Teaching Dynamics to a Young Choir in Regard to Antonio Vivaldi's Gloria

Alexander Foster

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There are so many good reasons to have a choir in your local high school. But one of the hardest things as a choir director is selecting good music for a choir that will be both enjoyable for the students to sing and within their range to perform well. This problem becomes especially difficult when you attempt to teach a young choir to perform a piece from the Baroque era. Given all the unwritten rules it can be challenging to know where to start teaching, but the most basic part of music can also be the most influential. Knowing how to make good decisions on the dynamics of a piece can really bring it all together.

To first understand the issue of dynamics in a musical score we first need to go back to the beginning. Since the dawn of time people have been making music. As long as there has been speech there has been singing. The current form of written music that we are used to today didn't even begin to develop until the ninth century, but it wasn't until about the 17th century that sheet music gained the look that we know today. By the time the Baroque period had come around there had been many advancements in what could be written and communicated through sheet music but as a general rule sheet music was supposed to only give guidance to a performer, not tell them exactly what to do. Because of this, sheet music from the Baroque era was very minimal compared to what we are used to today with dynamic and tempo marking all over.

In modern music notation we are used to being told exactly what to do and when. Every dynamic written out for us and even where to breath is marked in the passages. But even with all of this advanced notation the performer gets to make many decisions about how to perform the piece. There is always leeway to decide to do something differently then the next performer. This concept is illustrated clearly by Haynes; "No practical notation has been (or has been

devised to be) comprehensive or precise. Each notation, and each source using it, assumes a series of understandings on the part of the reader."[1]

Given how much discretion we as performers have over our performance choices today it becomes clear how there is so much debate about how to correctly perform a piece from an earlier era that comes with almost no direction from the composer. Music in the Baroque period was written with just the notes on a staff to tell the performers what to play. It gave them the order of pitches, and a general idea of the rhythm, but beyond that every decision was up to the performer. Music was altogether a language that it was expected that if you spoke at all you were fluent. And in the Baroque era this was true.

The vocabulary term that is used commonly in academic circles for understanding how to authentically play something as it would have originally been played is Historically Informed Practice. The idea behind HIP is to take a look back into history and try to imagine what the music would have sounded like when it was first played.

One important element to know about the Baroque period is how they viewed choirs differently than we do today. During the 17th century there was a lot of importance placed on unity and a wholeness of sound across the entire ensemble. Most choirs were small affairs consisting of only one voice per written part.[2] This would be considered crazy by our standards today. How could a choir of just four to six people even hope to be heard over a full orchestra? The main difference to remember is the quality of the singers. I am not by any means putting down the quality of vocalists today, but merely highlighting the differences. The goal of choirs

[1] Bruce Haynes, The end of early music: a period performer's history of music for the 21st century, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 105
[2] Gordon Lamb, The Baroque Period 1600-1750, (n.d.), 1

today is to bring many people together to enjoy making music. During the Baroque period being in a choir was an extremely professional endeavor. Singers would spend countless hours perfecting their skills before being hired to perform along with an orchestra. Vocalists during this period were incredibly good at projecting their sound throughout the performance hall so that all those present could hear them. While today we spend hours of rehearsal time training our choirs to blend softly and each section to sound as one, during the Baroque era the goal was to be loud and confident in your solo part to add to the overall spectacle of the performance.

Given the overall professionalism of these performers it is a given that there was a lot they already knew that we as performers don't usually know today. It was common practice for a composer of this time to perform their instrument of choice in the performance of their work. And it was common for every performer to be intimately familiar with the mechanics of composition. For example, during the baroque period any keyboardist was expected to understand how to improvise chord progressions based solely upon a single base line. Whereas today this is a skill hardly any pianist would have, so we write out exactly every note we wish them to play. Like a keyboardist, vocalist of the Baroque era would look at an exceedingly bare score and know all of the implied notation.

It can be said that today there is a great distance between our composers of music and our performers.[3] Today in music we focus so much of our time in teaching students how to read music and to understand what the original intended emotions of the piece were. For example, even the basis of this paper is how to express the intended dynamics of a given piece. But humorously this kind of education couldn't be farther from the mind of a Baroque teacher. If you

[3] Gordon Lamb, The Baroque Period 1600-1750, (n.d.), 1

were to learn how to sing during the Baroque period you would first have to learn all about music theory and how to write a good song. This has the distinct benefit of creating a high level of musical literacy in the general populace of the performers of the day. So, it can be assumed that any given performer of the Baroque period would look at a rather simple piece of score and know instinctively what needed to be added by way of vibrato, dynamic, and implied rhythm to make it sound much more musically proficient. Whereas today, the average performer, while arguably just as accomplished as a Baroque era performer, has been trained differently and may not know innately how to decorate their music so we must notate exactly what we wish them to do. This is caused mainly by the ever-growing gap between composer and performer.

