

**Rediscovering Historically Accurate Da Capo Aria Performance Practice**

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Music 301: The Middle Ages

November 11, 2022

One challenge that performers face in performing da capo arias from the Baroque time period is that the melodic lines are often simple and can be dull when repeated verbatim. The singers of the day would embellish and improvise on the existing melody to add variety and showcase their skills. Today, three centuries later, those who wish to perform the aria in a style that is as historically informed as possible face the challenge of improvising in the style of a mostly unwritten tradition. In the Baroque da capo arias, the return of the A section is meant to be embellished and ornamented by the singer. If the performer is to choose to ornament this return of the A section in the most historically accurate manner, they must correctly improvise with grace notes, trills, and runs that are stylistically accurate to the time period to avoid the anachronistic sound of later techniques. By historically accurate, I am referring to how the returning A section material should be performed and ornamented. In this way, the listener might be able to discern how the piece may have been performed in its day. For the purposes of demonstration, I will be using Handel's da capo aria "La Giustizia" from his Opera Giulio Cesare in Egitto as an example of how these improvisational practices can be applied. I argue that the practice of correctly integrating authentic Baroque techniques into a da capo aria when one desires to render a historically accurate interpretation is integral to create a performance that could have been conceivably performed at the time of the composition.

One issue that must be acknowledged before further discussion of ornamentation and improvisation is that for the purposes of this paper, I will be discussing Italian vocal performance practice and ornamentation. Since Handel wrote his Italian operas and da capo arias in an Italian style, this logically would make the most sense in addressing how one could render a historically accurate performance of "La Giustizia." Italian ornamentation was the freest during the period from about 1700-1750 compared to French and German ornamentation when it came to

improvisation on repeated melodic lines. French composers indicated many of the ornamentations that were to be used while Italian singers were expected to ornament and become part of the composition process as they sang the composer's piece. Germans had a mixed view that combined both attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Because of these characteristics, it is crucial for singers to know how to improvise on the return of Italian da capo arias like the Handel example. Since Handel wrote operas in an Italian style, it can be assumed that he wrote the melody in "La Guistizia" in a way that was meant to be improvised on liberally by his singers, and that any written ornaments weren't the only written ornaments that were to be performed. A question this raises is exactly how much ornamentation would be reasonable? And where would it be placed?

A good place to turn is the reviews of Italian trained singers that performed during this time. Faustina Bordoni was one of the most famous female singers of the time, and was described as

[singing] the first part of an aria exactly as the composer had written it but at the da capo repeat introduced all kinds of doublements and manière without taking the smallest liberties with the rhythms of the accompaniment; so that a composer sometimes finds his arias, in the mouths of their singers, far more beautiful and pleasing than in his own original conception.<sup>2</sup>

This description is rather reserved for the time since many singers would add too many ornaments. What Faustina does is give the listener the original A section melody without any decoration, so that on the return, her additions can stand out. This would also make her virtuosity shine even brighter by choosing to begin the ornaments and improvisations at the return of the A section rather than to slowly add ornaments from the end of the A section and throughout the B section until getting to the da capo and adding an even larger amount. The approach of gradually

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<sup>1</sup>Joan E. Smiles, "Directions for Improvised ornamentation in Italian Method Books of the Late Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Vol. 31, no. 3 (Autumn 1978): 495.

<sup>2</sup>H. Diack Johnstone, "A Flourish for Handel," *Early Music* Vol. 29, no. 4 (November 2001): 620.

adding ornamentation is not wrong since it is historically informed, but it is worth noting how Faustina performed da capo arias as one of the most famous female singers of the day. Another important fact to consider is that the range of Faustina's improvisation remained the same as the original melody. There is a manuscript containing her notated improvisation that someone transcribed at a performance of hers in 1720. It is a performance of Giuseppe Vignati's "Sciolta dal lido." The transcript is shown below underneath the original melody.<sup>3</sup>

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the aria "Sciolta dal lido". Each system consists of three staves: a vocal line in treble clef, a piano accompaniment in treble clef, and a bass line in bass clef. The first system is labeled with a box containing the number 40. The original melody is written on the top staff, with lyrics "Sciol - ta dal li - do con ven - to in -". The piano accompaniment features triplets of eighth notes. The second system is labeled with a box containing the number 45. It shows the original melody on the top staff with lyrics "fi - do la na - vi - cel - la al sco - glio". The piano accompaniment also features triplets. Below the original melody, there is a line of text: "+ 4 measures Sciol - ta dal li - do con ven - to in -". This indicates the start of Faustina's improvisation, which is notated on the top staff of the second system. The improvisation uses triplets and passing tones to ornament the original melody.

