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Sixteenth-Century Instrumentation: The Music for the Florentine Intermedii

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SIXTEENTH-CENTURY INSTRUMENTATION: THE MUSIC FOR THE FLORENTINE *INTERMEDII*

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INTRODUCTION

Composers of secular music during the Renaissance did not generally write with specific combinations of voices and instruments in mind. Indeed, most sixteenth-century music which survives today fails to mention instrumental participation, and thus suggests to us that it was originally sung *a cappella*. But contemporary descriptions of performances then make clear that much vocal music was accompanied by instruments.[1] Thus the scores of sixteenth-century chansons, madrigals, and *Lieder* present merely the essential notes; performances that strive to recapture the original spirit of such compositions must seek to bring them back to life by imaginative reconstruction. The realization that madrigals and other sixteenth-century secular compositions were often performed with both voices and instruments has given rise to the notion that Renaissance musicians played and sang music with whatever resources happened to be at hand. But that statement must be an oversimplification for it is patently absurd. Why should Renaissance men, so sophisticated in their pursuit of pleasure, and so aware of the sensuous surface of life, be imagined callously indifferent to one of the most important facets of music, namely, the way it sounds? Moreover, secular music was performed at courts which employed large numbers of skilled, professional musicians, and many princes prided themselves on owning superb collections of all of the instruments then in use.[2] With relatively unlimited resources at hand a musician charged with preparing a performance at one of these courts had perforce to pick and choose, and his decisions were undoubtedly motivated by sound, musical reasons. If we concede, then, that musicians did exercise artistic choice in deciding to score one piece in one way and another piece differently, there

[1] See, for instance, the examples given in Emilie Elsner, *Untersuchung der instrumentalen Besetzungspraxis der weltlichen Musik im 16. Jahrhundert in Italien* (Ohlau i. Schl.: Eschenhagen, 1935).

[2] See, for example, the very instructive description of the facilities available at the court of Ferrara late in the century, in Ercole Bottrigari, *Il Desiderio* (Venice: Ricciardo Amadino, 1594; facsimile edition by Kathi Meyer [Berlin: Martin Breslauer, 1924]), pp. 40-44; the treatise is translated into English by Carol MacClintock (American Institute of Musicology, 1962), pp. 50-55.

CHAPTER I

THE *INTERMEDII*

Intermedii were inserted between the acts of neo-classical comedies modeled on Plautus and Terence. Beginning in the 1550's pastoral plays, *favole pastorali*, came into fashion, and they, too, were often supplied with *intermedii*.[1] Since comedies and pastoral plays all had five acts, there were normally six *intermedii* performed during a single evening: one before the prologue and one after each of the acts. As a relief from the complexities of plot of the plays proper, the *intermedii* stressed spectacle: the inventive stage engineers of the time devised ingenious machines so that gods and goddesses could descend from the heavens or else be revealed in consultation on Mount Olympus, prosaic city streets could be transformed in an instant into beautiful, exotic gardens or the burning city of Hell, and mountains, caves, and grottoes could spring magically up from beneath the stage floor. The stage spectacle was brought to life by elaborately costumed singers, actors, and instrumentalists who performed one or more musical compositions during each *intermedio* and pantomimed and sometimes danced but almost never spoke. The *intermedii* were, in short, *tableaux vivants*, based usually on mythological subjects. Since there was no spoken dialogue, they had no plot. At most, all of the *intermedii* for an evening would be unified in theme. Thus the six *intermedii* performed in Lyons in 1548 all dealt with the ages of man, beginning with the Age of Iron, and ending, of course, with the Age of Gold that was to come in the reign of Henry II, for whom the play was performed. And all of the *intermedii* in 1589 illustrated the notion that music, according to the an-

[1] Nino Pirrotta, "Intermedium," *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 6 (1957), cols. 1310-26, summarizes the history of the *intermedio*. See also Pirrotta, *Li Due Orfei da Poliziano a Monteverdi* (Turin: Edizioni RAI, 1969). On *favole pastorali* see Henry W. Kaufmann, "Music for a *favola pastorale* (1554)" (to be published), which deals with the first example of the genre, Agostino Beccari's *Il Sacrificio*. The event cited as Festival I in the Appendix is unique among the Florentine *intermedii* in that it apparently consisted mostly of purely instrumental music.

