

## U6 Music & Humanism Revision 2

### Prima Prattica and Seconda Prattica

#### INTRODUCTION

These two terms represent probably the two most important conceptual issues in the music of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and it's important that we have a good grasp of them in some detail.

The terms prima prattica and seconda prattica are two which may never have been handed down to us were it not for the dispute which erupted between Artusi (a Bolognese clergyman) and Claudio Monteverdi. The dispute essentially represented a sense of unease over the neglect of the madrigal's text.

The dispute manifested itself in two ways: the dissolution (i.e. falling apart) of structural elements of the (old-fashioned) polyphonic style; and an effort (Mainly on the part of the Florentine Camerata) to revive ancient music as they saw it.

The proponents of both arguments generally accepted one of two classically-rooted opinions as to the purpose of music. The SCHOLASTICS looked to Aristotelian theory, the rationalism of which concentrated on abstract concepts – 'harmony', numerical relationships, and other features which could be explained SYSTEMATICALLY.

The HUMANISTS (whom Monteverdi looked to) favoured the PLATONIC view that music should stimulate the PASSIONS, because ultimately such release should promote the catharsis that was otherwise sought in tragedy. Platonics therefore looked beyond the work of art to the RESPONSE of its beholders. The early Italian critics were Humanists, whereas the formal theorists (including Artusi) were Scholastic.

The polemics on both sides of the argument highlighted three issues:

- 1) The disputes of progressives and reactionaries (found during any period in time).
- 2) The disputes of theoretical and practical musicians.
- 3) The disputes of musicians and literary men.

The entire debate crossed the barriers of scholarship and entertainment.

## BASIC ISSUES

It is clear that Monteverdi did not want to get involved in academic arguments about music because he considered it futile to judge his compositions solely by the rules of academic counterpoint. The deliberate overlooking of formal rules for the benefit of TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION was held to be better.

The transition from prima prattica to seconda prattica was not as abrupt as history might suggest. Prima prattica had anticipations of concertato techniques, and seconda prattica (at least in its early stages) had elements of the older style. A good example of this can be found in motets of the *Cento concerti ecclesiastici* (1602) of Lodovico Viadana (c. 1560-1627). While they were new as small-scale sacred pieces for a few voices and indispensable basso continuo, the attitude to the text was reminiscent of the prima prattica: that is, they had none of the EMOTIONALISM in their approach to the text that was essential to the seconda prattica.

The reason why prima prattica is confined to church music is that the greater part of the liturgical texts of the Mass and psalms were of a NEUTRAL nature, not calling for the dramatic word-painting of the new music. We can see the limitations of the term prima prattica: it refers to sacred music, neutral in textual emotionalism. This is incomparable aesthetically to seconda prattica music, designed to appeal directly to the

affections rather than fulfilling an academic or religious dictum.

By about 1610 the transition to the concertato style in north Italian church music was virtually complete. Viadana's new idea of the small-scale motet for 1-4 voices and organ (i.e. plausible in ordinary churches) was beginning to become popular because of its PRACTICAL advantages. In Rome, however, the stylistic issue was not so well-defined: the old-style music was not abolished because the large choirs required for its performance had the financial support they needed, at least in the larger churches.

## MONTEVERDI AND THE PRIMA PRATTICA

1610 was an important year, because Monteverdi's Mass and Vespers collection was published: this was the FIRST collection to include BOTH prima and seconda prattica music. Indeed, the publication of the two idioms in a single collection was a very rare event even after this date.

In Monteverdi's day the terms 'da cappella' and 'concertato' generally came to be considered as opposites. Indeed the most striking difference between the da cappella style of Monteverdi (especially in the 1610 and *Selva morale* Masses) and that of his contemporaries is that he made a special effort to be CONSERVATIVE. He went back to a motet by Gombert (c. 1495-1560) for the model of his parody Mass *In illo tempore* of 1610. At this time Monteverdi wanted to prove to the Romans (particularly Pope Paul V) that he had mastered classical Netherlands polyphony.

Unlike other important madrigal composers of the time (Wert, Vecchi, Marenzio), Monteverdi did not allow the madrigalian influence to exert itself upon his 1610 Mass. Instead he put in a great amount of time and

effort to familiarise himself with Gombert's style (with which he was essentially unsympathetic!), for the main reason that it forced him to adopt an old-fashioned style of great contrapuntal purity.

