancing dissonances, when they naturally improvise expressive alterations to the written notation (as he says: 'things left implicit') as they read them in the moment of performance. He calls this aspect of vocality *cantare accentato*, which, in his opinion 'renders a pleasing harmony at which I marvel'. But Vario/Artusi maintains that however skilfully the singers might apply affective ornaments, this does not change the fact that the composed dissonances:

> always are and [always] will be grating, crude, harsh and insupportable to the ear. And when this song is taken from the hands of these singers, it will inevitably [still] be [insupportable] and will remain thus, because in sum, that is what it is.[3]

Artusi's almost throwaway comment about the song being 'taken from the hands' of the singers once their performance is finished is for me an arresting one: it's an evocative image of a literal separation between the notation of the song (which for him is 'what it is') and its anonymous executants, as the five professional singers, their own agency in the music apparently entirely irrelevant, leave the part books behind on the table as it were and exit the

[2] Giovanni Maria Artusi, *L'Artusi, overo Delle imperfettioni della moderna musica* (Venice: Giacomo Vincenti, 1600), fol. 39r–39v: 'Heri dopò ch' io lasciai Vostra Signoria verso la Piazza inviatomi fui da alcuni Gentilhuomini, invitato à sentire certi Madrigali nuovi; cosi trasportato dalla amorevolezza de gl' amici, et dalla novità delle Compositioni, andassimo in casa del Signor Antonio Goretti Nobile Ferrarese, giovane virtuoso, e amatore de' Musici, quanto ogn' altro, che per ancora habbi conosciuto: là dove ritrovai il Signor Luzasco, e 'l Signor Hippolito Fiorini, huomini segnalati, che con loro s' erano ridotti molti spiriti nobili, et della Musica intendenti: Furono Cantati una, et due volte; ma tacciuto il nome dell' Auttore: era la tessitura non ingrata, se bene come Vostra Signoria vedrà, introduce nuove Regole, nuovi modi, et nuova frase del dire, sono però aspri, et all' udito poco piacevoli'.

[3] Giovanni Maria Artusi, *Seconda parte dell'Artusi overo Delle imperfettioni della moderna musica* (Venice: Giacomo Vicenti, 1603), p. 10: 'sempre sono, & saranno aspre, crude, dure, & insoportabili all'udito. Et quando sarà quella cantilena fuori delle mani di cosi fatti Cantori, bisogna che sia, & appaia tale, perche in soma ella è tale'.

room by the back stairs, never to appear again. It also hints, I'd like to suggest, at more fundamental questions about the ways we construct our historiographies of early modern music.

The whole 'event' that opens Artusi's attack on modern music may well be entirely fictional, invented to provide some colour to brighten up his dry paper analyses of music excerpts from the madrigals. For example, Luca makes a barely credible claim to have transcribed the madrigals by ear following the performance. Notwithstanding, and maybe particularly because I also have 'lived experience' of being an anonymous performer roped in on many occasions to illustrate an otherwise theoretical musicological presentation, I have always wondered about the five singers in this story. What did *they* consider to be the function of, and their relationship with, the notes from which they read before they were 'taken from their hands'? What, indeed, are the 'materials' of such a performance? Are they simply the abstract notational code which it is the musicians' job to execute as analogue sound, or do they extend, say, to include the physiological processes of singing – and, by implication, of listening? The acoustical effects of the structure of the room on the sonic experience? Visual aspects of performance such as expressive facial gestures exchanged between singers and audience? And how significant are the relationships between the singers and the other people present at this event – the nobleman host and the other 'distinguished … and … noble spirits versed in music'?

To put my questions in a nutshell, I defer to the great music sociologist, Christopher Small:

> What does it mean when this performance (of this work) takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants? Or to put it more simply, we can ask of the performance, any performance anywhere and at any time, *What's really going on here*?[4]

Small famously insists that music is not a thing, but a process – something that happens – coining the neologism 'musicking' to describe it. Further, as you may recall, he proposed that:

> To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing.[5]

To which he added that 'participants' includes anyone who contributes to making the performance happen (in his particular case-studies, these included the person who takes the tickets on the door, the stagehands, and roadies).

