



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Giulio Caccini, extracts from Introduction to *Le nuove musiche* (1602)

Giulio Caccini (1551–1618) was a composer, singer, and singing teacher active in Florence at the turn of the seventeenth century. (He was also the father of Francesca Caccini [1587–c1641], the composer of five operas, including the first opera to be performed outside of Italy [see Other Notable Composers and More Music, Chapter 30]). Caccini seems to have been a proud, egotistical man, eager to claim sole credit for the development of the new monodic style of singing that emerged in Florence around 1600 and that formed the basis of what we today call opera. Although there were many figures involved in the creation of this new dramatic style (*stile rappresentativo*), including Caccini’s rival, Jacopo Peri (see Chapter 30), Caccini tried to trump them all by rushing into print with a collection of music entitled *The New Music*. In it Caccini not only advocates a new style with regard to texture (monody as opposed to multivoice polyphony) but also posits a new relationship between music and text: text should dictate the nature of the music, not music determine the nature of the text. This, of course, echoes the sentiments of Claudio Monteverdi (see previous In Their Own Words), who decreed famously that the text should be the master (*padrona*) of the harmony—determine the course and nature of the music—and not the other way around. Strictly speaking, of course, Monteverdi would echo Caccini’s sentiments because, although the roots of the Artusi-Monteverdi controversy extended back into the 1590s, Monteverdi did not publish an official declaration of his position until 1607 (see In Their Own Words for Chapter 28 or 29). As Caccini says in the passage below, musical counterpoint should not appear to be “turning the poetry to shreds.” Indeed, counterpoint is antithetical to the spirit of ancient Greek music that was fundamentally a soloist’s art. Music should move the soul, not merely titillate the ear, either by means of dense counterpoint or excessive vocalises. If ornamental vocalises must be used, they should fall on long, not short, syllables of the text and at final cadences (note the beginning of our ornamented “cadenza”). Finally, Caccini encourages the use or appearance of *sprezzatura* in performance. This word *sprezzatura*, which first appeared in a musical context in Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* of 1528 (see In Their Own Words for Musical Interlude 2), is difficult to translate but generally connotes “a noble, but studied nonchalance.” Everything should seem to flow as naturally as possible, following the dictates of the text.

I remember when the incomparable camerata [academic club] of Sir Giovanni Bardi de’ Conti di Vernio flourished in Florence [see Chapter 30]. Many among the nobility took part, as well as the best musicians and smartest people, including the poets and philosophers of that city. I myself also frequented the camerata, and I can truly say that I learned more from their learned discussions than I did in thirty years of [the study and practice of] counterpoint. I say this because these insightful gentlemen always encouraged me and convinced me with the clearest reasoning *not* to value the kind of music that prevents the words from being well understood and thus spoils the sense and the form of the poetry. I refer to the kind of music that elongates a syllable here and shortens one there to accommodate the counterpoint, turning the poetry to shreds. Instead, they urged me to adhere to the manner [of composition] praised by Plato and the other philosophers who affirm that music is nothing but speech, rhythm, and harmony. According to them, the purpose of music is to penetrate the minds of others and create

the marvelous effects that writers admire. In modern music, these effects could not be achieved through counterpoint. Particularly in solo singing accompanied by string instruments, not a word could be understood in the pervasive vocalises, whether on short or long syllables. Furthermore, in every type of music, the common people would applaud and shout for serious singers only [if they produced] such vocalises.

It was evident, therefore, that such music and musicians could offer no delight other than that which harmony gave to [the sense of] hearing alone, for they could not move the intellect, lacking the understanding of the words. The thought occurred to me to introduce a kind of music for which someone else would be able to make musical speech, using a certain noble *sprezzatura* in song (as I have described elsewhere). This kind of music passes through dissonances sometimes while holding on to the bass note, except when the normal treatment of the bass is desirable. The middle parts played by the instrument express [only] certain figures since these parts are not much good for anything else [clearly, Caccini did not have much use for counterpoint!].

The time of the Florentine Camerata marked the beginning of songs for solo voice [of this kind]. It seemed to me that these songs had more power to delight and move [people] than vocal works for many voices. So, I composed the madrigals “Perfidissimo volto,” “Vedrò ’l mio Sol,” “Dovrò dunque morire,” and similar works. [My setting of] the aria on the Eclogue of Sanazzaro, “Itene à l’ombra gli ameni faggi,” is an especially appropriate example. I wrote it in the very style that later served me for the plays that were presented in Florence as sung dramas. . . .

In both madrigals and arias [all in monodic style] I have always tried to imitate the ideas of the words, seeking more or less expressive notes to follow the sentiments of the words. I concealed the art of counterpoint as much as I could, to make the words as graceful as possible. I placed consonant chords on long syllables and moved quickly through short ones. I observed the same rules in making [ornamental] passagework. Even so, to achieve a measure of ornamentation, now and then I made use of eighth notes up to the value of a quarter beat or a half beat at most, and mainly on short syllables. These are permissible because they pass quickly. They are [therefore] not passagework, but rather an addition to make the music more graceful. Besides, special considerations require that every rule suffer exceptions. But since previously I said that those long runs in the voice are badly used, I should give warning that passagework is not executed because it is necessary for a proper manner of singing. Rather, I believe that passagework brings a certain titillation to the ears of those who do not really understand what it means to sing with expression. For, if they knew, they would undoubtedly detest such passagework since nothing could be further from expression. That is why I say these lengthy runs in the voice are badly used. Nevertheless, I have allowed some passagework in the service of less expressive music. I have used it in such music over long, not short, syllables and in final cadences. For these long runs, there are no other considerations for vowels, except that *u* sounds better in the soprano than the tenor, and the *i* better than *u* in the tenor. The function of the remaining vowels follows their common use: that is, the open vowels are more sonorous than the closed, and they are easier for vocal exercises. . . .

It remains for me to say why such vocal effects as crescendos, diminuendos, exclamations, trills, little groupings, and other previously described effects are [so often] used indiscriminately. It is indeed indiscriminate when a person applies such effects as much in expressive music, which they enrich, as in canzonettas for dancing. The root cause of this defect (if I am right) is that the musician [at fault] does not have a good understanding of what he wants to sing. If he did, he would not run into so many errors so easily. The one who runs into errors easily has depended on a totally expressive way of singing (if you will). For him, the general rule is that crescendos, diminuendos, and exclamations are the foundation of expressive singing. He applies this rule to all kinds of music, not discerning whether it enriches the words. [In contrast,] there are people who well understand the ideas and sentiments of the words. They understand

our defects and know how to discern where an effect can more or less enrich [the music]. One must seek assiduously to please them above all others and to value their praise more than the applause of the ignorant and vulgar masses. This art does not suffer mediocrity: the most exquisite things to be found in music's excellence are infinite, and so we, the professors of this art, must persevere to discover them, with effort and diligence, and with utmost care and love.

Source: Translated by Zachariah Victor from the original Italian of *Le nuove musiche* (facsimile, 1973).