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ORNAMENTATION IN THE 16th CENTURY

The practice of embellishing polyphonic vocal music was very much in fashion in the sixteenth century. Singers at St. Mark's (Venice) and St. Peter's (Rome) prided themselves on their ability to perform in this manner. Choral ornamentation however was not limited to liturgical music; it was also common in the chansons, madrigals, and other secular works of the time. In the solo music of the period, the embellishment assumed a virtuoso and instrumental character as singers and instrumentalists would extemporize and develop original contrapuntal lines to a given cantus firmus (i.e. chant, chorale, or hymn tune).

In the choral ornamentation of the time the embellishment assumed two basic characteristics:
1. the emphasis rested on the contrapuntal nature of the music, thus making ornamentation more appropriate during sustained notes and at cadential patterns;
2. the tendency existed for the ornamentation to affect the melody and not the harmony, thus allowing the embellishment to take place simultaneously with the original written part.

The writers of the time recommended three rules of ornamentation:

1. Embellishment can occur in any part but should not take place in more than one voice at a time. When two voices are embellished at the same time, the intervals involved must be consonant.
2. Embellishments should be avoided at the beginning of a piece, unless the opening passages are in four part homophonic texture. The beauty of an embellishment arises from the graceful and enchanting movement of parts after the entrance of each voice is clearly heard.
3. Embellishments are far more effective when they are used sparingly and in good taste.

Contrapuntal Ornamentation

The purpose of melodic ornamentation is to rework a vocal line to make it more florid and expressive. The following examples by Ortiz (1533) and Coclius (1552) illustrate both simple and elegant possibilities. You will observe that in most cases the embellishment is diatonic (step-wise); in some instances the last note of the embellishment is the same as the note which is embellished.

Example 1
Diego Ortiz, 1553. Contrapuntal ornamentation

written   performed   written   performed

written   performed   written   performed

Example 2
Coclicus, 1552. Contrapuntal ornamentation

Cadential Ornamentation

The cadence is especially appropriate for diatonic embellishment. The cadential patterns shown below are suggested by Ortiz and Coclicus. They should be practiced and then adapted to similar cadential sequences in sixteenth century choral works.

Example 3
Diego Ortiz, 1553. Cadential ornamentation

Coclicus, 1552. Cadential ornamentation.

It is important now to apply these principles to actual choral works. The excerpts shown below are examples of ways in which sixteenth century composers and performers embellished the choral music of their contemporaries.