

# Singing voice and instrumental sound between fact and ideology

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# Singing Voice and Instrumental Sound between Fact and Ideology

*Sergio Durante*

In Federico Fellini's film *Prova d'orchestra* (Orchestra Rehearsal, 1978) one of the characters, a rather airheaded lady, describes the special merits of her flute by saying that it "has the sound that most resembles the human voice". Discouraged, she then adds that in the orchestra "everybody says the same" of their own instrument.

While Fellini's main focus was the relation between freedom and order in the orchestra as a metaphor for society, he incidentally captured and criticized what remains a commonplace among musicians: the human voice is idealized as the model for musical expression, an apparently self-evident truth not unsuspected of being a cliché. To claim that each and every instrumentalist aspires to imitate the human voice and/or that any instrument – even the most unlikely – simulates the human voice would be stating too much or nothing at all. In the light of the organological differences between instruments, the generalization appears ludicrous (consider, for instance, the difference in ability to sustain sound between plucked, bow, or wind instruments); each instrument deploys certain idiomatic traits that have little or nothing to share with the human voice. In a sense the paradigm could be reversed: an instrument might be appreciated per se insofar as it is *different* from the human voice.<sup>1</sup> Voice and instrument, then, are the terms of our enquiry, but what are the questions? I imagine that today's singers and instrumentalists alike will pose themselves simple ones: "how vocally should I play?", "how instrumentally should I sing?", or, more sceptically: "what is unquestionably 'vocal' or 'instrumental'?"

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<sup>1</sup> The parallel (or comparison) between voice and instrument is based on generalizations hardly acceptable for a critical musical mind: which human voice are we referring to? Is "the human voice" such a generalization that it cannot be of any factual significance within a specialized discourse on music? We might agree that in the Western idea of art music, a generic concept of the "human voice" has been related with a multiple class of concepts termed "instrument/s". But even less so than voices, instruments cannot be generalized: they belong to multiple "classes" of sound-producing technological objects that have so little in common (e.g., a lute and a flute, a harpsichord and a violin, a clarinet and a set of bells) that – if at all – it is only possible to define a shared feature of "instruments" negatively: as sound-producing technological objects which are *not* a human voice.

In this article, I discuss a few selected cases from the music literature. To what extent these texts are representative of a common frame of mind is an open question: any literary source might have some claim to a degree of originality or reinforce a commonplace. It is not easy to assess which of these two conditions prevails in any given source but we may agree that, original or not, any source reports something “thinkable” at a certain time in history.<sup>2</sup>

Paulus Paulirinus (ca. 1460), our first example, compared lute and voice as follows:

Cithara est instrumentum musicum communiter [sejunctum] ceteris propter sonorum suorum subtilitatem, habens quinque choros chordarum semper duplatas et novem ligaturas in collo, faciens sonorum varietates digitorum tamen registracione, cuius concavum pectoris clibanum habet officium, foramen vero oris; collum vero habet similitudinem canne pulmonis, super quod digiti perambulantes habent officium epiglotti; percussio autem chordarum habet similitudinem penularum pulmonis a quibus vox efflatur, sed corde navales gerunt lingue et officium quibus vox formatur. Citarista autem habet officium intellectus registrantis cantum.<sup>3</sup>

The lute is a musical instrument which in general distinguishes itself from the others by the subtlety of its sounds. It has five courses of strings, always doubled, and nine laces [frets] on the neck, on which various sounds are produced with the application of the fingers. Its concave body has the function of the thorax, the hole corresponds to the mouth, the neck is similar to the trachea, on which fingers have the function of the epiglottis; the plucking is similar to the breath of lungs through which the sound is produced, while the gut strings are like the tongue and produce the sound. The lutenist has the duty to understand how to proceed in agreement with the song.

The intention here is to establish a parallel between voice and instrument through analogies between the respective sounding bodies: human and artificial. For the author, this symbolic element is more relevant than the analogy between the actual sounds (which would be difficult to support in this case). The comparison between voice and instrument implicitly refers to nature and artifice. Neither claims primacy: both are equally functional for music in their own right, and it is up to the ability of the lutenist to mediate between them in order to

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<sup>2</sup> The period I consider here ranges from the end of the 16th century to the end of the 18th, with occasional extensions, privileging Italian sources, both for reasons of space and because in matters of song and voice they are often relevant if not normative. I have heavily relied here on the *Lessico italiano del canto*, a web collection of diverse sources relevant to the practice of singing.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Christopher Page, “The 15th-Century Lute: New and Neglected Sources, in: *Early Music* 9/1: Plucked-String Issue 1 (1981), 11–12. All translations are by the author unless stated otherwise.

support the voice appropriately. Thus, the above quote outlines an ideology that explains the relation between voice and instrument.

