Building Musicianship through Study and Performance of Renaissance Music

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An Honors Thesis

by

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Abstract

Vocal Renaissance music, often unaccompanied, has very complex counterpoint and independent lines. The nature of this music helps to create singers and performers who are more independent and aware of the overall texture, as they see and hear how the different parts are intricately woven together. Because of these features, it was my wish to design a project around learning and performing works from this time period, not only to become more familiar with great pieces written during the Renaissance, but also to develop and improve my own musicianship by directing the craftsmanship of this challenging literature. Over the past year, I have selected literature, rehearsed an ensemble, and given a performance of the selected unaccompanied, vocal Renaissance pieces for this creative thesis project.

Acknowledgments

I must first and foremost recognize my advisor, Dr. Jeffrey Carter, whose inspired teaching and high standards have driven me to exceed expectations and strive for excellence. He has been a very influential musical mentor throughout this project, as well as a vital logistical consultant.

It would not be fair to write acknowledgments without thanking my pianist colleague Peter John, who was the very first Renaissance singer I sang with so many years ago. An entire obsession spawned from those first days of reading madrigals and canzonets together.

I owe some credit in the success of the project to my student, peer, and friend Derek Hunter. From day one when this project was but the seed of an idea to the night of the performance, having completely changed ensemble members and repertoire throughout the year, among other trials and tribulations along the way, it was his vision and belief in my unique project that allowed me to put the pieces in motion, even up against seemingly tremendous opposition.

Many thanks go to the singers in the ensemble, Andrea Bube, Alyssum Foltz, Brian Nabors, and Derek Hunter. No ensemble is a success without the commitment and talent of its members.

I would like to thank Dr. Murray Steib for his historical input and for being an excellent resource on the music of the Renaissance. I relied on his expertise on more than one occasion.
Reflection

Last summer when I was faced with making the repertoire decisions, I asked myself what it was I wanted to accomplish with this literature. I wanted repertoire that would be not be terribly difficult to pull together so that I could really work on basic musicianship concepts of intonation, tone, blend, and balance. These cornerstones of good music-making would be difficult enough to tackle and wield some control over without worrying about extremely difficult literature. I consulted many anthologies of scores and CD recordings of many I selected nine pieces from the genres of the motet, madrigal, French Chanson, German dance songs, and English secular songs by a wide variety of well-known Renaissance composers, giving a nice overview of the variety of music from the height of the Renaissance.

I chose two pieces by Thomas Morley because, while both are English madrigals, the styles are quite different. “Sing We and Chant it” is more representative of the typical English madrigal with the “fa la la” chorus, and “April is in my Mistress’ Face” is much more subdued, revealing Morley’s preference for self-restraint. The other English madrigal, “To Shorten Winter’s Sadness” by Thomas Weelkes, is an uplifting madrigal with the harmonic and contrapuntal drama that Weelkes enjoyed using, providing a nice contrast to his madrigal composer counterpart Morley.

Palestrina’s sacred motet “Alma Redemptoris Mater” demonstrates this master’s craft at balancing lines using a very conservative harmonic language that emphasizes the text. Clarity of the text was an important aspect to take into consideration when setting these texts to music, because the Council of Trent decided that all secular influences should be removed from the music at this time, thus making sure the words were easily heard. Palestrina excelled at this and quickly became one of the leading composers, not just in Italy, but of all of Europe during the Renaissance.

“Au Joli Bois” is the representative piece from the secular genre of the French chanson. Sermisy wrote many chanson during the Renaissance, and this one certainly demonstrates his lyrical, homorhythmic style. His
beautiful chansons about unhappy love, nature, drinking, or animals are very simplistic in their counterpoint, but they incorporate symbolism in the text, such as descending lines for a sad thought or use of extended melismas for important words.

Tomas Luis de Victoria wrote many sacred motets and has a style similar to Palestrina, possibly because he might have been instructed by the Italian composer. Victoria was the most prolific Spanish composer during the last half of the sixteenth century and wrote strictly in the sacred genres of the time, which were primarily masses and motets. The setting of “Ave Maria” that we performed demonstrates how he weaves the voices in and out of the texture in short fragments, then how he sustains them with longer phrases in paired duets. The homorhythmic section in 3/4 is a reflection of historical influences. It was always believed that 3/4 meter was sacred because it represented the holy trinity.

Hans Leo Hassler’s piece “Tanzen und Springen” was our representative German piece on the program and shows how the madrigalist’s influence spread through different parts of Europe. As in the English madrigals, the “fa la la” chorus makes its appearance here as well.

John Dowland’s “Weep You No More, Sad Fountains” is a secular song from the beginning of the seventeenth century. Dowland, a very prolific composer of lute music, weaves very complex, contrapuntal lines and uses an advanced harmonic language that makes this sad song of unhappy love exceptionally effective.

William Byrd’s well-known “Ave Verum Corpus” is a motet from the Gradualia collection of motets that was published in 1605 at a time when religious persecution was rampant in England. Many people were charged with being recusant, or not attending the Protestant church. This piece demonstrates the modal fluidity that music had during the Renaissance, since major and minor modes had not yet become the established standard.
When I undertook this project, I had no idea I would have as many decisions to make as I did. From rehearsal place and time to the color of an 'e' vowel, as director I was constantly making the calls. I found that this was the greatest challenge for me the entire year, staying organized and being consistent.