CHAPTER II

KEYBOARD INSTRUMENTS

The musicians' galleries that were built behind the scenes in these large theaters must have been quite spacious for there had to be room in them for at least one and usually more keyboard instruments. Keyboards took part, in fact, in all eight of the Florentine *intermedii*. One such instrument, a claviorganum, sufficed in 1539, and a single organ played for *L'esaltazione della croce* in 1589. But two spinets were needed in 1568 and two organs for *La Pellegrina* in 1589. And there were three harpsichords in 1568, four in 1565, and more than one plus an organ in 1586.

Curiously, the normal Italian harpsichord of the sixteenth century, a simple one-manual instrument with two sets of eight-foot strings, neither of which could be disengaged, seems to have played a relatively small rôle in theatrical entertainments.[1] The festival booklets of 1568 and 1586, the latter very imprecisely worded, are the only ones to specify harpsichords without modifying their description in some way.[2] Thus in 1518, only the highest pitched plucked stringed keyboards were required, presumably *ottavine* or *spinettini*, supplied with single sets of four-foot strings.[3] Spinets, small polygonal instruments with a single set of eight-foot strings, alone and in pairs, accompanied solo singers in 1548.[4] In 1565 the harpsichords, used in twos, threes and fours to accompany ensemble singing, are described as "double," meaning perhaps instruments without a short octave in the basss, unless they were supplied with two sets of strings, one eight-foot

[1] On the normal, sixteenth-century Italian harpsichord, see Frank Hubbard, *Three Centuries of Harpsichord Making* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 1-42, but esp. 5-6; and Raymond Russell, *The Harpsichord and the Clavichord* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), pp. 27-40. For capsule definitions and histories of the various instruments mentioned in the following pages, see also Sybil Marcuse, *Musical Instruments: A Comprehensive Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1964).

[2] Appendix, V: B1; and VI: A1 and E1.

[3] Appendix, I: D.

[4] Appendix, III: A1, D, and F3.

CHAPTER IV

BOWED STRINGED INSTRUMENTS

The two foundation instruments which remain to be discussed, the *lira da braccio* (or simply *lira*), and the *lirone* (also called *lira grande*, *arciviolata lira* or *lira da gamba*) are closely related to each other. The larger instrument seems to have evolved during the course of the sixteenth century as a bass counterpart to the *lira da braccio*, to expand its range and extend its function. Thus the *lirone* relates to the *lira da braccio* in the same way that the various sixteenth-century archlutes, the theorboe, the *chitarrone*, and the *colascione*, relate to the lute. And its invention furnishes another example of the tendency of sixteenth-century musicians to build instruments in families, or for ever more specialized purposes. The earliest reference to the *lirone* thus far cited in the musicological literature occurs in a Florentine *intermedio*, that of 1565.[1] By then, the *lira da braccio* had already had a long and distinguished career.

The *lira da braccio* resembles in body outline the violin, but its peg box is leaf-shaped, its pegs are inserted from the front, and two of the seven strings normally to be found on the instrument run off the fretless fingerboard as drones.[2] Its five melody strings are tuned like a violin, save that the low G is doubled an octave higher; the most usual tuning for the instrument is given in Example 17.[3] The two off-board strings, tuned in

[1] Appendix, IV: B, E, and F 1-2. The statement by Marcuse, *Musical Instruments* p. 311, that the "earliest mention of the lira da gamba seems to occur in a Graz inventory of 1577," must therefore be emended.

[2] The best general survey of the history of the instrument, with a full bibliography of works dealing with it, is Emanuel Winternitz, "Lira da braccio," *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 8 (1960):935-54. A revised and condensed version of the article appears in *idem*, *Musical Instruments and their Symbolism in Western Art* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), pp. 86-98. Benvenuto Disertori, "Pratica e tecnica della lira da braccio," *Rivista musicale italiana* 45 (1941):150-75, which relates the *lira* to the frottola repertoire, is the first and to date the most extensive discussion of the playing technique of the instrument.

[3] After Giovan Maria Lanfranco, *Scintille di musica* (Brescia: Lodovico Britannico, 1533), p. 136, and, in English translation, in Barbara Lee, "Giovanni Maria Lanfranco's *Scintille di Musica* and its Relation to 16th-century Music Theory," unpublished Ph. D.

