Italian vocal ornamentation in the decades around 1600

Introduction

In this document, as well as an introduction to the basic types of ornamentation, you can read excerpts from the contributions of four important figures in the world of singing around 1600:

Giulio Caccini, whose publications around 1600 were the fruit of his time spent studying at the Florentine Camerata, an exclusive cultural organisation whose goal was to recreate the glories of ancient Classical theatre and music, which was said to have had a most remarkable power over the hearts and minds of men and women,

Giovanni Battista Bovicelli, who wrote one of the most important treatises on singing, published in 1594, in which he explains the art of ornamentation with exceptional detail, and special attention to the relationship with the text,

Francesco Rognoni, whose ornamentation guide, published in 1620, reinforces some of the tenets of Caccini and Bovicelli, while incorporating more modern and daring styles of ornamentation

and

Carlo Gra[ziani] [*also known as Carlo G: last name obscured on MS*], whose name appears at the head of a 300-page manuscript collection of vocal pieces, mostly for solo voice and continuo, with full continuo realisations and written-out ornamentation. He gave no written advice, but the ornamental patterns, in context, are extremely valuable.

Types of ornaments

You will come across ornaments broadly in four categories:

- *Passaggi*, or diminutions.

These consist of florid ornaments created by literally dividing longer notes into shorter ones, so that a semibreve might be ornamented as 16 semiquavers:

- Trilli, groppi/gruppi/groppetti, tremoli

These can be **tone repetitions** on a single note (in various rhythms) or **tone oscillations**, similar to the later trill. Nomenclature varies from author to author. They perform a role similar to the trill in eighteenth century music; they can be applied to a single note almost anywhere, and are especially to be found in cadences.

Here is a selection from F. Rognoni:

One pattern seen often in the Graziani MS is seen here:

- Dynamic ornaments

In this category are included the crescendo and diminuendo on a single long note – later known as the *messa di voce* – and the *esclamazione*, a diminuendo followed by a crescendo. These were considered a form of ornamentation and vital to good expression.

- Accenti

This is an elusive term, used sometimes to refer to a specific ornament of this type:

Francesco Rognoni "true *accento*"

but also to refer to a general category of subtle, elegant ornaments straying no more than a 3rd from the main note and displaying rhythmic flexibility, such as these, also from Rognoni:

Bovicelli, in particular, uses the term in contradistinction to *passaggi* and stresses that their characters are quite different, with *passaggi* more suited to energetic, joyful texts while *accenti* are more suited to melancholy or sorrowful texts.

Graziani uses them liberally, somewhat in the manner of F Rognoni:

A complete understanding of ornamentation acknowledges all these different types; scroll down for the summaries and examples from each author in turn.

Giulio Caccini

a summary of salient points from the introduction to

Le Nuove Musiche, Florence, 1602

- Bullet points and standard text: my paraphrasing of the author's words

Green text, regular paragraphs: my commentary or further explanation

- The old style [of constant diminution] obscured the words, destroyed the concept and meaning, and messed with the lengths of syllables for the sake of counterpoint or ornamentation; it was more suitable for wind and string instruments than the voice.

This example of the "old" style to which Caccini objects is from Girolamo dalla Casa, 'Alla dolc'ombra', from Il vero modo di diminuir, Venice, 1584, and illustrates more-or-less continuous diminution in at least one part:

- The new style, which I have learnt in Florence at the famous Camerata, is based on Plato and other philosophers, and sets speech and rhythm above mere sound; its purpose is essentially **rhetorical**: to affect the minds of the listeners.

- My purpose is, following this, to write a kind of music in which one can as it were speak in harmony.

- An important characteristic of this is a kind of noble *sprezzatura*[1] [negligence], in which dissonances remain briefly against a held bass.[2]

- My principal aim is to represent the conceit or point of the text

- Instead of running passages, I use small flurries of notes up to a quarter or at the most half a bar, which pass quickly and add to the grace

From Queste lagrim'amare (Le Nuove Musiche, volume 1, no. 2)
Examples of passaggi of up to half a bar, according to Caccini's own recommendations

- Running passages **are** allowed occasionally, on long syllables, in less affective moments, and at final cadences

From Dolcissimo sospiro (Le Nuove Musiche, volume 1, no. 3)
Example of extended passaggi, as allowed at final cadences

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[1] A 16th century definition (from Castiglione's Art of the Courtier, 1528), is 'a certain nonchalance, so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it. It is certainly a rather nebulous concept and Caccini's 'explanation' only helps us a little. His examples of rhythmic variation give us more insight into one aspect of this approach, however.

