

A Guide to Performing “Miserere Mei Deus” by Gregorio Allegri

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Music is well known to have the ability to invoke and influence emotions in its listeners. This fact is often in the forefront of a composer's mind as they are writing a piece of music and therefore intended to be performed in a specific way. One such piece was “Miserere Mei Deus” by Gregorio Allegri. This piece was important enough to the Pope and the Catholic Church that it was forbidden to be performed anywhere except for the Sistine Chapel, and only on two days of the year. While the piece is still considered to be one of extreme beauty, some of the mysticism that once surrounded it is gone. While it is not reasonable to restrict listeners to only hear it in the Sistine Chapel twice a year, there are certain things performers could do to help aid the mysticism of the piece to help us feel how it would have felt to hear it in the 17th century when it was written. Using the correct diction, careful placement of vibrato, and intentional dynamics will give a listener a more vibrant and historically accurate of how “Miserere Mei Deus” was meant to be heard.

The importance of diction should not be underestimated, because how a song text is pronounced can mean the difference between sounding like high school choir and sounding like the highly trained choirs of the Sistine Chapel. Using correct diction can not only help singers maintain their pitch but also help them keep their technique. One principle of diction is knowing where to add an “h” sound and where to insure it is not. First is to ensure there are no h’s between vowels when it is not a melisma. Fredrick Neumann writes about problem saying, “One must not... sing, as it is so frequently done, Kyrie eleison with he-he-he.”<sup>1</sup> One obvious problem with adding an “h” sound in a word with no “h” is that it changes the word into one that does not exist. Another is that Latin does not have “h” sound that is present in English. One place that is

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<sup>1</sup>Fredrick Neumann, *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York City, NY: Schirmer Books, 1993) 191.

relevant in “Miserere Mei Deus” is in in the example below, in measures four and five.<sup>2</sup> The word “Deus” has the singers on the “e” vowel for the entirety of measure four before going to the

Mi-se-re-re me-i, De-us, fecundum  
 Mi-se-re-re me-i, De-us, fecundum  
 Mi-se-re-re me-i, De-us, fecundum  
 Mi-se-re-re mei, De-us, fecundum  
 Mi-se-re-re me-i, De-us, fecundum

“u” vowel in measure five. A singer must resist the urge to add an “h” as it changes from one vowel and note to the other to keep the word and note clear. Another example is below in measures six and seven. This is example, from the same piece, is like the one above, except with different vowels.<sup>3</sup> A performer would want to refrain from adding an “h” sound between the “u”

Magnam mi-feri-cor-diam tu-am.  
 Magnam mi-feri-cor-diam tu-am.  
 Magnam mi-feri-cor-di-am mi-feri-cordiam tu-am.  
 Magnam mi-feri-cor-diam mi-feri-cor-diam tu-am.  
 Magnam mi-feri-cor-diam tu-am.

<sup>2</sup> Gregorio Allegri, *Miserere Mei Deus*, ed. Charles Burney (London: Robert Bremner, 1771) 35.

<sup>3</sup> Allegri, 35

and “a” vowels. In both examples above the mentioned vowels and measure were notably syllabic and not melismatic.

Next is to ensure that a performer separates the notes in a melisma with a slight “h”. Fredrick Neumann refers to this with these two quotes. “A full legato can blur the design; thus a compromise must be made, one that permits the clarity of the line to be perceived without its being torn apart” and “fast vocal passages do not just require smooth continuous breath; each tone should be rendered through clear attacks of the breath.”<sup>4</sup> For each of the notes in a melisma to be heard, there must be some source of separation between them. The source of separation will be different with each instrument and should not cause the line to be “torn apart”. For the voice, this will be achieved with a small “h” between the notes. An example of this can be found in the excerpt below in measure five in the top two voices. A singer wanting to separate the notes in the

The image shows a musical score excerpt with five staves. The top two staves are vocal parts, and the bottom three are piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "à Tempo". The lyrics are "tu-is, et vincas cum judi-ca - - - ris." The music features a melisma on the "a" vowel of the word "judicaris".

melisma on the “a” vowel of the word “judicaris” would add a slight “h” between each of the notes. This added separation will increase the listeners ability to distinguish between the different

<sup>4</sup> Fredrick Neumann, *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York City, NY: Schirmer Books, 1993) 192.

notes adding to the beauty of the freedom of the voice rather than getting a muddy sound that is difficult to separate from itself.

Another important principle of diction is knowing the correct placement of the vowel on the beat. “The vowel always comes one the beat. Therefore, initial consonants must come before the beat – that is, at the end of the preceding beat.”<sup>5</sup> It is important that vowels fall on the beat because are open and allow the voice to be fully engaged and flowing for the duration of the note. Consonants are important for understanding the words that are being sung but have a possibility of interrupting the vowel and the voice. Placing a consonant incorrectly can even cause the text to be heard incorrectly. Before continuing further in an explanation of consonant and vowel placement, some terminology must be established. The terms voiced and unvoiced refer to whether or not the vocal chords are active in the production of the sound. All vowels are voiced as there is no other source of sound producing them. There are also voiced consonants, such as [g], [d], and [b]. Their unvoiced counterparts are [k], [t], and [p] respectively. Plosive refers to consonants that build up and then “explode” to create their sound. [g], [d], [b], [k], [t], and [p] are all plosives. Fricative refers to sounds that causes “friction” as it slides out of the mouth. Examples of fricatives are [f], [v], [ʃ] and [ʒ]. Finally, there are lateral consonants, which are produced by air flowing around the tongue as it is raised such as [l] or [ɭ].