There are so many different ways that a vocalist could decorate their music, but for the simplicity of conveying this concept we will stick simply to how they could interpret implied dynamics in a given piece.

There are so many scores from the Baroque period, a truly great time to be a musician. But for the purpose of this paper, we will only be discussing Antonio Vivaldi's *Gloria* RV589.[4] Over the course of his time at the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice Italy, Vivaldi wrote this different Glorias. RV 589 which we will be discussing was the second of the three that he wrote for the girls of the Pieta. It is the most well known of his Glorias and is simply known as Vivaldi's Gloria.

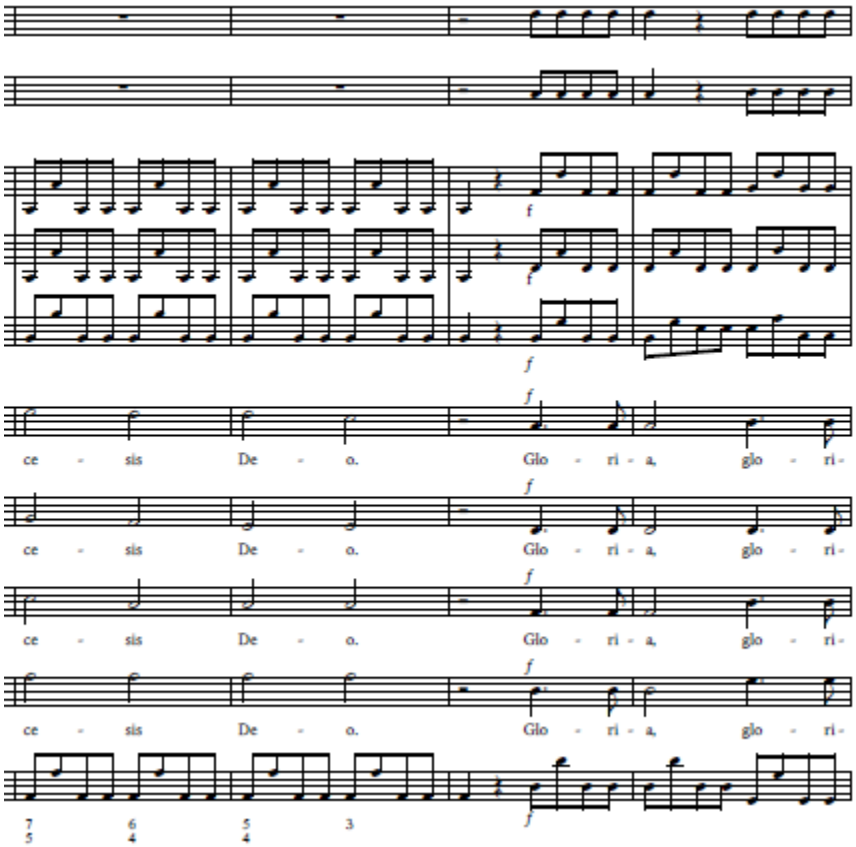
This Gloria is the first part of a 12-movement collection that Vivaldi wrote to be played all together. The Gloria is written for a four-voice choir accompanying a full Baroque orchestra. At the time Vivaldi wrote his Gloria for an all-women's choir, but the sample we will be viewing

[4] Calebe Barros, IMSLP, (2022), 1

has been altered for a standard SATB arrangement. There have been no changes made to the voice leading or part writing aside that the base and tenor lines have been dropped down into the male octave range.

Of the many different ways to look at a score and interpret what dynamics to choose, we will be focusing on just three. First, how to derive dynamic changes from the instrumentation surrounding the vocal parts.

Example 1: *Gloria* mm. 26-29



The figure above was originally produced by Vivaldi without the dynamic markings, they have been added to help with the understanding of this concept.

Looking at Example 1 there are a few things to point out. The very top line is the trumpet, and just below the Obo. The other four lines without words are for the string instruments, Violin 1 and 2, Viola, and Cello. The four texted lines in the middle are the choir, SATB respectively.