The example shows that Faustina used triplets of neighbor notes and passing tones to ornament the da capo, but it is also interesting and appropriate to note that she stays within the range of the original melody. There are no jumps to the extremes of her range like in a piece by Mozart or Bellini. The style of using a wider range than the original melody was developed after the

<sup>3</sup> Elvadine R. Seligmann, "Understanding the Art of Vocal Embellishment in Handel's Opera Seria," *University of Northern Colorado* (December 5, 2007): 12.

Baroque period.<sup>4</sup> The anachronistic sound of using such a technique unknown to the Baroque world of Handel would not be historically informed. A way that someone could apply the example of Faustina to “La Guistizia” would be to add triplet passing tones between measures 14 and 15 and measures 19 and 20 on the word “punire.” This would be stylistically acceptable since it would serve to connect the line instead of adding notes that go above or below the range of the melody.

A consideration that must also be said here is that the character of the piece Faustina performed and the character of “La Guistizia” are completely different. This affects everything from which ornaments one would use in a da capo aria down to how they would be executed. Frederick Neumann, a scholar of Baroque performance, says

A slow beat, an unobtrusive meter, a great diversity of note values involved, and a melodic rhythm that appears free and rhapsodic, will all tend to provide a fertile soil for melismatic ornaments. By contrast, a fast beat, a sharply defined meter, incisively contoured melodic figures, and a fundamental sameness of note values will offer little opportunity for them.<sup>5</sup>

This makes deciding which kinds of ornaments to add, particularly melismas, an easier task. Songs that are slower have more room for ornamentation, especially if there are note values every now and then that are significantly longer than the other note values in the melody. For example, if the melody is mostly made up of quarter notes, a dotted half note would be an excellent spot for ornamentation. A slow tempo would add itself nicely to allowing the singer to decorate as they please, however a quick tempo is trickier to decorate. “La Guistizia” is more

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<sup>4</sup> Dean Winton, *Handel's Operas* (New York: Clarendon Press: 1994):28-29.

<sup>5</sup> Seligman, “Understanding the Art of Vocal Embellishment,” 9.

difficult to ornament for this reason. The most obvious place for ornamentation that can show of the singer's abilities is at the place for the cadenza at measures 37-38. Some quick runs or arpeggios could be added here to fit the brilliant character of the piece, and could reflect the anger of Sesto convincingly. In addition to what ornaments to use is how a singer could execute them. One example of this could be how one would trill in each of these pieces. In the book *A Performer's Guide to Baroque Music*, an interesting detail about the trill from Joachin Quantz in 1752 is that "There is no need to make all trills with the same speed... In sad pieces the trills are made more slowly; but in gay pieces they ought to be more quickly."<sup>6</sup> This indicates that execution of ornaments varies with the mood of the piece. Albeit that Quantz was a flutist, his opinion is still relevant to da capo arias because of the nature of music to have different moods, and he is from the Baroque period. In "Sciolta dal lido" the key is major, while in "La Giustizia" the key is an aggressive minor. "La Giustizia" is also performed at a faster tempo. These differences dramatically change how a trill or any other ornament are to be done in each piece. A singer performing "La Giustizia" will probably be showcasing techniques related to speed, and so ornaments such as trills, mordents, runs, and melismas would be performed considerably faster than in "Sciolta dal lido." These considerations are important when deciding which ornaments to use and how to execute them.

Another area of the da capo aria that should be of primary concern when it comes to ornamentation is the cadenza. The cadenza is usually at the end of the A section, and in "La Giustizia" this would take place in measure 38 on the downbeat. According to *A Performer's Guide to Baroque Music*, "Vocal cadenzas... are often desirable on the dominant harmony leading to the last chord: slight, if at all, for the first section; not much more, if at all for the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Donington, *A Performer's Guide to Baroque Music* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1974), 200.

middle section; more, but still not too much for the da capo repeat of the first section.”<sup>7</sup>