The placement of each of these vowel groups are going to be different. Due to the small amount of time that it takes to produce unvoiced plosives, they can be placed almost directly on the beat with the following vowel. The same can not be said for voiced plosives, which need to be slightly before the beat to give proper time for the production of the consonant. Fricatives

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<sup>5</sup> Fredrick Neumann, *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York City, NY: Schirmer Books, 1993) 195.

require the most amount of time and there for need to be prepped almost an entire 16<sup>th</sup> – 32<sup>nd</sup> note before the beat. Laterals are very flexible in how long or short they can be. In consequence, they will be made very short and placed almost on the beat with the following vowel. However, the typical “American” retroflex [ɻ] should be avoided entirely in Latin diction and replaced with the flipped [r] instead. This will not change the placement, due to the production being very short, comparable to that of [d]. The example below is a particularly crucial moment for the “r” to be flipped [r] rather than retroflex [ɻ]. In the third measure, including all voiced but especially

The image shows a musical score for five voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor 1, Tenor 2, and Bass. The score is divided into three sections: 'Canto Fermo' (Soprano and Alto), 'à Tempo' (Tenor 1 and Tenor 2), and 'Canto Fermo' (Bass). The lyrics are: 'Tibi soli peccavi, et ma-lum co-ram te fe- - - ci; ut iustificeris in fermo-nibus'. The 'r' in 'coram' and 'fero' is highlighted with a red dot, indicating the point where it should be flipped to a clear [r] rather than a retroflex [ɻ].

in the top two and bottom voice, the “o” vowel is held out. It is crucial that the “r” does not bleed over into that “o” vowel, because it will taint the pure vowel sound that is crucial to Latin.

Vibrato is another that one must consider when trying to get a pure sound out of a singer. There are conflicting view points when it comes to whether or not vibrato should be used in pieces from the early Baroque. Pier Francesco Tosi showed his preference for no vibrato when he said, “Let him learn to hold out the notes without a shrillness...or trembling...the trouble in holding it out, he will get a habit, and not be able to fix it.”<sup>6</sup> Roger North expressed his

<sup>6</sup> Pier Francesco Tosi, *Observations on the Florid Song: 1723* (Scotts Valley, CA: Createspace Independent Pub, 2012) 4.

preference for the same with his quote, “The greatest elegance of the finest voices is the prolation of a clear plain sound.”<sup>7</sup>

The desire for the tone to be clear and straight by definition excludes the use of vibrato. The desire is a worthy one and should not be disregarded, especially in a piece such as “Miserere Mei Deus” where the harmonies and dissonances play a huge part in the feeling and emotion of the piece. The harmonies and dissonances also enhance the words and their meaning to show the pain of someone asking for mercy, but also the hope that mercy will be given. Vibrato, however, does not inherently take away the ability to hear these harmonies. Martha Elliot states that “vibrato is a natural part of healthy singing.”<sup>8</sup> Vibrato is a natural phenomenon that happens when a singer’s technique is aligned and correct. To restrict something that is so naturally accruing and beautiful would be to decrease the potential beauty of the human voice. Vibrato can also help a singer maintain a pitch for longer with out losing breath or going flat. Carol MacClintock quotes Lodovico Zacconi by saying “the tremolo, that is, the trembling voice... should be short and beautiful, for if it is long and forceful, it tires and bores.”<sup>9</sup> In order for the vibrato to fit into the harmonies of “Miserere” it must be short and non-forceful. MacClintock quotes Michael Praetorius in support of this idea by saying “a singer must have a pleasantly vibrating voice... but with particular moderation... he must be able to maintain a steady long tone.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Roger North, *Roger North on Music* (London: Novello, 1959) 18.

<sup>8</sup> Martha Elliot, *Singing in Style: A Guide to Vocal Performance Practices* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2007) 15.

<sup>9</sup> Carol MacClintock, *Readings in the History of Music in Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979) 73.

<sup>10</sup> MacClintock, 164.