[2] It was described in his 1614 preface as 'that charm lent to the song by passing over several quavers and semiquavers above different [bass] notes, which, done at the right moment, relieves the song of a certain restrictive narrowness and dryness, and renders it pleasing, free and airy'. Caccini compares this to the use of rhetorical figures to lend agility and sweetness to a speech.

- I find the old practice of beginning a 3rd or 4th below the note rather a cliché, so I prefer to make use of *esclamazioni* at the beginning of a phrase. In other places I also make use of crescendo and diminuendo, *trilli*, and *gruppi.*

These ornaments belong in the 2nd and 3rd categories listed above and are worth explaining in detail.

The **esclamazione** is a dynamic effect consisting of a diminuendo followed by a crescendo; it can take various forms according to the rhetorical purpose. Caccini describes the first of these examples clearly: make a gradual diminuendo on the dotted minim D, then give more breath to increase the voice on the crotchet C. The second esclamazioni on 'deh!' he simply describes as 'more lively'.

Examples in which esclamazioni are to be used on the dotted minims

Esclamazioni are preferred on dotted minims; for semibreves, Caccini recommends instead a crescendo and diminuendo (what others would later call a messa di voce).

The **trillo** is a fast tone repetition on a single note:

Caccini's method of explaining and teaching it

He represents it schematically as above, explaining that this is an effective method of teaching it, but the examples in his songs show that the execution must be quite varied, as it occurs on long and short notes equally often:

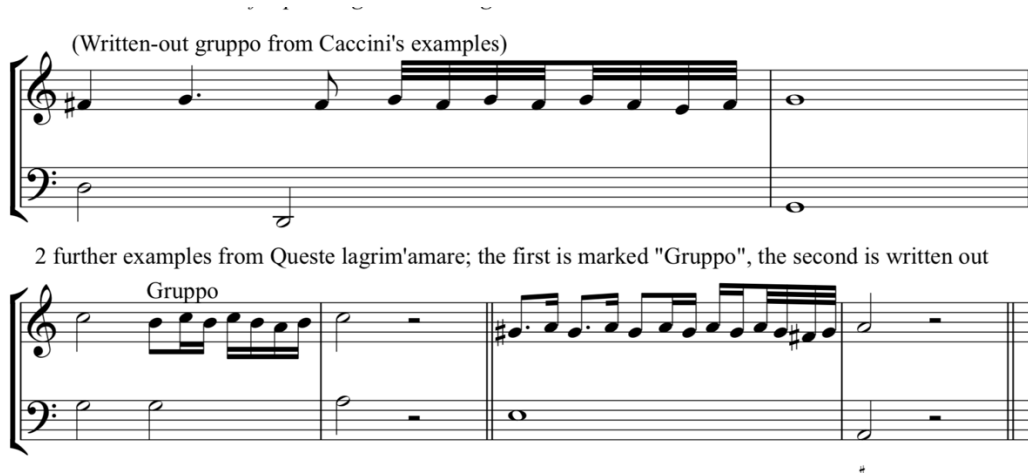Here are some audio examples of **esclamazioni** and **trilli**, sung by Charles Daniels:

https://schloss-weissenbrunn.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Charles-Daniels-solo-Example-1-Esclamazione-Coloratura-or-gorgia-trillo-in-Kabsberger.wav

https://schloss-weissenbrunn.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Charles-Daniels-solo-Example-2-Esclamazione-trillo-in-Kabsberger.wav
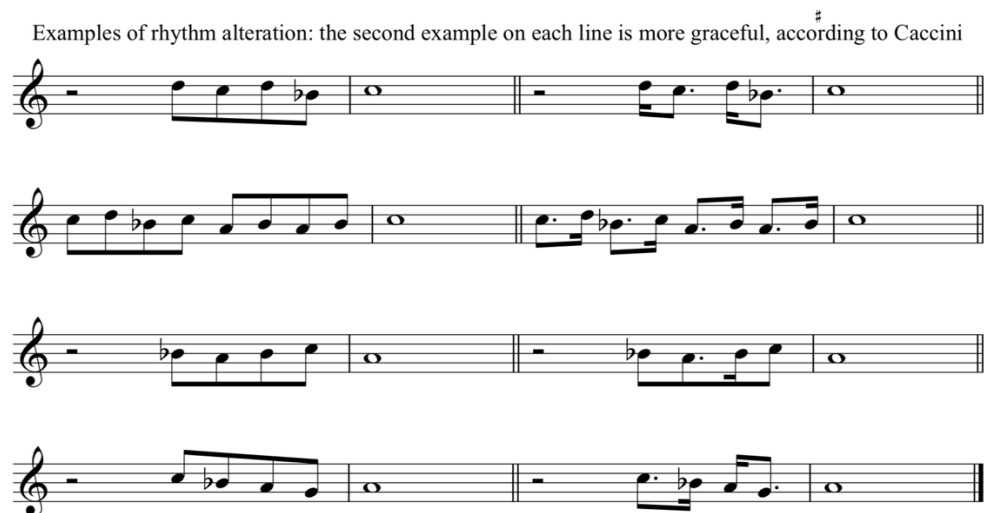
The **gruppo** is an ornamental pattern akin to an 18th century trill with a turn:

Gruppo

Caccini's method of explaining and teaching it

As with the trill, Caccini explains that this schematic, accelerating example is a good way to teach it, but written out examples show a more varied execution:

(Written-out gruppo from Caccini's examples)

2 further examples from Queste lagrim'amare; the first is marked "Gruppo", the second is written out

Gruppo

- Another important characteristic which adds grace to your performance is the subtle rhythmic variation of even quavers or semiquavers: practice these and other examples to achieve perfection:

Examples of rhythm alteration: the second example on each line is more graceful, according to Caccini

Giovanni Battista Bovicelli

a summary of the most important points from his

Regole, passaggi di music, madrigali et motetti passeggiate, Venice, 1594

- When making passaggi, make sure you pay attention to the text: do not unduly lengthen short syllables, or vice versa, and don't change syllable in the middle of a flurry of notes or immediately afterwards – it is better to delay the syllable change as in the 3rd example below:

- Make sure you pay attention to the harmony when making passaggi

- You can vary ornamental figures by using dotted rhythms

- You can begin gracefully by starting a third or fourth below the note, preferably using a dotted rhythm

This is an example of the ornament that Caccini considered outmoded just a few years later – though see Rognoni, below!

- *Groppetti* and *passaggi* can be made more gracious by slowing the note values at the end – not suddenly, but for instance from semiquavers to quavers, crotchets etc.

- The tremolo (a tone-repetition) can be combined with other *accento*-like figures and works especially well in step-wise patterns

Alle note segnate si deve fare il tremolo formato.
One must make a structured tremolo on the marked notes.

Bovicelli's tremolo is notoriously elusive, as he seems to use it only in combination with other ornamental patterns; Caccini's trillo (above) and Rognoni's examples of trillo and tremolo (below) are much clearer.

- Larger intervals must be handled carefully: too many in a row can sound too instrumental

- *Passaggi* are usually better suited to joyful works, while *accenti* are better suited to melancholy works; there can be exceptions, however.

- Keep strict time during ornaments, except at the very end, on the penultimate note, when it is OK to take a bit of time.

- Don't breathe too often, grit your teeth, or sing through the nose

- When making *passaggi*, wait a few beats before getting going, and make sure you pronounce all the words carefully

Francesco Rognoni

Guidance for carrying the voice (*portar la voce*) from the introduction to

Selva de' varii passaggi secondo l'uso moderno, Milan, 1620

1. A graceful way to sing a series of semibreves is to crescendo on the first 3 beats and make a short *tremolo* on the last:

2. *Accenti* – touching on the note above at the very end of each longer note – can be made ascending, but are especially good descending:

3. The *tremolo* can be made often, but gracefully and not indiscriminately. Here are two ways of doing it:

4. The *gruppo* and the *trillo* should be written as in the following examples; practise by singing them on the vowel "a". They are mostly used for the penultimate note of any cadence:

Del trillo sopra la minima.

Del trillo sopra la semibreve.
Primo modo.

Secondo modo

5. You can begin the note a 3rd or 4th below, according to the harmony, to add grace:

Del principiar sotto la nota.

Some 20 years after Caccini dismissed this ornament, Rognoni clearly finds it perfectly acceptable!

6. *Esclamazioni* are made on descending figures, by making a diminuendo on the first note and enlivening the next with a quick tremolo:

Esclamazioni.   *affettuosa*   *meno affettuosa*

Qui - a   a - ni-ma   me - a.

These are very similar to Caccini's examples: a dotted minim followed by a descending interval.

