

Vocal Pedagogy in Baroque Period:

Looking over Isabella Leonarda's work to find vocal pedagogy styles.

Hailey Crockett

Music 301: Music Literature 1 – Middle Ages

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Isabella Leonarda, in her time, was a very prolific composer. ¹Isabella was born in Novara, Italy on Sept 6, 1620, to a prominent Novarese family. When she turned sixteen, she was entered into the Ursuline convent where she lived the rest of her life. She was beloved and well liked; she was also a nun like Hildegarde of Bingen. Isabella wrote lots of sacred music including the sacred motet which is my focus in this paper. She wrote Motet op.6 #8 called “O Domine”. Isabella wrote this song in Venetia, Italy. This motet was written in the Baroque era meaning that vocal ornamentation was completely different from the 21st century. Since musicians don’t know exactly what is historically accurate, singers look towards sources that can give clues as to how a piece might have been sung. Looking at pieces before singers start to learn the music can help determine appropriate uses of vocal ornamentation such as using vibrato, trills, and other forms of vocal articulation to decorate this song to create a better performance. This paper will discuss important performance practices such as whether singers would have used straight voice or vibrato, what types of vocal ornamentation would singers have used such as trills and how to include little personal touches to performance practices.

Vocal pedagogists have debated about whether performers would have used a straight tone or vibrato to ornament a piece in the Baroque period. This is a highly debated topic because there isn’t much information about vibrato. To begin vibrato is a fluctuation of a single pitch, mostly described by the number of oscillations between each pitch. ²James Stark states, “He did not think of vibrato as an ornamentation in the “add on” sense, but rather as something that occurs in practically all the tones of artistic singing, thus enhancing the cultivated voice as normal occurrence” Vibrato is a naturally occurring in the voice when singing. It’s more likely that vibrato was part of singing back when this piece was performed because vibrato is a natural occurrence in the voice. Essentially because vibrato is part of the vocal apparatus that you physically cannot take out vibrato from the voice. Which means that singers back in the 17th century would have a least had some vibrato but could cut it back a little to maintain a straight tone voice. Though this has been debated on whether it really does hurt a singer’s voice when they sing without vibrato. John Nix, a very prominent figure in the vocal world, has taught in lots of universities and worked at the National Center for voice. ³John Nix did a study on singers about their voice fatigue after singing in a lesson. The singers reported on who taught them their lesson, how long their lessons were, and what environment they sang in. The results showed that there was not a lot of difference between singing with vibrato and non-vibrato singing. This impacts how singers might have been taught to sing back in the 1600s because

¹ Carter, Stewart A. “Isabella Leonarda.” (*Oxford Music Online*, 2001.) doi:10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.13920.

² James Stark. “*Bel Canto, A History of Vocal Pedagogy*”, (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press Incorporated 1999)

³ Nix, John. “New Voices in Research: Vibrato and Non-Vibrato Singing: Who Teaches It? How Do They Teach It? Does It Make a Difference?” *The Choral Journal* 53, no. 9 (April 1, 2013): 57–66. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=edsjlr&AN=edsjlr.43051928&site=eds-live&scope=site>

vocal teachers might have taught them to use vibrato or non-vibrato based on how they thought it would affect their singer's vocal health. Most times singers would use a section where the vibrato could be most heard, in this case this section would be where they would hold longer notes. Vibrato is more difficult to hear in a more rhythmic and faster paced pieces. Vibrato is often used in every note. The section below would be a great spot for vibrato because it's a slower section with half notes and quarter notes. Most vocal teachers will have their students use vibrato to have make a continuous flow through out this phrase.