One century later, on the eve of what has been considered the age of modern music, entirely different preoccupations with vocal performance were expressed by Giovanni de' Bardi. It is not clear which musical repertoire he referred to in his *Discorso* (ca. 1578), perhaps pieces for voice and accompaniment, but more likely polyphonic madrigals:

Dalle quali cose [fonti letterarie classiche e moderne: Platone, Talete Milesio, Macrobio, Petrarca e Dante] si trae, che la musica altro che dolcezza non è; che chi cantar vuole, conviene, che dolcissima Musica, e dolcissimi modi ben regolati dolcissimamente canti; soggiungendo oltre di ciò [...] che convien sempre, quando altri si trova in conversazione esser costumato e cortese, e non alle sue, ma all'altrui voglie pieghevole: e quante fiata altri sarà ricercato dell'opera sua, altrettante si deve nel miglior modo, che si possa, sodisfare [...]<sup>4</sup>

From the above [a series of literary excerpts from Plato, Thales of Miletus, Macrobius, Petrarch, and Dante] we conclude that music is nothing else than sweetness [and] that whoever wishes to sing will better sing the sweetest Music with the sweetest well-regulated manners [or ornaments] in the sweetest way; adding to the above [...] that it is always appropriate in conversation [i. e., social interaction] to be well-mannered and gracious, accommodating to the wishes of others and not to one's own: and as many times as his work is requested [i. e., singing], he will try to satisfy this in the best possible way [...]

Three aspects of this case are noteworthy: 1) the core of the argument is authoritative and based on literary sources; 2) the focus of performance is on sweetness and restraint ("ben regolati modi"); 3) sociability is perhaps the key concern. In other words, the singer must be available to the audience: in the social context of the time, this means being readily available when the musician's patron calls for a performance.

None of the above directly concerns instruments, since Bardi appears to be discussing vocal music. However, the quote is not irrelevant to our subject; Bardi had previously observed that

per mio avviso terrete sempre fisso nella memoria quello, che dice Aristotile, che ne' ritmi sono l'immagini della fortezza, e altre cose dette; però sopra tutti gli altri sarà il vostro intendimento principale di non guastare mai il verso cantando, facendo la lunga breve, e la breve lunga, come suol farsi ciascuna fiata; ma quello, che è peggio, da quelli, che grandi uomini in quella scienza esser si credono, e con tanto mal garbo e modo, che chiunque è intendente della buona Poesia gran pena ed ambascia ne riceve; cosa certo

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<sup>4</sup> Giovanni de' Bardi, *Discorso sopra la musica antica e moderna* (ca. 1578), first published in Giovanni Battista Doni, *Lyra Barberina amphichordos*, vol. 2, ed. Anton Francesco Gori, Florence: Stamperia imperiale 1763, 248.

indegna del secolo nostro, e tanto più che si trova di quelli tanto arditi, che imprendono a dire, che le parole nella musica il principale non sono, cosa contraria direttamente al buono, al giusto, e al convenevole, caduti sono per mio avviso questi meschinelli in tanta cecità per l'adulazione sfacciata dell'indotta plebe, non curante, come è sua natura, di cosa buona, o perfetta.<sup>5</sup>

in my opinion you should always keep in mind what Aristotle said [...]; your main concern in singing will be not to spoil the line by singing the long syllable short and the short long, as is done all the time; but what is worse is those who believe themselves to be great at that science [i. e., music] and [say so] with such unkindliness that whoever is experienced in good poetry, suffers great pain and repugnance; certainly a fact unworthy of our time and, moreover, since some are so insolent as to dare to say that the words in music are not the main concern, a statement that is contrary to the good and the right and the suitable; in my opinion their small minds are so blinded by the flattery of the ignorant populace, which is indifferent, on account of its own nature, to what is good and perfect.

We find here a cultural pattern which will pop up time and again, albeit with significantly different nuances: a well-educated aristocrat criticizes an attitude and a practice that places the musical organization of a piece, rather than the words, at the top of the compositional hierarchy (the key phrase is “words are not the main thing in music”).

This statement comes close to a theoretical justification of the independence of the musical construction, declaring the autonomy of music without words. On the contrary, Bardi argues based on principles that are not “musical”, but originate in the doctrine and styles of verbal communication.

This calls attention to the dual nature of the voice: communicative/verbal on the one hand and auditory/sonic on the other. More frequently than not, the two are connected or intertwined: sometimes coherent and reinforcing each other, yet not always, or necessarily. Through its sonic nature, the voice shares much with musical instruments. In fact, the more the voice exceeds or neglects verbal communication, the more it approaches the condition of a musical instrument.

In music history textbooks, Bardi is linked with the rise of opera and diminished interest in – or declared criticism of – polyphonic imitative music. As historiography developed, we came to realize that this shift in music history is less dramatic than most textbooks depict. Nevertheless, it marks the beginning of a period in European music culture in which the prevailing cultural paradigm (or ideology) is literary and text-centred. This text-centredness is a stereotype that clearly does not represent the whole historical reality but it explains why some intellectuals argue that, in a logocentric society, musicians rarely achieved the intellectual skills sufficient to develop a discourse on musical autonomy. In

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5 Ibid., 245.

Europe in the first half of the 17th century, some statements about the intellectual primacy of music focussed on the microculture of artificial counterpoint and music symbolism, best represented by Romano Micheli, Pier Francesco Valentini, Francesco Soriano, and Michael Mejer.<sup>6</sup>

In the 18th century – the period when opera spread across the continent and consumption of instrumental music increased – Giovanni Andrea Angelini Bontempi (1625–1705) wrote his *Historia musica*. Bontempi was a musician of unusual, exceptional erudition, a singer, composer, librettist, stage designer, and general historian. He described the vocal prowess of the singer Baldassarre Ferri as follows:

[...] egli, oltre la chiarezza della voce, la felicità de' passaggi, il battimento de' trilli, l'agilità d'arrivar dolcemente a qualsivoglia corda; dopo la continuatione d'un lunghissimo e bellissimo passaggio, sotto la qual misura, altri non havrebbe potuto contenere la respiratione, Egli prorompeva senza respiro in un lunghissimo e bellissimo trillo, e da quello passava ad un altro passaggio assai più lungo e più vigoroso del primo, senza movimento alcuno né di fronte, né di bocca, né di vita, immobile come una statua.

Il discendere con un trillo da hemituono in hemituono senza alcuna incisura, e con voce leggiadramente rinforzata dall'ottava acuta della Nete (aaa) e Paranete (ggg) alla stessa Nete (aa) e Paranete (gg) del Tetracordo hiperboleon; operatione, se non affatto impossibile, almeno di grandissima difficoltà a qualsivoglia altro valoroso cantore, al Ferri era un nulla; poichè da quello passava senza respiro ad altri trilli, e passaggi, e meraviglie dell'arte. Fe' più volte sentire da hemituono ad hemituono senza respiro o incisura alcuna, e con voce sempre soavemente rinforzata anche il crescimento del trillo; cosa non più sentita, né praticata.<sup>7</sup>

[...] he, besides the clarity of the voice, the ease of passages, the percussion of trills, the agility to reach any note sweetly; after the continuation of a very long and beautiful passage, during which nobody could have been able not to draw breath, he came out without breathing into the longest and most beautiful trill, ended thereon with another passage longer and more vigorous than the first, without any movement of his forehead, or mouth, or hip, steady as a statue.

Descending by semitone over a trill, with no interruption whatsoever, and with a gracefully reinforced voice from the higher octave of *nete* (aaa) and *paranete* (ggg) to the same *nete* (aa) and *paranete* (gg) of the *hyperbolaion* tetrachord (an operation of the greatest difficulty – if not at all impossible – for any other skilful singer) for Ferri was nothing; from there he passed without breathing to more trills, and passages, and wonders

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<sup>6</sup> An outline of this attitude, important from a cultural rather than artistic standpoint, is found in Sergio Durante, "On *Artificioso* Compositions at the Time of Frescobaldi", in: *Frescobaldi Studies*, ed. Alexander Silbiger, Durham USA: Duke University Press 1987, 195–217 and Giuseppe Gerbino, *Canoni ed enigmi: Pier Francesco Valentini e l'artificio canonico nella prima metà del Seicento*, Rome: Torre d'Orfeo 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Andrea Angelini Bontempi, *Historia Musica*, Perugia: Costantini 1685, 110.

of the art. He performed also an ascending scale of trills by semitone without breathing or interruptions; a thing never heard of nor practised.

It was 1695: a singer and theoretician, who had worked with Monteverdi and Cavalli and had himself composed operas in the high-low (drama-comedy) style characteristic of the later 17th century, described an exceptional vocalist without referring at all to the relationship between word and melody. His only concern was to record the memory of an amazing aural experience, otherwise doomed to oblivion. Since vocal virtuosity has always existed in various forms, it is debatable whether the description of Ferri's voice bears witness to the vocal imitation of an instrumental gesture. It is undeniable though that the "crescimento del trillo", or uninterrupted phrasing without drawing breath, is more appropriate to a violin than to a human voice (or to a wind instrument, for that matter). Be that as it may, the quote suggests that at the same time as the rationalistic principles of the Arcadian academy were being developed, intense fascination with the experience of sound as a source of amazement was possible and appreciated, regardless of any meaning of music in semantic/verbal terms.

This points to a possibly perpetual dialectic: voices imitate instruments which imitate voices. The process originates simply because of their social proximity. The styles of the process, however, constantly change parallel to the changes in music languages and instrumental technology.

In the balance between the meaningful (carried by the words) and the playful (the sonic "arabesque"), instruments may take the lead, as witnessed by Pierfrancesco Tosi. While discussing the *trillo lungo* in his *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni* (1723), he refers to the period when this ornament gained popularity. Meanwhile, he portrays the interference between vocal and instrumental practices with reference to the trumpet:

Il trillo lungo già trionfava mal a proposito [in passato], come fanno in oggi i passaggi; ma raffinata che fu l'arte, si lasciò a trombetti, o a chi volea esporsi al rischio di scoppiare per un eviva dal popolaccio.<sup>8</sup>

The long shake unsuitably triumphed [in past times], like divisions today; but once the art was refined it was left to the trumpet players or to those who wanted to risk exploding for the applause of the populace.

Here the taste for virtuosity is reported with a different nuance, as striving towards the limits of both instrumental and vocal performance. The image of pro-

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<sup>8</sup> Pier Francesco Tosi, *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni*, Bologna: Dalla Volpe 1723, 46.

longing a trill “to the death” (“risk exploding”) is hyperbolic but effectively depicts the borderline between music performance and athletics.<sup>9</sup>

Voices and instruments imitate one another in this period; it is interesting to consider which of the two is the leading model at a given time or place in history. Voice is the easy guess of course: historically, vocal composition has been the most produced and appreciated by composers and performers alike. (Significantly, the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna placed composers in different classes, *compositori* and *compositori di sinfonie*: the latter were considered, if not less important, certainly less complete.)

Through a slow and hardly noticeable process, these roles were reversed; the evidence for this is vast. With the expansion of orchestral forces from the end of the 17th century, purist literates became obsessed with the balance between orchestra and voice. At the same time, this was a period of emancipation for instruments and instrumentalists. Giuseppe Tartini’s account of this is telling from two perspectives: the specificity of instrumental composition and its primacy. As to the former, in 1739 Tartini proudly declared his choice to compose only instrumental music:

[...] i compositori di musica strumentale pretendono di saper fare quella vocale, e viceversa. Sono due generi [...] tanto differenti, che ciò che si addice all’uno non può assolutamente adattarsi all’altro; ciascuno dovrebbe limitarsi a quella che è la sua inclinazione. Hanno insistito [...] perché io lavorassi per i teatri di Venezia e non l’ho mai voluto fare, perché so benissimo che un’ugola non è un manico di violino. Vivaldi, che si è messo in testa di sperimentare ambedue i generi, nell’uno si è sempre fatto fischiare, mentre nell’altro riusciva benissimo.<sup>10</sup>

[...] composers of instrumental music presume to be able to write vocal music too, and vice versa. These are two genres [...] so different that what is appropriate for one cannot be adapted to the other; each one should limit himself to his talent. They insisted [...] that I compose for the theatres of Venice and I never accepted because I know very well that an uvula is not a violin neck. Vivaldi, who meant to experience both genres, in the first was always booed, while in the other he succeeded very well.

Yet, roughly at the time he stated this (1739), Tartini was giving violin players in his school a set of rules for ornamentation (published after his death as *Traité des agréments de la musique*, Paris 1771) which was described as equally good “for instrumentalists and singers”. Since Tartini never taught singers (and only released the text to his violin students), why was his treatise extended to them?

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<sup>9</sup> This case is not different in kind from Manrico’s cry “O teco morir!” in Verdi’s *Travatore*; here, as elsewhere in 19th-century standard repertoire, athleticism is justified by the heroic characterization.

<sup>10</sup> Charles De Brosses, *Viaggio in Italia*, Bari: Laterza 1973, 520.



This indicates that the primacy of the voice was being reversed: an instrumentalist could provide instruction to vocalists.<sup>11</sup>

Towards the end of the 18th century, the reception of instrumental gestures within the doctrine of singing is prominent in the work of Giovanni Battista Mancini, singing teacher to the imperial archduchesses in Vienna, who described the most difficult vocal skills as *agilità martellata*, *agilità arpeggiata*, and *agilità di sbalzo* (large intervals in the range of the 10th and more). The term *martellato* (hammered) appears as the opposite of what may be considered vocal and proves – in conjunction with relevant musical sources – the ongoing osmosis between vocal and instrumental patterns. Significantly, instrument-derived gestures can be used to characterize a vocal role in the hands of a composer/dramatist, such as the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *Zauberflöte*. The extreme agility in the high register reaches beyond sheer technical skill and expresses the iron will of the Queen (in her first aria) and her raging insanity (in her last), perfectly interpreting the classical saying “muliebre est furere in ira” (it is a woman's trait to rage in anger).<sup>12</sup> Therefore, while purely technical virtuosity is meaningless in terms of the verbal text, a vocal gesture derived from imitating instrumental effects may express a higher level of meaning.

In the following century, the 19th, more and more singing treatises were published, which fall into two categories: either they try to preserve earlier traditions, referred to as *bel canto* (a quite generic term that appears when traditional singing practices are declining in favour of new ones), or they take innovative approaches to suit the new stylistic trends in theatrical performance.

The most famous of these is Manuel Garcia's *Traité complet de l'art du chant* (1840). As in other treatises, time and again the *Traité* refers to the voice as “the most perfect instrument”, “the most perfect among instruments”, or the like. Forty years earlier one would simply not conceive of the voice as an instrument but, as the social recognition of orchestral music peaked, the voice was best represented as an instrument. Its primacy needed to be reaffirmed. Now, the human voice could be understood as an instrument: first, because of the sonic analogy between the natural human voice and the artificial instruments; second,

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11 Giovanni Battista Mancini, *Riflessioni pratiche sul canto figurato [...] rivedute, corrette, ed aumentate, Terza edizione*, Milano: Giuseppe Galeazzi 1777, 45: “E' una vera profanazione dell'arte, che un semplice e cattivo suonatore di tasti, o d'arco, s'arroghi la qualità di maestro di canto, senza conoscerne i primi elementi. Fanno essi gridare a tutto fiato i loro scolari, guastano bellissime voci, non sapendo il modo di produrle e stenderle, si sentono disuguaglianze di registro, stonature, voci in gola, nel naso, mute, perché pretendono questi maestri, che lo scolare con la voce eseguisca quello, ch'essi fanno sul proprio strumento o sia cembalo, violino, o violoncello”.

12 Seneca, translated by Catherine Keane, *Juvenal and the Satiric Emotions*, Oxford: OUP 2015, Chapter 2.

and more significantly, the voice was now key to the realization of the score, the *Werk*, which had replaced performance as the real focus of modern music production.

Music history does not end there, nor does the interference between instruments and voices. Another watershed might be placed between 1948 and 1951: the first is the date of Richard Strauss' *Vier letzte Lieder*, an untimely masterpiece that unites instrumental glow with a use of the voice in line with the traditional paradigm of verbal/poetic expression. Just three years later the adventure of Darmstadt began; with it, the verbal/communicative function of the voice gave way to its phonetic dimension. In due time, this path would lead to compositions like Salvatore Sciarrino's *Lohengrin* (1982–84) and the *Vox Cycle* of Trevor Wishart (1990). This last composer declared that the voice is more versatile than any other instrument for sound production; whether or not one agrees, Wishart's work is nurtured by the interplay between human voice and instrument, in his case electroacoustic.

At the conclusion of this *vol d'oiseau*, having adventurously hopped from century to century, we may ask ourselves whether an historical investigation of the changing relation between voice and instruments is of any help for music practitioners. Probably not, but it may prompt a more useful question: what is the current prevailing ideology behind historically informed performance practices? What are its positive aspects, biases, and ideological grids? I do not need to convince the readership of this book that historically informed performance practice is a good thing, a luminous manifestation indeed of the urge to revive the past that recurs in Western civilization. However, when we focus on universal and relatively abstract terms (voice, instrument) we risk representing as a fictitious whole a reality that was uneven, multiple, incoherent, and very different from place to place. The lingering notion that we are facing a "unified phenomenon" (i. e., Western art music) is a mistake and turns our attention away from certain qualities of the musical experience (the where and why), promoting instead the flattening aestheticism of a lost "ideal beauty". We must realize that while efforts to wake up the "sleeping beauty" are noble and worthwhile, she will open her eyes confined in two golden cages: the uncomfortable format of the live concert and the shining wrap of digital recordings.