But what Small goes on to say (and what is often forgotten) is critical both to his entire thesis and also to what I want to suggest could be a fruitful way of understanding early modern ensemble performances that takes us beyond traditional musicological concerns:

> The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are commonly thought of as the being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as a

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[4] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan, 1998), p. 10 (original emphasis).

[5] Small, *Musicking*, p. 9.

metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be.[6]

It seems a reasonable expansion of Small's list of participants to include not just the people taking part, but also *all* relevant inanimate 'materials' – in the New Materialist Jane Bennett's words, the 'vibrant matter' – sounds, objects, embodied actions and environmental spaces, that are all critical to the dynamic network or 'assemblage' in any act of musicking, and which create its 'musical meaning' through the relationships established.

So, let's test this out on another scene of sixteenth century musicking that is definitely a work of fiction, but no less worth exploring for that. Tomaso Costo's *Il fuggilozio* is in the tradition of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, addressed to 'anyone who needs to escape damnable idleness'.[7] Eight gentlemen and two ladies go to visit Prior Ravaschiero at his magnificent palazzo in the Naples suburb of Posilipo, overlooking the sea. The prior is suffering from gout, so they decide to cheer him up, and for the next eight days they hang out together, exchanging hundreds of jokes, witty anecdotes, and pithy epigrams. At the end of each day, they relax by playing games, fishing and, what they all love doing most of all, making music. Each evening, other Neapolitan grandees come out in their boats to enjoy the air and to eavesdrop on the music. Thus, at the end of the first day:

> Because boats had begun to appear, it was decided that they should bring their discussion to a close for the day and the viols be prepared in order to sing something beautiful. It was a good idea to tune up the instruments, as countless boats were already coming; … [soon] three beautiful and highly decorated *filuche* (as these boats are called) arrived; in the first of them, accompanied by many other ladies, was the Duchess of Montalto, Donna Maria della Zerda, most noble and most important noblewoman … and in the other two, many gentlemen of her household, with several musicians, who came playing and singing to give her pleasure.[8]

They are soon joined by other boats with numerous knights and gentlemen on board.

> It then seemed to Ravaschiero, the good company having taken the instruments into their hands, that he would play and sing something beautiful: some madrigals were sung, and among them, the following was the most notable:
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> 'Esce splendor da gli occhi di mia Diva / Ch'or m'abbaglia, or m'alluma'.[9]
>
> […]

[6] Small, *Musicking*, p. 13.

[7] *Il Fuggilozio di Tomaso Costo Diviso in otto griornate…* (Naples: G. I. Carlin and A. Pace / repr. Venice: Barezzo Barezzi, 1600, fol. A5r. 'ciascuno il dannosissim' ozio doversi fuggire'.

[8] Ibid., p. 67. 'Ma perche erano cominciate a comparir delle barche, fu concluso, che per quel dì si faesse punto al ragionate, e si mettesser a ordine le viole per cantar qualche cosa di bello. Si penò buona pezza ad accordar quegli stromenti, ond'erano già venute infinite barche; … Giunte le tre faluche (così dette quelle barche), nella prima d'esse venuta, accompagnata da molte altre Signore, la Duchessa di Montalto Donna Maria della Zerda, Signore nobilissima, e principalissima, che allora per indisposizione stanziava al buon' aere di Chiaia, e nell' altre due molti gentilhuomini suoi creati, con alquanti musici, che venivan [sic] sonando, e cantando per darle piacere ...

[9] Ibid., p. 67. 'Parve allora al Ravaschiero, ed alla bella brigata, che dato di mano a gli stromenti si sonasse, e cantasse qualche cosa di bello: furon cantati alcuni Madrigali, e fra gli altri fu il piu notabile questo, che segue'.