7. Be careful to avoid parallel fifths and octaves when ornamenting; it's also a good idea to pause on the penultimate note of any florid ornament, to avoid rushing into the final note.

Compare Bovicelli's advice about ending flourishes with slower note-values.

Carlo Gra[ziani]

MS collection, c. 1620

NB There is no written text accompanying this manuscript, therefore everything from here on in is my own words.

Here follow a number of examples of ornaments in various categories, taken from the fully ornamented works. I've also included one longer excerpt to show the structure and placement of ornaments. These are a fascinating example of how ornaments might behave "in the wild" – which may diverge from the advice we read in treatises.

First, as this will be new territory for many, some listening:

- This video explains more about the MS with sung excerpts:

  https://youtu.be/e7ymTy5UcLE

- Here is a recording of Nigra sum in a Carlo G setting, sung by Perrine Devillers with Elam Rotem (whose early music videos in general are highly recommended!).

  https://youtu.be/VBQeK8QASQE

- Finally, here is a recording of one of the songs played on the violin – instrumentalists were constantly advised to copy singers, so these works can be a good model for players, too:

  https://open.spotify.com/track/6QgCw8IcH3QnQZgTMpUFue?si=2007064142ef48bf

Diminutions[3]

- The realised continuo is included, not only for its own sake, but also because it shows us the original vocal line, which we see in the top line of the realisation. The + sign, seen on two notes in this example, is used frequently in this MS to indicate a slight lengthening (within the pulse) of a given note:

- Many of the diminutions in the collection involve slight syncopations: here the singer dwells slightly longer on two notes, the tied C in the middle and the final C marked with a +

- Like Bovicelli in the previous generation, Carlo G's ornaments often include dotted rhythms for variety:

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[3] All examples are taken from Elam Rotem's edition of selected works from the Carlo G MS, which is available on IMSLP, along with a scan of the original MS: https://imslp.org/wiki/The_Carlo_G_Manuscript_(Anonymous)

- The following example reveals two interesting phenomena, also common in Caccini and Monteverdi: a long, elaborate diminution over several beats leading up to falling-step cadence, which is left plain, with an ornamentation in the accompaniment which has the 4–3 cadential movement:

NB Some singers in recent decades have resorted to using a rising fourth ornament, often extended at great length, on the penultimate note in cases like this. Unfortunately, you will hear it in many recordings! **Please do not imitate this rising fourth** – it is a bad habit, invented in the 1970s, with no historical precedent, and it has become a terrible cliché, devoid of grace or style.

Trilli, groppi, tremoli

- This trillo-like pattern, with a repeated tone followed by a "turn" into the next note, is particularly common in Carlo G, on any rising passage (left) or at 4–3 cadences (right). The example on the right is preceded by an accento figure (see below for more examples):

- This is a groppo, also typically used in a 4–3 cadence. It is very similar to the examples by Caccini, Bovicelli and Rognoni. Carlo G sometimes abbreviates it to g (*right*):

- Groppo- or tremolo-like figures also occur in other contexts, and the MS contains many variants, like this one which moves up a step for the final oscillation to facilitate a downward stepwise movement:

Accenti

- These hard-to-define figures are found extensively in Carlo G, and have many characteristics in common with those seen in Caccini, Bovicelli and Rognoni. They often take the form of a short, rhythmically flexible linking figure at the end of a note, facilitating a graceful connection:

- They can also "wander" for a little longer around the principal note and its near neighbours:

- Accenti involving a rising third, often on a dotted rhythm, are especially common; here is an example from a duet, involving a near-imitation in the second voice of the rising third accento in the first voice:

Finally, here is a longer excerpt which demonstrates typical placement of ornamentation. This is taken from a setting of Benedictus Deus. Commentary follows on the next page:

A few salient points to note:

- A variety of ornamental categories are used: **diminutions** in quavers (70, 71, 73) and semiquavers (61, 62, 66, 73, 76), **dotted rhythms** (70, 71, 74, 76), *accenti* (74, 75) and **tremoli** (just one at the end of 76)

- Several passages are left **completely plain**: in particular, the triple time section remains unornamented, which is the case for **all triple sections** in this manuscript

- Liberal use is made of the + symbol to indicate slight dwelling on certain notes. Note, especially, its use on the quaver diminutions to lengthen the second note: this is strongly reminiscent of the advice in Caccini to vary the rhythm of groups of four quavers.

- Once again we see an example of an extended final flourish **before** the cadence, with the cadence itself left completely plain.