Text Declamation and Consonants: Means to Expressive Choral Singing

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The role of text declamation has often been neglected in our search for a means to expressive choral singing. Most often, the focus of a choral rehearsal is on note learning and elements of voice training while scant attention is paid to the text beyond that of pronunciation. This study focusses on text declamation as an essential element in our understanding, interpretation, and communication of the affective elements of a choral composition.

Text declamation, the most important element in determining articulation and phrasing in vocal music, was addressed most eloquently by the singing masters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their treatises and method books were intended for individual singers, but the same principles should also be adhered to by choral ensembles. Domenico Corri, a performer and teacher who spent most of his professional life in Edinburgh and London, confirmed this on the title page of his 1810 treatise, *The Singers Preceptor* (1810) which, he says, is "expressly calculated to teach the *Art of Singing* and consists of establishing proper rules, (the result of fifty years of experience) accommodated to the capacity of every student whether amateur or professional, theatrical, or choral." In this paper, the influence of text declamation on the interpretation of vocal music in general will be viewed from the standpoint of rhetoric and the role of consonants in their affective capacity.

As one of five major studies in rhetoric, Quintilian, a first century rhetorician, described the teaching of pupils in the preparation of an oration, as follows:

> [In reading aloud,] there is much that can only be taught in actual practice, as for instance when the boy should take breath, at what point he should introduce a pause into a line, where the sense ends or begins, when the voice should be raised or lowered, what modulation should be given to each phrase, and when he should increase or slacken speed, or speak with greater or less energy. In this portion of my work I will give but one golden rule: to do all these things, he must understand what he reads (Butler, 1958, I, p.10).

From the middle of the sixteenth century to at least the middle of the nineteenth century, treatises on singing made explicit the close union between public speaking and singing. Isaac Nathan (1836) characterized this union as follows: "We may account oratory, the twin sister of music: in both, expression holds the same inalienable sway. Hence, considering oratory as a science congener to music, as far as *expression* goes, we shall apply the one to the other" (pp.

223-4). In 1824, Richard Mackenzie Bacon, in his *Elements of Vocal Science*, also described attributes of words and music common to both. To Quintilian's list of rules for declamation, he added the tone of voice with which one speaks.

> The effects of reading or declamation are produced by the quality of tone, by inflexion, by emphasis, and by total cessations or pauses. Singing seems only to heighten these effects by using in a bolder manner the same agents. The principles of both are the same (Foreman, 1824/1966, p.73).

It follows then that a singer who would achieve an expressive performance must learn to read a text aloud in a declamatory manner before studying the pitch and rhythmic content of a composition. Manuel Garcia writes, with regard to emphasis, "We are always impressed by words strongly accentuated, because they appear to be dictated by some acute passion (1856, p.45). He also states, "one stresses more strongly when one declaims than when one speaks, and still more strongly when one sings" (p.26). By the middle of the nineteenth century, it seems it was necessary for him to remind singers to place emphasis on accented syllables, a mode of declamation to which singers of the previous century were accustomed.

Much can be learned about phrasing, articulation, tone, and inflection by reading excerpts from Shakespeare in a declamatory fashion. Thomas Heywood (1612), in *An Apology for Actors*, emphasizes the importance of punctuation when he writes about rhetoric, "it not onely emboldens a schollaer to speake, but instructs him to speake well, and with judgement to observe his comma's, colons, & full poynts, his parentheses, his breathing spaces, and distinctions" (p.29). The familiar "To be, or not to be" monologue from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, illustrates the degree to which punctuation, modulation of the voice, subtle variations in tempo, and altering the tonal quality of the voice are essential ingredients in conveying the affective nature of this monologue in a convincing manner. It is particularly important to note the timing and pacing of pauses as dictated by the punctuation. Commas, semi colons, colons, and periods are all part of a sense of poetic gesture, analogous to musical phrasing, that conveys the meaning of the text.