Adagio

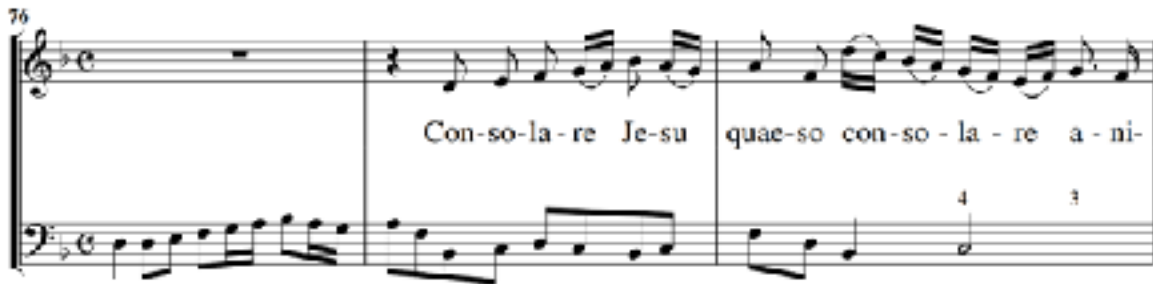
Cor me-um iam do-let iam pu-det er-ras-se il-le-ce-bras

There have been others who have also shared their opinions about vibrato. ⁴Frederick K. Gable wrote an article on performance practice in the Baroque period. He states that in the Baroque period, singers had more natural vibrato and that it was only for ornamentation. He says that most students now are being forced to sing with vibrato when it never occurred naturally in the first place. In some ways he might be right. Maybe vibrato was used only as ornamentation or maybe it really does occur in the natural voice. Using vibrato back then may have also depended on the composer. ⁵Later, is a direct quote from Giulio Caccini that talks about how he preferred his singers not to cover up the piece and other stylistic features because of the vibrato in the singer's voice. This is a hard topic to discuss especially when we do not know everything that happened during those time periods

A spot to consider that might have been sung with a straight voice is measure 76. Vibrato normally sustains one note but here the notes are so fast it would be difficult to hear vibrato in these spots especially because it was considered an ornamentation.

⁴ Gable, Frederick Kent. "Some Observations Concerning Baroque and Modern Vibrato," (Performance Practice Review: Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 9.) (Spring 1992) DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199205.01.09 Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol5/iss1/9>

⁵ Nigel Fortune, *Italian 17th-Century Singing.* (Music & Letters 35, no. 3 (July 1, 1954): 206–19.) <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.729917&site=eds-live&scope=site>.



There are many types of ornamentations that can be used in a performance among those are glottal, trills, and others that will be mentioned in this essay. First option to be used is glottal. A glottis is the space between the vocal folds. For example, if the singer said “uh, oh” the glottal would be the uh, where the vocal folds are closed and then the oh would be the release and the singer would be back at a normal release. Thus, creating a glottal. Often a glottal is used right before a word with that starts with a vowel. Isabella Leonarda has spots where singers can do glottal. Such as this example below.



In measure 168, the phrase stops for a rest. This would be an appropriate place in the music for a glottal stop because right after the rest, the piece starts on “ah”.⁶This has a vowel at the start of the word so this would be a perfect stop for a glottal. It would be a good stop because people naturally release the air as they say “ah”. The glottal is a great way to change the color of the timbre of a singer’s voice.⁷Christian T Herbst and Jan G Svec say this about glottal “The most obvious method for voice timbre control is via the sound modifiers, that is, articulation by

⁶ David Shariatmadari. “Why Have We Got It in for the Glottal Stop?; Ed Miliband Has Been Pilloried for Dropping His ‘t’s. But We Should Think Twice before Condemning This Perfectly Innocent Linguistic Tic.” (*Guardian, The: Web Edition Articles (London, England)*, April 30, 2015.)

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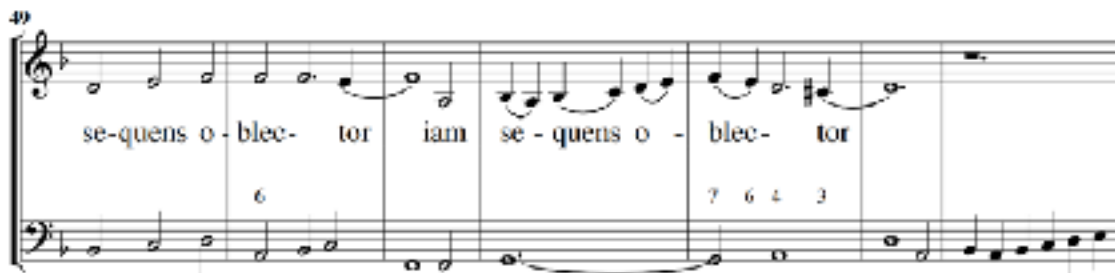
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⁷ Christian T., and Jan G. Svec. “Adjustment of Glottal Configurations in Singing.” (*Journal of Singing* 70, no.3 (January 1, 2014) : 301) [https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.360358466&site=eds-live&scope=site)

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introducing changes into the vocal tract shape” A glottal would be considered a sound modifier and was a great addition to singers back then and now.