The use of the vibrato must be controlled and maintained to be small, tight and non-intrusive, or else it runs the risk of being too overbearing and it will cause specific notes in the tight harmonies to break. The vibrato should not, however, be excluded entirely from the piece as that may cause the singers to run out of breath or go flat, and it will certainly not live up to the beauty that the human voice can produce. Below is an example of when a good time to have tight

The image shows a musical score for five voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor 1, Tenor 2, and Bass. The lyrics are "of-fa hu-mili-a-ta." The score is divided into measures 4, 5, 6, and 7. In measures 4 and 5, the Soprano and Alto parts have shorter note values, while the Tenor 1, Tenor 2, and Bass parts have longer note values. In measures 6 and 7, all parts have longer note values. The score illustrates the use of vibrato in different voice parts, with the lower voices maintaining a small amount of vibrato and the upper voices having shorter note values.

and controlled vibrato. Here we see longer note values in the lower three voices along with them holding out the same vowel over the longer note values in measures 4-7. Looking at the top two voices, however, we see shorter note values in measures four and five. So, while it would be acceptable for the lower voices to maintain a small amount of vibrato, the same cannot be said for the upper two voices. It is important to note that the clarity of text is just as important as the

clarity of harmony. Below is an example of when to not use vibrato. In measure one, each voice is maintaining only one note for the entirety of the measure, but because the words are still moving it would be inappropriate to use vibrato here as it would make the words difficult to understand. For the majority of measure two through six it would be appropriate to use vibrato except for where the notes and words are changing in the top two voices.

Finally, the proper implementation of dynamics help will produce the mystical feel that the piece once emanated. While looking back at history, we see that “the direction of music was changed with the appearance of Claudio Monteverdi... who strove to express in music the fullness of life with all of its emotions... Monteverdi’s musical ideas have permeated almost every generation after him”<sup>11</sup> Taking Monteverdi’s approach to music (expressing the emotions of life), mixed with the standard dynamic practices of the time can recreate an authentic feel for the piece “Miserere Mei Deus”. According to Jeffery Kite-Powell, part of the early seventeenth century view on music was a “greater attention to the sentiments of the text.”<sup>12</sup> The most

The image shows a musical score for five voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor 1, Tenor 2, and Bass. The lyrics are "of-fa hu-mili-a-ta." The score is written in a single system with five staves. The lyrics are written below each staff, with hyphens indicating syllables across notes. The music is in a common time signature and features a variety of note values and rests. The lyrics are: of-fa hu-mili-a-ta. (Soprano), of-fa hu-mili-a-ta. (Alto), of-fa hu-mili-a-ta. (Tenor 1), of-fa hu-mili-a-ta. (Tenor 2), and of-fa hu-mili-a-ta. (Bass).

<sup>11</sup> Robert J Summer, *Renaissance Music for the Choral Conductor* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2013) 7.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffery Kite-Powell, *A Performer’s Guide to Seventeenth-Century Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012) 293.

effective way to replicate the dynamics will be to help the listener feel the emotions and the “fullness of life” through attention to the text.

One principal is for voices to enter with more energy and power than the voices already singing, and in consequence, for the voices who are already singing to slightly decrescendo in order to give attention to the voice that is entering. In the example above, the bottom three voices are singing the word “humiliata” for several measures, in the middle of which enter the top two voices. The entering voices are singing the same word that is being held by the bottom three voices. As each of the voices enter, they should do so with a slight accent to bring attention to them and the reiteration of the word “humiliata”, while the sustaining voices slightly decrescendo to take attention from them. The focus of these measures is the word (translated) humility and therefore the dynamics should emphasize that as well. Below are two more examples of nearly the exact same idea musically, but different words. The focus in these examples are “[God’s] compassion” and “judgment” respectively.

The image shows a musical score for six voices, arranged in two systems of three staves each. The lyrics are in Latin and are repeated across all staves. The lyrics are: Magnam mi-feri-cor-diam tu-am. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Magnam mi-feri-cor-diam tu-am.

Magnam mi-feri-cor-diam tu-am.

Magnam mi-feri-cor-diam mi-feri-cordiam tu-am.

Magnam mi-feri-cor-diam mi-feri-cor-diam tu-am.

Magnam mi-feri-cor-diam tu-am.

*a Tempo*

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece, likely a soprano or alto part, with five staves. The tempo is marked 'a Tempo'. The lyrics are: 'tu-is, et vincas cum judi-ca - - - ris.' The score includes a double bar line after the word 'ca' on each line, indicating a pause. The music is written in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). The notes are mostly quarter and half notes, with some eighth notes. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across notes.

One final principal is to allow the pauses to be effective. It is important to “pause in the proper places, because such a pause prevents confusion between one passage and another.”<sup>13</sup>

While focusing on the words, it is important to ensure that the phrases are separated to avoid confusion between lines of text. This not only adds to the clarity of the overall text, but it adds moments of silence to sing in the ear of the listener. The three examples above are all locations where after the phrase (the double bar line) performers should let the silence ring for several beats before continuing on with the piece.

“Miserere Mei Deus” is a beautiful piece of music surrounded by rich history. In consequence, it should be given the appropriate respect and beauty that it was written for. Correct use of diction, careful placement of vibrato and intentional dynamic principals will help this piece gain the mysticism and emotions that it deserves. With text about asking forgiveness and mercy from God and music that helps invoke those emotions perfectly, it is no wonder that it was so protected by the church, and it should remain a piece of reverence still.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Donington, *Baroque Music, Style and Performance: A Handbook* (New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1982) 30.

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