> To be, or not to be: that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
> No more; and by a sleep to say we end
> The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to, 't is a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
> To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause . . .
> (Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act III, Scene I, 1623/1977, p.861).

In 1622, Henry Peacham, in *The Complete Gentleman*, compared the rhetorical figure "prosopopoeia" with music's "passionate airs" (Heltzel, 1962, p.116). This figure of rhetoric is a vivid portrayal of the thoughts and feelings of the person being represented. A singer (like an orator) should identify with the character portrayed in the text of an aria to such a degree that the listener experiences the same passions as those of the writer (Toft, 1993, p.15). In 1856, Manuel Garcia, a singing teacher who taught many of Britain and Europe's finest singers between 1847 and 1895, writes in his treatise on the art of singing, "A pupil, in order to discover the tone suitable to each sentiment, should attentively study the words of his part . . . and recite his *role* as naturally as if giving utterance to his own feelings" (Garcia, 1856, p.67). Richard Bacon, in 1824,recommended the following method of preparing an aria,

> The student ought first to consider the appropriate delivery of the words before he tries them in combination with the air [aria]. Having thus determined how the words ought to be read [spoken aloud], he will proceed in the adaptation of them to melody" (Foreman, 1966, p78).

Let us consider the importance of consonants for the singer within the context of text declamation. Domenico Corri, in *The Singers Preceptor*, lists six requisites or gifts necessary for a good singer. Two of these concern the singing of words. They are 1) "Distinct articulation of words and sounds; by which only, meaning and sentiment can be expressed," and 2) "Quick perception; to give every word its proper energy or pathos" (1810, B, p.1). Louis Lablache, in his *Complete Method for Singing*, clearly differentiates between pronunciation and enunciation, which he refers to as articulation. "The merit of good pronunciation would disappear with the singer, if he did not add a good articulation, which consists in giving more or less force to the consonants. The degree of force of articulation ought to be subordinate to the sense of the words" (p.101).

Manuel Garcia also emphasizes the expressive nature of consonants. "Expression depends greatly on the weight and strength given to articulation. *Consonants express the force of a sentiment, just as vowels express its nature* [Garcia's emphasis] (1856, p.45). For Garcia, consonants are to singing as bowing is to playing stringed instruments and tonguing is to articulation on wind instruments. He clarifies this by saying that, "the consonant serves to mark the time, to make it incisive, to speed up or slow down the movement, to accentuate rhythms" (Foreman, 1975, p.27). Although a declamatory style of singing has most often been associated with seventeenth and eighteenth century vocal music, there is much evidence to show that nineteenth century singing masters advocated the same sensitivity to the rhetorical and declamatory elements in a text.

Christina Rossetti's "A Christmas Carol" (Crump, 1979, p.216), written in 1875, illustrates the musical nature of consonants and their ability to convey the affective qualities of a poem. Harold Darke's beautifully tranquil setting of this poem (Kyte, 1992, p.394), composed in 1911, affords the singer time to give consonants their due. The poem is rich in imagery that conjures a picture of wind, ice, and layers of snow. It is the onomatopoeic quality of Rossetti's words and their consonants that make vivid the experience of winter. The singer must emphasize these to convey to the listener the feeling of a bleak winter day. The subtleties of this affect can be much more difficult to convey than feelings of love, joy, anger,

melancholy, or grief that are easily found in the madrigals and operas of an earlier time. Given the simplicity of Darke's setting, the declamation of the poetry becomes central to the affective quality of its performance.

A Christmas Carol

In the bleak mid-winter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter
Long ago.