Another example of vocal ornamentation is trills. ⁸ A trill is when an original note is adjacent to a note that is a half-step above and the voice is used to oscillate between those adjacent notes. A trill is normally higher than the pitch which helps us differentiate between vibrato and a trill. This technique takes lots of skills and practice. ⁹ Vibrato is normally less than a half a step away from the original note, as well as vibrato can go below the note while a trill can only be above the note. While a trill is a half-step away from the original note. In this example below, measure 53 the last note is a “C#” and goes to a “D”, because they are only a half-step apart singers could use a trill here as ornamentation. This was normally an ornamentation done at the end of the any piece or phrase. Lots of composers would use them in not only vocal music but also instrumental music.



The image shows a musical score snippet for a vocal line and a bass line. The vocal line is in treble clef and contains the lyrics "se-quens o-blec-tor iam se-quens o-blec-tor". The bass line is in bass clef and contains the fingerings "6" and "7 6 4 3". The music is in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The vocal line features a trill on the final note of the phrase "se-quens o-blec-tor".

This spot would be perfect for a trill. Often in the Baroque period it would be used to ornament certain spots. This spot in particular ends a phrase which demands a grand ending thus singers would enter a trill to portray the grand ending. Most pieces in the Baroque period would use a trill at the end of a phrase.

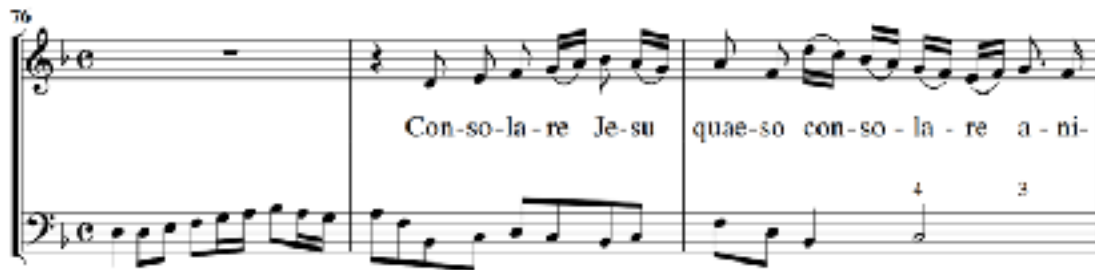
Tremolo is another ornamentation that was used in the Baroque era. ¹⁰ Tremolos would have been used to propel a singer from their chest voice to their head voice. This would create a much better transition for singers. Moving from the chest voice and head voice normally is around “B” for most singers. This transition can be unruly if not contained properly. Singers would use a tremolo to help alleviate the awkwardness between those two voices. Tremolos are also like vibrato because the technique is backed up by the same voicing mechanisms. With a

⁸ James Stark. *“Bel Canto, A History of Vocal Pedagogy”*, (Toronto, Canada, University of Toronto Press Incorporated 1999) 122

⁹ Fredrick Kent, Gable. *“Some Observations Concerning Baroque and Modern Vibrato,”* (Performance Practice Review: Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 9. (Spring 1992) DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199205.01.09 Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol5/iss1/9> 92))

¹⁰ James Stark. *“Bel Canto, A History of Vocal Pedagogy”*, (Toronto, Canada, University of Toronto Press Incorporated 1999) 124

tremolo it is mostly about volume because of this attribute singers can overcome the harshness of changing voices. For example, just like people must run before they jump over something, singers need to get up to the appropriate speed before they change voices. Of course, this does not mean that singers can rush through the phrase or that this section should turn harsh because of the volume of this technique. However, this technique should still be noticeable.