According to this, creating a cadenza on the last dominant chord of a section is the most desirable thing to do when performing an vocal cadenza. This would be the best place, especially in “La Giustizia” since the accompaniment on the downbeat only holds a dominant D Major chord. The singer can ornament as they please, using whichever techniques or skills that can best showcase their talent. However, it should be noted that the aria should not be too much, which could be taken to mean not too long or too ornate, especially if a singer decides to do a cadenza at the end of each section of the aria. In an article about Italian singing techniques and da capo arias entitled “A Flourish for Handel,” it is said, “According to Quantz, vocal cadences, like those for a wind instrument, ‘must be so constituted that they can be performed in one breath.’”<sup>8</sup> No matter what or how the singer decides to sing for their cadenzas, it should always be done in one breath. This would contribute to ensuring that a cadenza is not too long or too ornate. Another benefit would be that the cadenza would sound better since there isn’t much of an accompaniment to cover any breaths or breaks. This would make the performance seem more seamless. Using these guidelines will ensure that a cadenza fits in nicely without being too long and generally guaranteeing virtuosity or lyricism that can fit comfortably in a singer’s breath control.

There are a few particulars that should be mentioned about a few specific ornaments that are especially unique to the Baroque period. The first of these that should be mentioned is the cadential trill. In Robert Donington’s book *Baroque Music Style and Performance A Handbook*, using trills at cadences is discussed. The trill provides repercussions and energy that “can enliven those otherwise uneventful dominant to tonic cadences... Rather than trying to play these

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<sup>7</sup> Donington, *A Performer’s Guide to Baroque Music*, 166.

<sup>8</sup> Johnstone, “A Flourish for Handel,” 624.

cadences down, it is important to endorse them with cadential trills which they imply whether so marked or not.”<sup>9</sup> This is a nice decoration that can be added at each of the cadences in “La Giustizia.” This small embellishment can make the dominant to tonic cadences more interesting in measures 26, 38, and 56. The listener is more invested in the music because the cadence is less predictable than the usual dominant to tonic cadences that is so common in Baroque music. It is a historically informed ornament and use of it that can add variety to the cadences. Another technique that was considered an ornament during the Baroque period was vibrato. According to *A Performer’s Guide to Baroque Music*, “Vibrato was customarily described as an ornament in Baroque treatises... What we should call an extreme and conspicuous vibrato was brought in deliberately for special effects of expression.”<sup>10</sup> Extreme vibrato in certain places in the music can bring out and accent certain words as a good contrast to the rest of the piece. In “La Giustizia” possible places that vibrato could be used to give more emotional expression or portray rage would be in measure 38 on the word “traditor,” and whenever the word “giustizia” appears on the middle syllable “ti” in measures 8, 23, 31. Using extreme vibrato throughout the whole piece would not be as historically informed as reserving it for specific words or moments. An additional ornament that singers could have used in their da capo arias, and one that at least Faustina employed, was the trillo. According to *Understanding the Art of Vocal Embellishment in Handel’s Opera Seria*, “Of the standard ornaments, the one seldom heard is the trillo, which is similar to a trill, but entails rapid rearticulation of a single pitch rather than alternating between two.”<sup>11</sup> The difficulty of performing this articulation is daunting, but it is an important ornament to consider when the singer is considering which decoration from their toolbox of ornaments to

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Donington, *Baroque Music Style and Performance: A Handbook* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1982), 131.

<sup>10</sup> Donington, *A Performer’s Guide to Baroque Music*, 195.

<sup>11</sup> Seligman, “Understanding the Art of Vocal Embellishment,” 7.



use in a da capo aria. The trillo can be used in cadenzas to showcase virtuosity or highlight a specific word in a different color to make it stand out against the rest of the words. The trillo probably would be best showcased in a cadenza to demonstrate the singer's ability, and where they can take as much time as they need to execute it. In "La Giustizia" this can be added in measure 38. Using these ornaments and having a knowledge of how they operated in the Baroque period will greatly enhance an individual singer's performance of the da capo aria.

In these ways, a singer can perform a da capo aria in a historically accurate manner. The knowledge of where to place ornaments and cadenzas, as well as knowing how to perform the specific ornaments will greatly enhance the performance, and give it an authentic Baroque flavor as opposed to an aria with a recap that sounds as if it is from another century such as a recap that uses extreme ranges of the vocal line that push past the range of the original melody or using extreme vibrato throughout the piece without regard to considering it as merely an ornament. It should also be noted that the example of Faustina used relatively little ornamentation, and that following her example, the singer should make sure that the ornamentation should be used as a way to contrast and give variety of the material while not completely saturating it or creating too much entirely new, foreign material. If the singer desires to make a historically accurate interpretation, then these guidelines should be expressly followed. This will give the singer success in performing the da capo "La Giustizia" and any other Baroque da capo aria in an accurately Baroque manner.

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