At this point in the piece the instruments have been playing the whole time, joined by the choir about ten measures previous. Directly before the shown excerpt the choir and orchestra are playing at an intense piano. Looking at the original score, there is nothing that stands out to initiate a sudden forte expression. But, as we notice that prior to this section the trumpets and Oboes have been silent we begin to see the foundation of our implied subito crescendo.

One of the rules of orchestration, that any Baroque performer would have been intimately familiar with, is that there must always be movement within each part. As we look at Example 1 we see that the trumpet and Obo parts come in on repeated eighth notes. This type of fanfare is a hallmark of the Baroque period and would be instantly recognizable to a performer of the day. Because there is no movement in pitch in either the trumpet or the vocal parts, the movement must come from somewhere else, the dynamic levels.

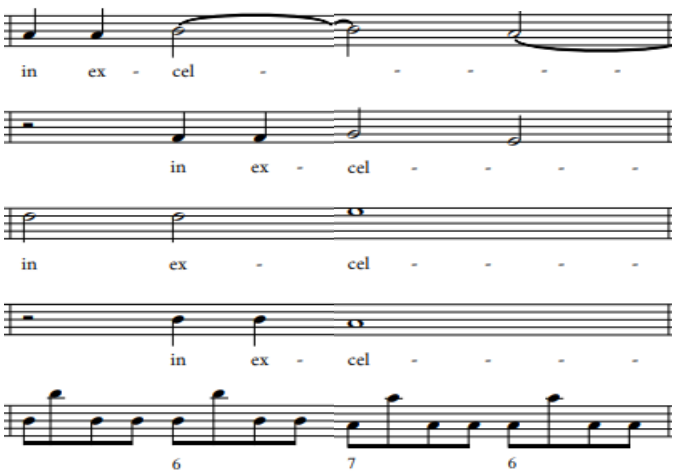
During the Baroque era dynamics were created a bit differently than we do today. Dynamics were controlled not by playing or singing louder and softer, but by adding and taking away parts. This being the case, the addition of the trumpet and Obo back into the mix is a clear indication that the choir, and the orchestra as a whole, was intended to be louder in this section. In today's terminology, we are going from our intense piano to a forte.

This is good and all, but what does it have to do with our choir today? Well, as a general rule, today we have a much larger ensemble than any Baroque composer was used to working with and we have the advanced technology of mics and speaker systems. This means that as

directors we need to be more intentional in directing our ensembles to sing and play louder or softer to recreate this dynamic effect. As demonstrated, when we see more parts added to a Baroque piece, sing louder. Or more simply put, for every added or subtracted instrumental part, add, or subtract one sound level.

The next kind of dynamic awareness that was commonly known by Baroque era performers and that we should pay special attention to today is how to control our dynamic within our own choir. When working with a very small Baroque choir it is easy to hear each part over the other. When one voice has the melody or an important phrase they would sing just a bit louder to be heard over the other few. But with our large choirs today this is something we need to learn to recognize and rehearse in our choirs. To demonstrate this, take a look at Example 2.

Example 2: *Gloria* mm. 62-63



In the above image we want to focus on just the choir part. We begin by noticing that the choir is no longer singing their words in unison. Now each voice part is entering at their own time. During this section the choir will still follow the previous rule about matching the instrumentation for their overall dynamic, but we need to pay special attention to the dynamics here between the voice parts to make sure we can understand what is being said.

The words being sung here are: in ex-cel-sis De-o. Before we begin to assign emphasis to these words we need to know what they mean. This is written in Latin and the word excelsis means, in the highest, and Deo is God.[5] So, the translation of this song is Glory in the highest God.