Since I knew I would be doing my own, independent recital, I submitted an application for an internal grant, which was approved by the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. I received a Creative Arts Grant award that would cover the expenses of invitations, publicity posters, and professional programs. I enjoyed designing the logistical aspects of the project, especially the programs and posters, using a combination of Adobe Illustrator, Microsoft Word, and a bit of help from the Staples Printing and Copying Center.

At the beginning of the year, I held auditions for the Renaissance ensemble and ended up with a handful of undergraduate students who were mostly music majors. We learned a few madrigals and a French chanson and performed them at the Renaissance Faire in Fishers, Indiana, which brought us some popularity among people with a particular interest in the time period. Soon after the event, the group decided that it was too much of a commitment to be in an extra-curricular ensemble and then disbanded.

With a grant award waiting in an account and recitals booked both semesters for an ensemble that no longer existed, my thesis hinged on gathering the necessary forces to see the project through to completion. It was then that I invited graduate voice students to participate in this special ensemble, culminating in a recital at the end of the spring semester. I was surprised by the level of enthusiasm this project received from all of the graduate students, even if they could not participate because of other obligations. It verified my first estimation that there is such interest in performing early music at Ball State; it just needs to be provided.

I began rehearsals again in the spring semester with a fresh group, a handful of graduate voice and choral conducting majors, and we met once per
week for an hour and a half. We sight-read, rehearsed, and polished with no piano to rely on, working sections at a time, sometimes slowly, listening for tuning, vowel agreement, and blending of voices. We also spent time working on diction, discussing the meaning of particular words, and the overall message of each piece.

I found the dynamic of crafting ensemble music to be a unique experience. An integral part of creating music with a group is to craft absolutely crystal clear sonorities that lock into place immediately so that the ensemble of many sounds like the precision and idea of one performer. Not only does the vertical aspect have to align perfectly, but each singer must keep a degree of a soloist mentality and make an organic phrase out of the horizontal line as well, resulting in music that has life and breadth. In the last few weeks of rehearsals, we were especially keen at communicating and functioning as one performing unit, breathing together, releasing together, and moving phrases toward a common goal in an almost instinctive manner. In the last few weeks of rehearsals, we experienced a true height in our musical awareness as a group, a kind of cohesion that cannot be achieved without attaining a certain level of familiarity with the music and the different characters in such a close-knit group.

The night of the concert, the First Presbyterian Church was serene, washed in the orange glow of candlelight. The performance was short but effective. The moments in the motets that were magic were truly magical, and those impressive moments soared over the audience in that tall space of the sanctuary. There were many comments about moments during the recital that were simply moving.

Of course, as performances will have it, there were some unexpected twists and turns that we did not expect to take. Things that are well rehearsed go wrong in performance, things that one would never expect a deterrence of any kind, but the measure of how in tune a group is to each other is whether they can pull it together again after that. When the chanson
“Au Joli Bois” had its shaky start and I considered restarting the song, somehow it pulled itself together again and was fine through to the end.

Overall, the recital and the entire project were very satisfying. To see all of the work, music, and sometimes frustration come together in a recital with music that truly lived and spoke is well worth it. It is the reason we do what we do.
Reconunendations for Similar Future Endeavors

One of my regrets in programming, which I discovered after doing some research, was not having any Italian madrigal on the program. So many secular genres of the Renaissance were inspired and influenced by the Italian madrigal in some way, and I did not have an example of this very popular genre to show the roots of the English madrigal and the German form of the madrigal. It would have also provided more balance in the languages presented. We sang many pieces in English in Latin, had one piece in French, and one in German. It would have been a nice balance to be able to present all of the major singing languages with a piece in Italian.

As I mentioned before, my greatest challenge has simply been being organized and consistent. It is vital to have consistency and discipline from the very beginning, from musical decisions to rehearsal technique, because it saves time and confusion down the road. There are several things that could have been done to further my own musical discipline in terms of preparation. I could have spent much more time with music and scores, developing an intimacy with and knowing each and every line as if they were my own to sing. That would have helped me in setting my expectations and explaining them clearly to the singers. More score study also would have helped me to form an exceptionally clear vision of each piece. Without that goal in mind, it's difficult for musicians to know what they're working towards. In terms of planning rehearsal strategies, having a musical goal for the piece will help devise strategies for achieving it. I needed to prepare more with the end in mind.

In trying to relate to my performers, I had a tendency to make a lot of different analogies and present ideas in many different ways, but this wasn't always the most effective method of communicating my ideas. Generally, I needed to talk far less and demonstrate more. The "seven words or less" rule is as applicable as ever; if you can't say it in seven words or less, don't say it. I probably wasted a lot of rehearsal time using elaborate explanations that they likely didn’t relate to. The quickest way for them to internalize an
idea, as I found out going into the concert, was to simply do it. As with any kinesthetic operation, singers need to sing to make the adjustments happen naturally. In the future, it is my goal to offer only detailed, specific, but brief comments and let the ensemble respond by doing.

One of the battles we fought this semester was with the deterioration of pieces over time. The ensemble only met once each week, and when that much time lapses before visiting the music again, there is bound to be some setback. Pieces we knew fairly well were not coming back as quickly as I had hoped they would, and this "playing catch-up" used up rehearsal time. If it is possible to meet twice per week instead of once, that might be more effective in terms of recall.
Bibliography