> This madrigal was excellently sung, at which all those Lords and Ladies made their boats stop and were very intent, taking no small delight. Better still, almost in competition, they got their musicians to sing the following madrigal:
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> > 'Se gli atti, o Donna, le parole, e'l viso / D'angelo havete, e un'angelo sembrate'.[10]

In a purely musicological investigation, we might, for example, extract from this passage the information that in turn of the century Naples, madrigals could be sung together with instruments, including viols. In fact, this is precisely how such texts are normally used by performance practice scholars, although others have warned that 'novelistic' descriptions like this one present more or less idealized situations that may not necessarily represent actuality. Nevertheless, if we consider the totality of the material dimensions of this musicking moment as Costo describes it, we would have to take note not just of the viols (and their tuning up) and the other, unspecified instruments played by the household musicians in the duchess's three *faluche*, but also the acoustical make-up of the sounds emanating from the room in the palazzo through its open window and on the water beneath, the intensity of the listeners' attention and even the technology and mechanics of handling and holding the boats still. If we then evaluate the complex relationships established during this act of musicking, the human participants will include not just the leisured dilettantes in the palazzo and their upper-class listeners, but also the servant musicians performing to order, and the oarsmen crewing the boats. We may well then conclude, picking up on Christopher Small's construction, that they did not necessarily bring into being a *single shared* 'model, or … metaphor of ideal relationships.' Clearly participants in a single act of musicking can have different conceptions of the meaning of what they are doing, depending on the social and material circumstances.

Finally, I turn to an iconographic description of music-making on water produced in 1585, not long before Costo's novel (Figure 1).

[10] Ibid., p. 69. 'Fu questo Madrigale eccellentemente cantato, a che tutti que' Signori e Signore, fatte fermar le barche, stettero intentissimi, e n'hebbero non picciolo diletto, anzi fecero, che quei lor musici quasi a gara [i.e., almost in competition] di questi cantassero il seguente Madrig'.

Figure 1: David Brentel: 'Music on a gondola'. From the Weihenmayer Stammbuch (1585) (Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum). Presented to Anton Weihenmayer, *Bürgermeister* of Lauingen on the Danube

It depicts three finely dressed women and three men in a Venetian gondola, caught in an act of musicking. Their relaxed demeanours and the coordination of their endeavours suggest that the experience is a mutually satisfying celebration of the relationships they are modelling. As Christopher Small says elsewhere in his book:

> The fact that those who enjoy the event do not feel constrained but rather that they are behaving in a way that is natural and normal suggests once again that a musical performance, while it lasts, brings into existence relationships that model in metaphoric form those which they would like to see in the wider society of their everyday lives.[11]

Various material objects enabling this particular musicking are carefully depicted: the woman front left plays a lute and the man front right holds what looks like a cittern; all seem to be singing, while the woman in the centre holds a music book; the man to her right gestures with his left hand – perhaps directing the ensemble. On the table are a cloth, plates and a knife, ready for a picnic. The motto underneath reads 'Der Venediger Lust Bracht und Herligkeit' (The Venetian Love of Display and Magnificence). But what of the two gondoliers, or *traghettatori*?

They are Africans, and as we now know from the work of the historian Kate Lowe, they are almost certainly freed slaves working as freelance gondoliers for hire by the hour (rather

[11] Small, *Musicking*, p. 47.

than members of the guild which controlled ferry traffic across the Grand Canal).[12] What is the nature of *their* participation in this musicking? And what is the significance of the raised arm gesture of the gondolier on the left which seems to mirror – coincidentally or not – the gesture of the man in the tall hat? Is he signalling his physical entrainment with their music, or is he maybe mocking his passengers in a private exchange with his mate? Do the gondoliers have any sense that they are contributing to the six musicians' almost palpable shared 'model in metaphoric form [of] those relationships which they would like to see in the wider society of their everyday lives'?

I will leave these questions open, and merely conclude by proposing that we expand our field of exploration of the meaning of any moment of early modern music-making beyond our usual narrow focus on what it might tell us about 'the music itself' or its 'performance practice'. Rather, we should *always* begin by posing Christopher Small's core question: 'What's really going on here?' and consider the totality of its materiality. This consists not only of *all* the human participants, but also all relevant material components, including everything from notation (if used), the musical instruments and other physical objects, to gestures, sounds actions and interactions that make up the dynamic assemblage of relationships contributing to each act of musicking. Only then will we be in a position to reanimate and recontextualise musical experience as something fully entangled in the fabric of history.

[12] Kate Lowe, 'Visible Lives: Black Gondoliers and Other Black Africans in Renaissance Venice', *Renaissance Quarterly* 66 (2013): 412–52.