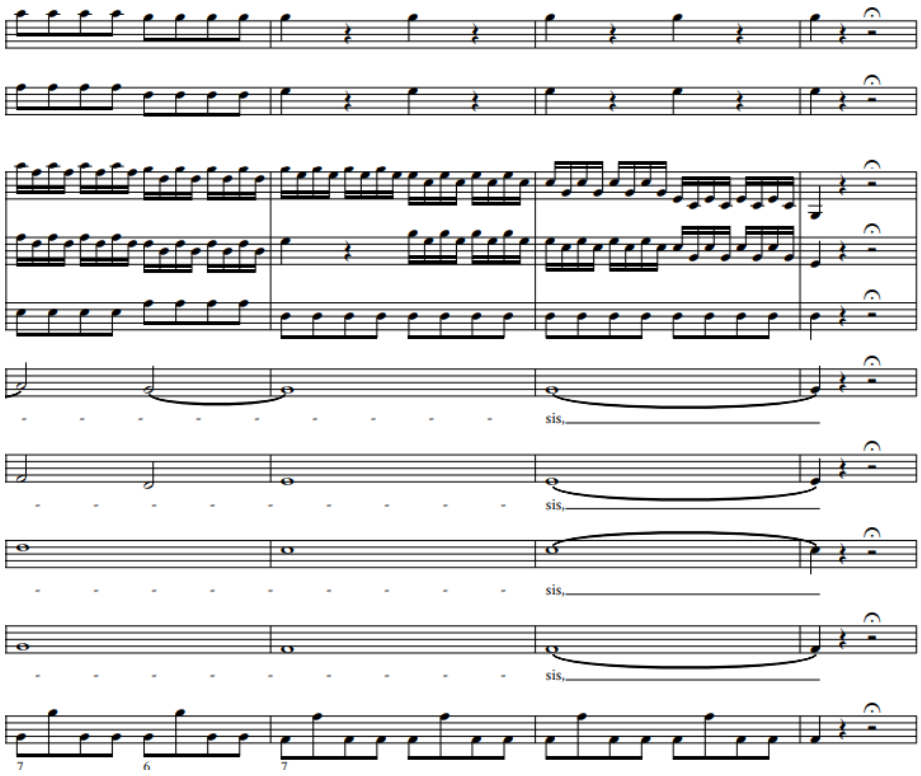
According to Wall, the author of Diction for Singers, in Latin the emphasis, or heaviest syllable of each word is ex**cel**sis and **De**o. Taking a look at Example 2 again we can see some examples of text painting in each line as the composer has chosen to change pitch on the syllable cel of the word excelsis in each voice. We also see that Vivaldi has chosen to make the cel syllable much longer than in or ex. As directors, it is our job to highlight this choice.

During the Baroque period, any run of the mill vocalist would see a moving, much longer note and know that meant to accent it. So, they would slightly increase their volume as the note moved and gently crescendo throughout its duration. The tendency though for our less educated choirs today though is naturally to sing the moving note the same and to actually slightly decrescendo throughout the note as the singers run out of air. As directors this is what we need to be fighting. Teach your choir to give their moving notes a good accent when they are the only part singing it so that they can be heard, and to crescendo through the long notes.

As we continue through this phrase we see more moving whole notes slowly bringing our four voices back into syllabic unison before a rest. See Example 3 below.

[5] Joan Wall, Diction for Singers 2nd edition, (2012), 132-136

Example 3: *Gloria* mm. 64-67



Here the long held, slowly moving monosyllabic tone does a great job of creating a dramatic mood. But simply holding a note for four measures can sound just as boring as it feels to sing. There are many techniques that a Baroque era performer would use to keep the audience engaged like vibrato and coloration of the vowels. But these techniques will not work with our large choirs, so we use dynamics to imitate them.

Just like in the previous example, the first thing to be sure to do is keep a slow crescendo throughout to fight off the choir going flat. But beyond that, we want to keep everyone engaged in the movement of this piece. Notice in the first measure of example 3 that the soprano and alto both change notes halfway through the measure. To accent this, we want to direct them to give a small pulse on the moving half note. Not a breath, but while continuing the same phrase just a

slight increase of volume and more pressure in the sustained air. This will help to push their moving sound through the overlying steady tone of the men. Consequently, moving into the very next measure, every voice moves except the sopranos. Because everyone is moving to change the chord being held, there is no need for a pulse to accent the movement, it will naturally be heard.

The very end of example 3 shows the winding down of this elongated phrase into a rest. Here we have two choices. Depending on the effect that we are trying for, we can direct our choir to slightly crescendo through to the end to keep the energy going, or direct them to gently decrescendo on the last measure to simulate a resting stop. Looking at the instrumentation provided in example 3 notice the slowing down of the playing of the trumpet and obo. Going back to our first example, the dynamic of the orchestra is winding down, so we need to direct or choir to imitate that decrescendo as well. While there would not be anything necessarily wrong with keeping a loud tone, in the interest of maintaining HIP in relation to the way a Baroque choir would have sung this passage, direction to slowly decrescendo would be more appropriate.

Music has always been an integral part of society, and vocal performance with it. But as we can see, attempting to recreate the performance of another culture hundreds of years ago can be very challenging. The simple trick to ensure that a choir is an historically informed as possible is to understand how to read an original score in the way that a performer of that day would. To see music through the eyes of the original audience and the ears of its very own composer. Dynamics are the single most important way to showcase how in tune a choir is with their music.

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