Since the precise pitch of any note on a crumhorn depends almost completely on delicate adjustments of wind pressure made by the player, who must change the intensity of the air supply slightly for virtually every note, good intonation is extremely difficult to achieve with a consort of crumhorns. Perhaps for that reason the Florentine musicians invariably added to them some instrument, presumably one more stable, from a different family. Both the chorus of shepherds in 1539 and the chorus of Frauds and Deceptions in 1565 were accompanied by five crumhorns and a cornett whose contrasting timbre probably served to emphasize the most important melodic line as well as to stabilize the intonation.[59] And the group of three crumhorns that helped to celebrate the Age of Bronze in 1548 were supported by a trombone playing as the bass member of the consort.[60] The caution of sixteenth-century musicians in using crumhorn consorts should guide modern players wishing to revive this singular sound. On those few occasions when one or two crumhorns were added to an ensemble, on the other hand, they took no very prominent position. Two crumhorns played inner parts, as we have seen, in the finale of the 1539 *intermedii*; in the finale of 1565 a soprano crumhorn ("stortina" as opposed to the standard "storta") probably played an Altus part; and once in 1568, quite improbably, a bass crumhorn ("storta per basso") seems to have played the lowest line beneath a consort of trombones and cornetts.[61] In short, crumhorns seem most characteristically to have played in consorts, but on occasion one or two could join with other sorts of instruments — especially trombones and cornetts — in mixed ensembles.

Three of the eight Florentine *intermedii*, those in 1565, 1568 and 1586, make use of still another double reed instrument, the *dolzaina*, whose exact nature is somewhat ambiguous, even though the term appears in literary and archival documents, inventories, and musical treatises from

n. 17 above), are the only ones supplied with notes about instrumentation suggests that they departed from normal custom. Perhaps, then, they are unusual in using crumhorns, or, more likely, instruments did not customarily double each other in playing the same part, a conclusion which is implicit in the instrumentations of the Florentine *intermedii*. For further information on the Copenhagen manuscripts, see Hendrik Glahn, "En ny kilde belysning af det preussiske hofkapels repertoire på Hertug Albrechts tid," *Studier tillägnade Carl-Allan Moberg 5 Juni 1961 (Svensk Tidskrift för Musikforskning* 43 [1961]), pp. 145-61.

[59] Appendix, II: B and IV: C.

[60] Appendix, III: C.

[61] Appendix, II: F2; IV: F1; and V: D.

B  Chitarrone (adding chords above B)

VII. F4. *O fortunato giorno* (*a 30*) in 7 choruses) Christofano Malvezzi
Performed by the entire company
SCORING: 60 voices, and the same instruments as in F1 and F2

A POSSIBLE DISPOSITION OF VOICES AND INSTRUMENTS:[71]

I 

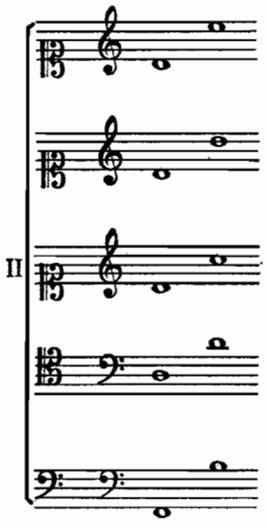
Soprano I (two singers) and soprano viol

Alto I (two singers) and tenor viol

Tenor I (two singers) and bass viol I

Tenor II (two singers) and bass viol II

Bssa I (two singers) and bass viol III

II 

Soprano II (two singers) and *lira da braccio* I (adding chords beneath part)

Soprano III (two singers) and *lira da braccio* II (adding chords beneath part)

Soprano IV (two singers) and violin

Tenor III (two singers)

Bass II (two singers) and *lirone* (adding chords above part)

71. Rossi omits mention of this composition. According to Malvezzi the singers included Tomasso Benigni, Ceseri (sic) di Missere, Placido Marcelli, and Giulio Cima, tenor at the court of the Duke of Mantua.

I have assumed that the following twenty-four instruments took part in F4: two cornetts,


10
to, In - vi - - dio - so fa - rei chiun - che
to, In - vi - - dio - so fa - rei chiun - che con -
con - - - ten - to, Splen - de nel vos - tro
ten - - - - - to,
15
vi - s'un vi - vo so - - - le,
Splen - - - de nel vos - tro vi - - s'un