When he arrived in Venice in 1613 for his new post at St Mark's, Monteverdi was also entrusted with the restoration of a 'canto polifonico' (the tradition of church polyphony) which served to intensify his interest in what was by then definitely an old-fashioned church style. 'Da cappella', by this time, was becoming synonymous with 'stile antico'. It no longer merely signified the type of ensemble required but implied a kind of archaism as well. The stile antico (at least to Monteverdi) was now a deliberate idiom, in opposition to the modern concertato style. The most significant feature of Monteverdi's stile antico Masses is the fact that there is no hint of modalism.

## MONTEVERDI AND THE SECONDA PRATTICA

The seconda prattica controversy was only *superficially* about dissonance treatment and the changing of modes within a piece – Artusi accused Monteverdi of violating the rules of strict counterpoint. The complaint about changing modes in the middle of a piece was rooted in Zarlino's (1517-90) opinion that each has its own character and affective content.

However, the real dispute was this: HOW FAR VOCAL MUSIC, with its union of words and sonorities, HAD SPECIAL STATUS REGARDING THE RULES OF COUNTERPOINT. The argument was governed by the two men's differing opinions of the FUNCTION of music – Artusi was wholly concerned with music at an intellectual level. Monteverdi, however, viewed dissonance treatment in accordance with the emotions of the texts he set. It is through this that he arrived at his famous maxim

(Platonic in origin) that music is the servant of the text.

For Monteverdi the *seconda prattica* was NOT a set of rules by which composers had to work, but a simple attempt TO DO JUSTICE TO A TEXT – in essence, then, the argument was the esteem for musical rules versus the respect for a text.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE ISSUES

However pedantic Artusi's argument was, it was not merely unprepared dissonances and changing modes which were pertinent – Monteverdi's approach to composition shook the foundations of traditional musical values. Scholars up until that point believed that the intellect (not the emotions) was the most important judge of the value of a work of art. Monteverdi believed that music should appeal primarily to the emotions, and that this was a legitimate reason to break the rules of counterpoint. For Artusi 'art' meant craftsmanship and artistic skill within a confined context (the only men classified as 'artists' were Masters of Arts – musicians, painters and the like were 'artisans') – it was on the same plane as a science.

The highest perception of art for Artusi was being able to UNDERSTAND it – for Monteverdi it was a private expression into which 'right' and 'wrong' did not enter. It is significant that neither the Florentines nor Monteverdi wrote new rules, but rather they worked against the rules for legitimate aesthetic reasons. Indeed, within the *seconda prattica* are the origins of the later aesthetic theory of genius.

In the opinion of the Florentine Camerata (of which Caccini was a spokesman) monodic declamation accompanied by simple chords was the best way of transmitting the emotions of a text. Caccini effectively introduced monody, which is an *arioso* vocal line midway between the recitative of opera and the rhythmically defined lines of arias.

As regards seconda prattica sacred music, the monodic style made itself at home in the sacred repertory. The motet became an increasingly important genre as the 17<sup>th</sup> century progressed. The motet was well suited towards personalisation of worship because, not being a part of the liturgy, it did not derive its text from a fixed set of words. Motet texts were often devised to reflect (usually allegorically) on worldly events. Because the seconda prattica placed emphasis on the emotions, it seemed particularly suitable for sacred use, as it put the listener in the correct frame of mind to perceive celestial truths which were only available through the medium of music.

## SUMMARY

Prima prattica and seconda prattica meant different things to both sides of the argument – to Monteverdi seconda prattica was a way of doing justice to the texts he set; but for Artusi it meant infringing on the time-honoured rules of counterpoint. The argument from Artusi's point of view has been much maligned since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and on a first hearing sounds pedantic and short-sighted. However it is important to remember that he had a Scholastic training in music, and was (albeit wrongly) judging Monteverdi's music outside its textual context. Bearing this in mind, the prima prattica carries overtones of archaism where they are not due – this earlier music simply had a different ideology, and the new ideology of the seconda prattica must have come as quite a shock. Prima and seconda prattica represent essentially different points of view as to the function of music.