Important to note is the contrast between the short, crisp enunciation of the word "bleak" and the longer duration of consonants in the words "wind made moan." Again in contrast, the glottal stroke on the vowels in the words "earth" and "iron" are hard and precise as they are placed directly on the beat. Garcia states emphatically that important words beginning with vowels, "*should always be attacked by the* coup de glotte, *and with the degree of force which is appropriate to the phrase*" (Foreman, 1975, p.11). The word "water" begins with a very liquid consonant that functions as a glide to the vowel and the "st" of "stone" imparts to that word a hard, incisive beginning which is sustained by a long vowel and rounded with an "n." The "s" and "n" in "snow" require approximately a sixteenth note of anticipatory time value before the vowel in order for them to conjure the sound and feeling of snow falling layer upon layer. Similarly, the "fr" in "frost" requires at least a sixteenth note value as a shivering grace to the vowel placed on the beat. The repetition of the word snow and the phrase "snow on snow" is a figure borrowed from rhetoric called *epizeuxis*, a figure much preferred by composers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Toft, 1993, p.21). This repetition adds affect to the sound of the word "snow." As to the preparation for singing a poem such as this, Louis Lablache writes, "We would advise pupils to articulate rather extravagantly in study; for then if in singing before people they lose a little of their precision, they will still have enough to do well" (1856?, p.101).

Let us consider the text declamation in one more poem. "The White Island" by Robert Herrick (Patrick, 1963, p.497), an Elizabethan poet, was set to music by John Clements in 1961 (pp.19-24). This part-song setting illustrates the problems which an ensemble may encounter when giving text declamation and punctuation priority over the natural phrasing tendencies of a strophic piece whose composition is not as elegant as is the poetry.

The white Island: or place of the Blest.

IN this world (the *Isle of Dreams*)
While we sit by sorrowes streames,
Teares and terrors are our theames
Reciting:

But when once from hence we flie,
More and more approaching nigh
Unto young Eternitie
Uniting:

In that *whiter island*, where
Things are evermore sincere;
Candor here, and lustre there
Delighting:

There no monstrous fancies shall
Out of hell an horrour call,
To create (or cause at all)
Affrighting.

There in calm and cooling sleep
We our eyes shall never steep;
But eternall watch shall keep,
Attending

Pleasures, such as shall pursue
Me immortaliz'd, and you;
And fresh joyes, as never too
Have ending.

Although there are six verses in this poem, Clements employs a strophic structure using three groups of two stanzas. The reason for this becomes clear when we read the poem out loud and hear how the thought units occur in groups of two stanzas. If one treats this text as mere words under a strophic musical setting, there will be points at which the sense of the text is confusing.

When singing this piece in accord with the text declamation, the only challenge in the first group of verses for the singers is to communicate the parenthetical phrase "the *Isle of Dreams*." In the second group, the commas signal a shift in the established phrasing pattern and there is another parenthetical interjection. The third group proves to be the most challenging in terms of communicating the sense of the text because the fifth verse must be connected to the sixth verse.

The words, "Attending Pleasures, such as shall pursue Me immortaliz'd, and you;" do not naturally fall into the repeated melodic contour of this strophic setting. In this instance, the singers must breathe before "Attending Pleasures" in order to show a connection between the two verses. It is imperative that they clarify the poetic gesture by observing the commas. This means that the comma

after "Me immortaliz'd" will set the words "and you" apart. Garcia's suggested "coup de glotte" on the word "and" will normally be accompanied by a borrowing of duration from the previous note, thus highlighting the phrase "and you" as the text declamation requires. Garcia writes, "The singer, free on this condition to increase and decrease alternately the partial values, will be able to set off certain phrases in a new way" (Garcia, 1856, p.76).

In conclusion, text declamation and consonants, as the partners of vowels, should be given equal consideration in determining how one presents an expressive choral performance.

When combined with the art of rhetoric, one gains an insight into the manner in which a good composer sets a text to music, and thus how a singer or an ensemble can most effectively communicate the meaning of that text to the listener. Choral conductors need to apply techniques of elocution to their rehearsals and performances. They will gain a deeper insight into the performance style of a piece by declaiming the text in a manner that not only clarifies the literal meaning of the text, but also conveys its affective nature to an ensemble. With a deeper understanding of the expressive nature of the text, singers will have the means to move the emotions of listeners in a manner that singers of a by-gone era would have done intuitively.

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