Above in measure 77, singers have an opportunity to ramp up before they need to change from their chest voice to their head voice. Just before is stepwise motion to help singers prepare but as they get to measure 78 singers must already be prepped to sing the “d”. However, singers who try this technique must be aware that increasing the volume to change voices, doesn’t not mean be extremely loud. This means take time to crescendo and have a clear site for what singers are reaching for. This is a great technique to use, and it requires skill and clear intention besides just vibrato to ace this technique. ¹¹Emil Behnke, he was a nineteenth century voice teacher said “I need scarcely add that there is yet another kind of tremolo, which, being absolutely under the control of the performer, is one of chief ornaments of song, and to which the observations just made in no way apply.” This states that tremolo is a technique hard to master but if done correctly could sound amazing in any piece.

Crescendos and decrescendos elevate a piece from boring to very interesting. However, placing them in the right places is essential. Lots of times the rhythm will indicate when it’s time to change from soft to loud. Caccini said this about singing, “that a singer should sing his clear and natural voice, avoiding feign tunes of notes, and should save his breath, not for these offensive sounds but to give the greater spirit to the increasing and diminishing of the voice...”¹² Caccini knew the importance of being soft and loud in a piece because of this he wanted singers to avoid fluff with the voice. In measure 83, there is a great spot to crescendo and decrescendo.

¹¹ James Stark. *“Bel Canto, A History of Vocal Pedagogy”*, (Toronto, Canada, University of Toronto Press Incorporated 1999) 136

¹² Nigel Fortune, *Italian 17th-Century Singing.”* (*Music & Letters* 35, no. 3 (July 1, 1954): 206–19.) <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.729917&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

81

re a - ni - mam

5 7 4 3

con - so - la - re Je - su

84

quae - so con - so - la - re a - ni - mam con - so - la -

4

From above this spot would be a great place to crescendo as they sing “consolare Je” and then decrescendo at “su quaeso”. The reason this would be a great spot is because the words mean “Jesus comfort me”, it’s almost a pleading from the individual. As singers decide how to sing, the words of a song help us know how to ornament the song.

Implementing your own style is so important. Musicians are trained from a very young age to sing the notes of the page and nothing more. What if singers sang how they wanted to sing the song. That’s how singers sang back in the day. For example, many stars were able to ornament the song the way they felt was necessary. So how come students are taught to sing the notes straight. Maybe it’s because singers need to learn technique before hand but after technique adding the singer’s own touches to a piece is important. Pieces will never be exactly historically accurate because there are no recordings or a lot of indications because ornamentation was not written back then. However, singers have the freedom to choose how they want to sing the song. ¹³Emily C Eagen, wrote a dissertation on how she felt figuring out her voice and how she was taught. This is what she says” Although the voice is housed in the body and is entangled with the singer using it, the singer is still an “interpreter” of the voice, one step removed from being synonymous with the self. Often, singers move out of the way of their voice but forget that people are interconnected to their voice. This makes it physically impossible to move out of the way of the voice. This points to the fact that singers and people in general have unique features in their voices that can’t be removed. With that in mind, singers can experiment and make the song to fit their voice. Obviously not changing everything about it

¹³ Emily C Eagen. “*The Singing Self: An Exploration of Vocality and Selfhood in Contemporary Vocal Practice*” (The University of New York (2021))
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5274&context=gc_etds

or else it wouldn't be the composer's piece anymore but some to make the unique voice stand out.

Vocal ornamentation in the Baroque period can sometimes be a hard topic because there are so many different subjects within this broad topic. As well as there are so many opinions about what is historically accurate and what is not. There are lots of sources that are out there, but no one knows what happened back then. Luckily at this point lots of music was written down but it's not like it is now where every notation is written down. Discussed in the paragraphs we talked about a lot of vocal ornamentation that made its way through the Baroque era. Those ornamentations included vibrato, glottal stops, trills, tremolo, and adding personal style to the music. Overall, these were what made Baroque music so good and continues to do so through the ages because of how classic they are. However, style continues to change through centuries, and it should be embraced as well.

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Photo:

