<u>Vocal Ornaments in the Seventeenth Century</u>
Prepared by Lucas Harris, Sept. 2002

1) *Passaggio / Diminution / Coloratura* (**'Passagework / Divisions'**)

The treatises often encourage divisions that render the idea of the text and do not break any obvious counterpoint rules. Rognoni also emphasizes singing *passaggi* on the vowels. Bernhard's remarks are reproduced below:

"In diminution, one divides the written notes into shorter notes which correctly preserve the measure. Thus a note which has the value of a half note may rightly be divided into four eighth notes, eight sixteenth notes, sixteen thirty second notes. Instead of staying on the given note, one ventures forth from it gracefully, as in this illustration:"

"Colorature are runs which are not so exactly bound to the measure, but which often extend two, three, or more measures further. It must be remarked, however, that such runs should be made only at chief closes, not too often, and not always in one and the same manner . . . in coloratura *it is better and more musical for a singer or instrumentalist not to stray from the notes at cadences, but rather to return modestly to these notes once again. It would, accordingly, be bad to adorn cadences with this sort of* coloratura *or* diminution*:"*
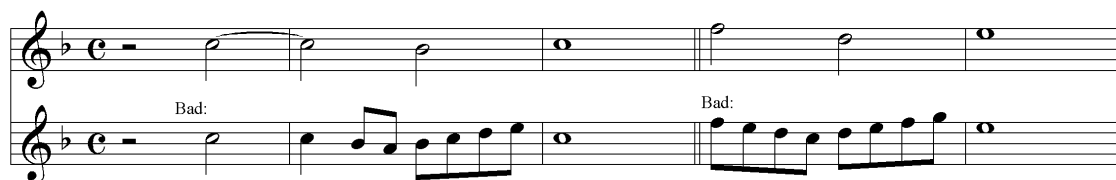
"For fourths, fifths, and octaves, and unisons, would be produced against the other voices. Instead of the foregoing, it is better to use the following sort of variation:"


"When music is made to the accompaniment of an organist or lutenist alone, the above rule is not observed as strictly as when a harmony of several voices is involved. But one should be aware of applying passagework or diminution *without careful consideration. In the bass, no rapid passagework or* colorature *should be employed at all, except for that which is indicated by the composer; otherwise the groundwork of the piece will be disrupted and the voices left without a foundation, and nothing but a disagreeable dissonance will be heard . . . other voices should introduce* diminutions *in such a way as not to beget musical defects. These can notably be avoided if the* diminutions *are ended on the same degree as that on which they are begun."*

The art of singing *passaggi* was highly developed by the end of the Renaissance, and was continued into the early baroque. Rognoni advises against passaggi on expressive words like

doglia, *affanni*, *pene*, & *tormenti*, saying that they instead take graces (*grazie*), *accenti*, and *esclamazioni* conforming to sense of the oration. These are the more expressive and text-oriented ornaments of the new style.

2) *Messa di voce* ('Putting forth of the voice')

"On whole and half notes it is customary to employ a piano at the beginning, a forte in the middle, and a piano once more at the end, as:"
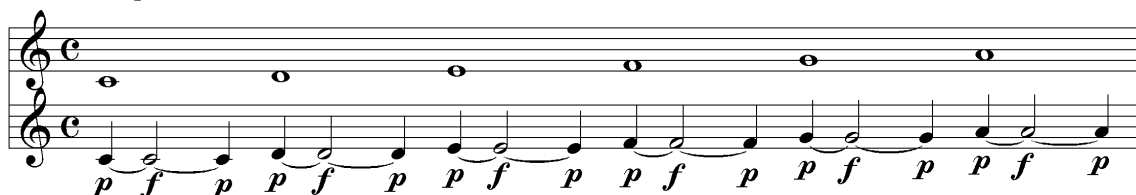
"Care must be taken not to shift too abruptly from the piano to the forte, but rather to let the voice wax and wane gradually." [Bernhard]

"The messa di voce *consists in beginning the note very gently and softly and letting it swell little by little to the loudest forte and thereafter recede with the same artistry from loud to soft. This beautiful drawing forth of the voice [* metter la voce*] unfailingly achieves a beautiful effect in the mouth of a skilled singer when used sparingly and only on bright vowels."* [Tosi]

3) *Esclamazione* ('Exclamation')

A long note beginning forte, then diminishing, then increasing back again. Caccini describes two types, one more passionate (*affetuoso*) than the other.

"Exclamation is nothing other than the strengthening of the relaxed voice . . . "

"In the first dotted half, you can intone 'Cor mio,' diminishing it little by little, and when the quarter note falls you can increase the voice with a little more spirit, and it will become an exclamation passionate enough for a note that falls only one step. But it will be much more spirited in the word 'deh' by holding the note that falls by more than one step, as it will become more sweet by the leap of a sixth."

4) *Trillo* ('Trill / Tremolo')

Note that the *trillo* is usually shown accelerating to the end, not slowing down:

"The trillo *I'm describing is upon one note only . . . you begin it with the first quarter note and then articulate every note with the throat on the vowel 'à' until the final whole note."* [Caccini]

" . . . not everyone can strike the trillo *in the chest, where the best ones originate, but certain people (and contraltos in general) are obliged to produce them in the throat. Above all, however, one should take great care not to change the quality of the voice in striking the* trillo, *lest a bleating sound result . . . Furthermore, one should not strike a* trillo *too fast, but rather let the voice simply beat [*schweben lassen*], as it were; and too slow a* trillo *is also not to be recommended. It is best to find a medium speed--although, if I myself had to choose one over the other, I would rather hear one that is somewhat too fast than one that is altogether too slow."* [Bernhard]

Caccini describes the following ornament as a *'ribattuta di gola'* (throat articulation):

Rognoni combines this ornament with the trillo on a whole note (middle staff below):

5) *Accento* ('**Accent / Escape tone /** *Échappé*')

The term *'accenti'* can also mean 'ornaments' in a general way, but *'accento'* also refers to a specific ornament where a sort of 'escape' note is added above a note before it drops by a step. The escape note is often dissonant and can create an expressive cross relation with the next harmony. Rognoni says it should be slower rather than faster.

"Superjectio, also called Accentus, is when next to a consonance or dissonance another note is placed just above, thus normally when the note should fall by a second." [Bernhard - *Tractatus compositionis augmentatus*]

Plain example:

With accenti:

From *Mentre vaga angioletta* (C. Monteverdi).

6) *Anticipatione della sillaba* (**'Anticipation of the syllable'**)

We see this most often in the literature when the composer puts the final syllable of a cadence on the penultimate note (instead of the final note):

Bernhard also describes these more complex scenarios:

"When the second note lies a step higher than the first, the syllable of the second note is applied to the end of the first . . . "

" . . . when the notes rise or fall a third, a fraction of the previous note is given to the note between them, while the syllable of the consequent note is applied to that fraction, as:"

"When the notes fall a fourth, the first note is divided as follows:"

"The last case, where the notes rise a fourth, is seldom encountered, but occurs like this:"

7) *Anticipatione della nota* ('Anticipation of the note')

" . . . when a fraction of a note is given to the note following it. It is employed when the notes rise or fall a second . . . the first note is divided, and the last part is drawn to the pitch of the next note." [Bernhard]

8) *Cercar della nota* ('Searching for the note')

"It is used either at the beginning or during the course of a phrase. At the beginning of a phrase, one sings the note immediately beneath the initial note very briefly and softly, then glides from this quite imperceptibly to the initial note:"

"During the course of a phrase, it can be used equally well between two notes of the same pitch or between notes a leap apart. When the notes are of the same pitch, one goes from the first to the second by way of the note immediately above or below:"

9) *Principiar sotto alle note* ('Beginning below the notes')

This is also called '*intonazione*' in Caccini.

"For the most part when you sing, to give grace to the voice, either at the beginning [of a phrase] or anywhere else, you begin a third or a fourth lower, according to the harmony of the other parts, especially the contralto, which the soprano can easily double at the unison (and the same goes for the other parts). The singer must be warned that however long you hold the first note, the second must be faster. This gives a grace that isn't there when the notes are of equal value. For the gracefulness of singing is none other than making the rhythms unequal, as we see here:" [Bovicelli]

"This principiar *is nothing more than giving grace to the voice at the beginning of a note."*
[Rognoni]

10) Unequalizing rhythms

Note all the ways in which Caccini unequalizes equal pairs of eighth and sixteenth notes. This often has the effect of stressing the dissonant tones of a *passaggio*.

11) *Cascata* ('Fall')

Caccini makes the gesture more expressive by making the long notes *longer* and the short notes *shorter*:

Here Caccini describes descending scales preceded by a rest for taking a breath:

12) *Gruppo / Groppo / Groppetto*

A cadential ornament from the Renaissance diminution tradition, a sort of upper-neighbor trill with a turn either up or down at the end.

Caccini's example is simple, involving an accelerando towards the end.

Bovicelli's examples are more complex, and he divides them into two types.

The first type has equal note values leading to the cadence. The second is the *'groppetto raffrenato'* which slows down to make it easier to finish the word.

Groppetto raffrenato

Groppetti di note uguali

Rognoni also says *"it is necessary to stop always on the penultimate note of every* passaggio, *and in particular on the* trillo *or* gruppo*, in order not to make the last note suddenly harsh . . . "*

13) *Portamento di voce / Strascinare* ('Drag / Slide')

*"Drag (*strascinare*) the voice little by little, almost imperceptibly, from the low to the high note, or the reverse, through the said limits of three or five quarter tones. This is done by some in common diatonic melodies, principally ascending, for certain mournful and sad affects, but with other intervals, which is a sort of* portamento di voce *more appropriate to women than to men."* [Doni]

Portamento is also used for dolorous and weeping effects; very often sliding is called for between chromatic pairs of notes (either ascending or descending):

Sometimes the composer wants a slide on exclamations: *ohimè*, *ahi lasso*, etc. Also on expressive moments where there is a large descending interval of a fourth or more, very often an 'false' (augmented or diminished) interval: