

Understanding the Art of Vocal Embellishment in Handel's Opera Seria

Elvadine R. Seligmann

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Dr. Deborah Kauffman

University of Northern Colorado

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For over 150 years, the Western world has revered George Frideric Handel as one of the greatest composers of all time. His legendary oratorio, *Messiah*, has been performed somewhere in the world nearly every year since its 1741 debut; his operas, however, fell out of favor approximately fifteen years before his death and remained largely forgotten until the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

When Oskar Hagen first revived Handel's operas in the 1920s and 1930s, he did not attempt to present them authentically. To increase the operas' appeal with German audiences, the professor freely cut and reorchestrated the scores, transposed entire roles and even translated the Italian librettos into German.<sup>2</sup> In 1955, the English joined in the revival of Handel's operas followed a decade later by the Americans. The English-speaking world sought to recapture authentically the golden era of opera seria and shunned the German modifications.<sup>3</sup> Careful adherence to the score, however, would not result in an authentic reproduction of Handel's operas.

Unlike most twentieth-century opera, Handel's Italianate opera seria embraced a longstanding improvisational tradition, which by its very nature was not reflected in the score.<sup>4</sup> Revivalists were bewildered by the task of imitating this imprecise element. The existing tradition of embellishment in Handel oratorios provided no clue because this tradition had evolved over time; furthermore, English oratorio had developed from an entirely different national style than

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Ann Parker, "Reception of Handel's Operas, Then and Now," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 72:4 (Fall 2003), 854-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 855.

<sup>3</sup> Winton Dean, "The Essential Handel," *The Musical Times* 100:1394 (April 1959), 194.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Donington, *A Performer's Guide to Baroque Music* (New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1973), 160; Frederick Neumann, "Ornament and Structure," *The Musical Quarterly* 56:2 (April 1970), 156.

Italian opera. Owing to substantial musicological research in the last fifty years, an increasing number of opera singers now present stylistically appropriate renditions of Handel's arias.

Unfortunately, a surprising majority remains ignorant, applying improvisational styles of later eras, embellishing the melodies beyond all recognition, or leaving them overtly undecorated.<sup>5</sup>

One must resist the assumption that Baroque composers attended to their manuscripts with the level of precision of modern composers. In the eighteenth century, Handel's manuscripts were still painstakingly hand-copied and usually facilitated performances under the composer's direction. To conserve time and resources, he notated only the most pertinent elements, including a basic sketch of the melody, the text, orchestra parts, and basso continuo.<sup>6</sup> He expected his performers to infer issues of common practice, and he could address any misinterpretations during rehearsal.<sup>7</sup>

Improvisatory embellishment constituted common practice for the singer just as realizing figured bass did for the harpsichordist. The purpose of such embellishment was to impart liveliness and brilliance to the melody and to enrich the harmony with non-harmonic tones.<sup>8</sup>

While residing in London, Francesco Geminiani, one of Handel's Italian colleagues, wrote, "But melody, tho' pleasing to all, seldom communicates the highest degree of pleasure."<sup>9</sup> Francesco Algarotti agreed: "It is true, to hear constantly an exact replication of the same thing must be

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<sup>5</sup> Winton Dean, "Scholarship and the Handel Revival, 1935-1985," in *Handel: Tercentenary Collection*, ed. Stanley Sadie and Anthony Hicks (London: Macmillan, 1987), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Donington, *A Performer's Guide*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Neumann, *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: Schirmer, 1993), 523.

<sup>8</sup> Johann Friedrich Agricola, *Introduction to the Art of Singing* [1757], trans. by Julianne C. Baird (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 92.

<sup>9</sup> Francesco Geminiani, *A Treatise of Good Taste in the Art of Musick* [1749] (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 1.

disagreeable; therefore the most reasonable measure is to leave some occasion for the skill, fancy and feeling of a singer to display themselves.”<sup>10</sup>

Until 1735, the leading singers in Handel’s operas were usually Italian virtuosos with extensive training and experience in the art of embellishment.<sup>11</sup> These singers did not require the composer to notate embellishments for them; indeed, they would have been offended had he tried. Pietro Francesco Tosi and Johann Friedrich Agricola specifically criticized singers and composers who stooped to writing out embellishments in advance, including cadenzas.<sup>12</sup> This Italian tradition contrasts that of French and German Baroque composers who meticulously notated embellishments.<sup>13</sup>

London audiences were particularly enamored with the virtuosic element of Italian opera. Most attendees were unable to understand the Italian text, making it difficult for them to follow details of the plot without constant reference to the libretto. In recognition of this fact, Handel periodically cut large sections of recitative so as not to lose the interest of his audience between arias.<sup>14</sup>

The level of vocal embellishment became increasingly elaborate over the course of Handel’s operatic career and beyond. Charles Burney remarked that the level of virtuosity, “which excited such astonishment in 1734, would be hardly thought sufficiently brilliant in 1788 for a third-rate singer at the opera. The dose of difficulties to produce the same effects as 50 years ago must be

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<sup>10</sup> “Può riuscir nojoso, egli è vero, il sentir replicar sempre così appunto la medesima cosa: ed egli par ragionevole, che si abbia a lasciare un po’ di campo aperto alla scienza, alla fantasia, e all’ affetto del cantore.” Francesco Algarotti, *Saggio Sopra L’Opera in Musica* [1755] (Bologna: Libreria Musicale Italiana Editrice, 1989), 47-48, as quoted in Francesco Algarotti, *An Essay on the Opera* [1755], ed. Robin Burgess, trans. Anonymous [1768] (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 38. Similar commentary appears in Giambattista Mancini, *Riflessioni pratiche sul canto figurato* [1777] (Bologna: Forni, 1970), 51; and Pietro Francesco Tosi, *Opinioni de Cantori Antichi e Moderni* [1723] (New York: Broude Brothers, 1968), 59.

<sup>11</sup> Winton Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> Agricola, *Introduction to the Art of Singing*, 212; and Tosi, *Opinioni*, 59. Tosi dedicated this treatise to the third Earl of Peterborough, whose wife, Anastasia Robinson, was one of Handel’s leading opera singers from 1714-24.

<sup>13</sup> Neumann, *Performance Practices*, 298.

<sup>14</sup> Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel, a Documentary Biography* (New York: Norton, 1955), 197.

more than doubled.”<sup>15</sup> It is hard to say whether this trend precipitated more from the demands of the audience or the competitive temperament of the performers, though evidence certainly supports the latter.

The most famous rivalry among performers in eighteenth-century opera was that of Handel’s Italian sopranos Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni. The divas often suffered to share the stage together, whereupon Handel was compelled to write for them parts of equal importance. When these two prima donnas were not pulling out one another’s hair,<sup>16</sup> they sought to outshine one another by means of vocal prowess.<sup>17</sup>

Singers also engaged in competition with members of the orchestra. Francesco Algarotti lamented in 1755:

One of the very favorite practices these days, one that brings an audience to its feet, is to make an aria into a contest between a voice and an oboe or a voice and a trumpet who set at one another with musical thrusts and parries in an interminable battle of lungpower. Although these duels are distasteful to those in the audience with sounder taste, there is no way to put a stop to them.<sup>18</sup>

Algarotti was not alone in his criticism of excessive bravura. Several eighteenth-century teachers and composers published treatises on vocal embellishment, all favoring florid embellishment while bemoaning the tasteless extent to which eighteenth-century singers had

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Burney, *A General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* [1789] (New York: Dover Publications, 1957), vol. II, 814.

<sup>16</sup> Faustina and Cuzzoni had engaged in a scandalous hair-pulling fight during a performance of *Astianatte* on June 6, 1727, “the biggest event of the season, next to the death of George I.” Robert Ness, “The Dunciad and Italian Opera in England,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 20:2 (Winter 1986-1987), 176.

<sup>17</sup> Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> “Una delle piu care usanze al di d’oggi, e che leva il Teatro a romore, e ilfar prova in un’ aria di una voce, e di un’ oboe, di una voce, e di una Tromba; e far tra loro seguire con varie bone, e risposte una gara senza fine, e quasi un duello a tutto fiato. Non si puo dire abbastanza quanto simili altercazioni riescano alla piu sana parte dell’ udiienza rincrescevoli.” Algarotti, *Saggio Sopra L’Opera*, 32, as quoted in John Spitzer, “Improvised Ornamentation in a Handel Aria with Obligato Wind Accompaniment,” *Early Music* 16:4 (November 1988), 519. For similar accounts, see Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* [1773] (New York: AMS Press, 1976), 213-214; and Mancini, *Riflessioni*, 176.

taken it.<sup>19</sup> Musicologists and singers alike face the quandary of which perspective is more authentic: the writers' conservative recommendations or the singers' progressive practices. It would seem that the performers and their audiences agreed, relegating the learned teachers to the minority opinion.

In the quest for the historically authentic Handelian style, one must remember that the heart of music, particularly that of an improvisational nature, is the interpretive contribution of a unique performer. Demonstrating a thorough appreciation for this concept, Handel designed not just arias, but entire roles, around the unique qualities of his singers.<sup>20</sup> Cuzzoni's arias were either so lively as to leave little room for embellishment, or of the expressive *Siciliana* style for which she was famous; the latter precluded difficult marked divisions but showcased her celebrated "shake." In contrast, the arias Handel wrote for her rival, Faustina, were either teeming with lengthy passages of rapid marked divisions or left conspicuously unencumbered to permit her to display her taste and unparalleled agility.<sup>21</sup> When these artists were unavailable for revival productions, Handel sometimes transposed or replaced arias to better suit the new singers.<sup>22</sup> Handel's arias for castrati took advantage of the unusual lungpower afforded these singers as a result of castration, an advantage lacking in the female singers who sing those arias in the twenty-first century.<sup>23</sup> An understanding of the singers for whom Handel composed specific

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<sup>19</sup> Examples include Algarotti, Agricola, Geminiani, Quantz, Tartini and Tosi.

<sup>20</sup> Steven C. LaRue, "Handel and the Aria," in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, ed. Donald Burrows (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 114-117.

<sup>21</sup> Burney discusses each singer's particular arias (and performances thereof) in his *General History*, II, 728-758.

<sup>22</sup> G.F. Handel, *Three Ornamented Arias*, ed. Winton Dean. London: Oxford University Press, 1976; and Nicholas McGegan as quoted in Bernard D. Sherman, *Inside Early Music: Conversations with Performers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 254.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Simon, "Handel: An Eighteenth-Century Messiah for Italian Opera?" *The Opera Quarterly* 3:3 (1985), 7; and George J. Buelow, "A Lesson in Operatic Performance Practice by Madame Faustina Bordoni," in *A Musical Offering: Essays in Honor of Martin Bernstein*, ed. Edward H. Clinkscale and Claire Brook (New York: Pendragon Press, 1977), 95.

arias provides valuable historical context, but attempts to imitate these singers defy the composer's obvious desire that the performance reflect as much the singer as the composer.

Keeping in mind the importance of individual interpretation, the modern singer should still observe the overriding conventions of the time. In some sections of music, embellishment was obligatory while in other sections such embellishment was inappropriate. The overwhelming majority of Handel's arias are in *da capo* form, a form ideally suited to the display of singers' talents. Tosi stated that the first rendition of the A section requires, "nothing but the simplest ornaments, of a good taste and few, that the composition may remain simple, plain, and pure."<sup>24</sup> Despite previously mentioned disagreement between Tosi and the younger generation of performers, singers adhered to this convention;<sup>25</sup> doing so showed the audience the degree to which their embellishments in the return of the A section were of their own design. As the B section occurs only once, singers ornamented it more freely than the first A section but not to the extent they did the repeat of the second A section.<sup>26</sup> On the whole, the art of embellishment belongs to the aria; embellishing recitative is inappropriate except for the occasional *appoggiatura*.<sup>27</sup>

Because Handel composed operas in the Italian style, albeit in London, the ornamentation of his arias accordingly followed the Italian model.<sup>28</sup> This model included (but was not limited to) a handful of specific ornaments used alone or in combination, as appropriate. Detailed

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<sup>24</sup> "Nella prima non chieggono, che ornamenti semplice, gustosi, e pochi, affinché la composizione resti intatta." Tosi, *Opinioni*, 59, as quoted in Tosi, *Observations*, 93. See also Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria*, 206.

<sup>25</sup> Johann Christoph Nemeitz, *Nachlese besonderer Nachrichten von Italien* (Leipzig: Gleditsch, 1726), 426, as quoted in H. Diack Johnstone, "A Flourish for Handel," *Early Music* 29:4 (November 2001), 620.

<sup>26</sup> Tosi, *Opinioni*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 42; Donington, *A Performer's Guide*, 163 & 178; and Winton Dean and J. Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas 1704-1726* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 32.

<sup>28</sup> Neumann, *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 319.

discussion of these ornaments is beyond the scope of this essay, but singers should apprise themselves of certain conventions and controversies pertaining to them.<sup>29</sup>

Of the standard ornaments, the one seldom heard is the *trillo*, which is similar to a trill, but entails rapid rearticulation of a single pitch rather than alternating between two. When Quantz heard Faustina's *trillo* in London, he believed she had invented the ornament because he had never heard it before.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the *trillo* had been in use for at least a century after Caccini discussed it in the preface to *Le Nuove Musiche*,<sup>31</sup> but it was not widely used because of its extreme difficulty. This difficulty has long served as an excuse for its omission in individual voice training, especially where the teacher is unable to achieve the effect in his own voice. Lest this ornament disappear entirely, those who intend to sing a significant amount of Italian Baroque vocal music should deliberately seek instruction in this art.

While the *trillo* remains optional due to its difficulty, the trill is obligatory. Tosi wrote, "One who cannot trill well cannot be a good singer, no matter how much he knows."<sup>32</sup> Trilling well, according to Tosi, requires the two notes of the trill to be in tune, precisely a full- or semi-tone apart; a trill is not merely a wide vibrato. Although a skilled singer will add trills to ornament individual notes throughout an aria, she is obliged to trill at most cadences, except in a *Siciliana* where a *portamento* is more appropriate.<sup>33</sup> Vincenzo Manfredini was famous for opposing this

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<sup>29</sup> The author assumes the reader is familiar with the definitions of these ornaments. The following sources define the ornaments and discuss them in much detail: Tosi, *Opinioni*; Agricola, *An Introduction to the Art of Singing*; Geminiani, *A Treatise of Good Taste in the Art of Musick*; Giuseppe Tartini, *Treatise on the Ornaments of Music* [c. 1750], trans. and ed. Sol Babitz (Los Angeles: Early Music Laboratory, 1970); Neumann, *Performance Practices*; and Donington, *A Performer's Guide*.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Burney, *General History*, II, 746.

<sup>31</sup> Giulio Caccini, Preface to *Nuove Musiche* [1602], in *Source Readings in Music History: The Baroque Era*, rev. ed., trans. and ed. by Margaret Murata (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 104-105, 107.

<sup>32</sup> "E chi n' è privo (o non l'abbia di difettoso) non farà mai gran Cantante benchè sapesse molto." Tosi, *Opinioni*, 25 (my translation).

<sup>33</sup> Julianne Baird, "An 18<sup>th</sup> Century Controversy About the Trill: Mancini v. Manfredini," *Early Music* 15:1 (February 1987), 44; Tosi, *Opinioni*, 25; and Donington, *A Performer's Guide*, 178 & 195.



popular viewpoint; however, ornamentation is a matter of taste, and the prevailing taste of the period clearly favored trilling at cadences.

A fuzzier controversy surrounds the starting pitch of trills. Neumann cites several examples of written-out trills in Handel's instrumental scores as evidence that Handel favored a lower-note start for trills.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, Donington cites sixteen treatises by the most famous authorities of the period that expressly state the trill should begin on the upper-note.<sup>35</sup> Given the weight of Donington's sources and the fact that composers generally notated trills symbolically rather than writing them out, it is likely that Handel wrote out the trills to which Neumann refers because he wanted those few to differ from the prevailing convention. Neumann himself suggests that lower-note starts were necessary in these isolated cases to avoid voice-leading errors. In any case, surely Handel would not have convinced his Italian prima donnas to abandon the wisdom of their training regarding this common ornament.

Vibrato is another source of debate among musicologists, one fraught with inconsistencies. Geminiani referred to vibrato as a "close shake," implying that it is similar to the trill but with a narrower pitch oscillation; Geminiani and Mancini praised consistent use of vibrato.<sup>36</sup> Tartini believed vibrato was better suited to instruments and even then, only as an occasional ornament.<sup>37</sup> Whether these writers interpreted the term as modern musicians do is unclear. For one thing, most extant eighteenth-century commentary refers specifically to instruments, namely strings. One cannot positively say whether these writers intended their sentiments to apply to the voice. The precise definition of vibrato also comes into question. Vibrato is defined in terms of the range and frequency of pitch and/or intensity fluctuations per second. Donington suggests

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<sup>34</sup> Neumann, *Performance Practices*, 407.

<sup>35</sup> Donington, *A Performer's Guide*, 196-197.

<sup>36</sup> Baird, "An 18<sup>th</sup> Century Controversy," 44; and Neumann, *Performance Practices*, 503.

<sup>37</sup> Tartini, *Treatise on the Ornaments of Music*, 82.

that, as many considered vibrato a natural component of the voice, writers may have found it acceptable in modest amounts but would have complained when either the range or frequency of oscillations made the sound less desirable.<sup>38</sup> As is always the case, the extent of the controversy proves that performers varied in their use of vibrato. At least two of Handel's singers, Cuzzoni and Carestini, reportedly employed vibrato consistently.<sup>39</sup>

These ornaments comprise only a portion of the palate from which Handel's singers embellished his arias. Decisions of how and when to use specific ornaments rested upon the character of the aria. Frederick Neumann explains with particular clarity:

A slow beat, an unobtrusive meter, a great diversity of note values involved, and a melodic rhythm that appears free and rhapsodic, will all tend to provide a fertile soil for melismatic ornaments. By contrast, a fast beat, a sharply defined meter, incisively contoured melodic figures, and a fundamental sameness of note values will offer little opportunity for them.<sup>40</sup>

Although the appoggiatura is always welcome, its length depends upon the style of the aria; long appoggiaturas contribute to the drama of melancholy arias while short appoggiaturas add buoyancy to lighter, livelier ones.<sup>41</sup> The *Siciliana*, for which Cuzzoni was famous, invites smooth, connecting ornaments such as *glissandi* and *portamenti*; the marked melismas, for which Faustina was famous, would be inappropriate in a *Siciliana*.<sup>42</sup> Singers should evaluate whether the ornaments they have in mind contribute to or detract from the mood of the aria.

At least once in every *da capo* aria, the singer is obliged to invent a cadenza to display the extent of her talent and thrill the audience. In the absence of the sort of structure

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<sup>38</sup> Donington, *A Performer's Guide*, 195.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Burney and J.A. Hiller, as cited in Neumann, *Performance Practices*, 504.

<sup>40</sup> Frederick Neumann, "Ornament and Structure," 159.

<sup>41</sup> Tartini, *Treatise on the Ornaments of Music*, 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> Tosi, *Opinioni*, 34-35.

melody provides, many modern singers find the improvisation of cadenzas to be a daunting task; however, as Tartini said, “since listeners are pleased at present to hear this sort of thing, however anomalous and ill-suited, one must know how to do it.”<sup>43</sup>

Like so many aspects of the art, cadenzas were a source of consternation among those writing treatises on vocal performance during Handel’s lifetime. Algarotti maintained that the cadenza should develop naturally out of the aria, reflecting the themes already developed through the melody and supporting ornamentation. He complained of contemporary singers who, “commonly pervert [cadenzas] to a quite different meaning and complexion from what was intended by the air; for here the singer is fond of crowding in all the graces, all the difficulties, and all the musical tricks he is master of – ridiculous!”<sup>44</sup> Though such abuses may be historically accurate, the best singers devise satisfying cadenzas in the context of their respective arias. Most of Handel’s leading roles sing at least four arias, allowing the singer ample occasion to display her talent; it is not necessary to show every trick in her book in a single cadenza. Tartini recommends using scales, arpeggios and variations thereof as the basis for cadenzas. His treatise offers many examples like the one in Example 1; these cadenzas average eight measures in length.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Tartini, *Treatise on the Ornaments of Music*, 26.

<sup>44</sup> “...la quale riesce per lo più di tutt’ altro senitmento, di tutt’ altro colore, che non è l’aria. Suole il musico racchiuder quivi, e distillarvi dentro quanto di grazie, di rarità, di artifici musicali ha saputo mai immaginare, o raccogliere.” Algarotti, *Saggio Sopra L’Opera*, 49, as translated in Algarotti, *An Essay on the Opera*, 39.

<sup>45</sup> Tartini, *Treatise on the Ornaments of Music*, 26.



**Ex. 1.** Sample cadenza from Tartini’s *Treatise on the Ornaments of Music* [1750].

Although Italian singers did not write down their intended embellishments, other musicians sometimes transcribed cadenzas and other improvisations as the artists sang them. Musicologists have uncovered a handful of these ornamented vocal scores, revealing snapshots of the improvisatory style of the time. Tartini’s sample cadenzas are slightly more elaborate than those Handel’s singers improvised in the 1720s and 1730s, but they exhibit many of the same qualities, particularly the use of scales and arpeggios.<sup>46</sup>

Although each singer displayed her own unique style, comparison of the ornamented scores reveals commonalities in the improvisatory styles of late Baroque singers. These commonalities apply not only to cadenzas but also to embellishment of the aria melody. One of these scores is a manuscript of Giuseppe Vignati’s “Sciolta dal lido,” upon which someone transcribed the embellishments Madam Faustina sang during one performance in Milan in 1720, six years before she began singing for Handel. Although her embellishments here are presumably simpler than the ones she invented to best Cuzzoni, they are demonstrative of the more conservative popular taste of Handel’s early years with the Royal Academy.

The most important characteristic to notice is that Faustina’s embellishments do not distort the original melody; rather, they serve to decorate or fill in the composer’s outline. The majority

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<sup>46</sup> A more detailed discussion of these scores follows, including an example of Farinelli’s cadenza. See also Buelow, “A Lesson in Operatic Performance Practice,” 90, for an example of Faustina’s cadenza.

of her embellishments follow stepwise patterns, usually triplet divisions featuring neighboring tones and scalar passages, as shown in Example 2. Her thematic consistency, particularly in sequential passages, suggests that while she did not plan her embellishments in advance, she had studied the aria in detail and had developed a palate of ornaments from which to choose during performance.

40

Sciol - ta dal li - do con ven - to in -

+ 4 measures Sciol - ta dal li - do con ven - to in -

45

fi - do la na - vi - cel - la al sco - glio

fi - do la na - vi - cel - la al sco - glio

Ex. 2. Vignati, “Sciolta dal lido,” mm. 40-46 ]<sup>47</sup>

It is also worth mentioning that the range of Faustina’s improvised rendition is the same as that of the melody upon which it is based, E4 to G5. The practice of demonstrating vocal skill by singing in extreme ranges did not develop until well after the Baroque era.<sup>48</sup>

Another valuable manuscript is of “Quell’ usignolo” from Geminiano Giacomelli’s *La Merope* as sung in Venice in 1734 by Farinelli, the most celebrated castrato of his day.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> The Library of Congress, Music Division, M1500 S28 G5, as reproduced in Buelow, “A Lesson in Operatic Performance Practice,” 87.

<sup>48</sup> Dean and Knapp, *Handel’s Operas 1704-1726*, 28.

Farinelli sang only once for Handel, preferring the rival London company, The Opera of the Nobility, which Senesino founded in 1733.<sup>50</sup> Like Faustina's, Farinelli's embellishments follow the contour of the original melody and imitate sequential passages with matching ornaments. His cadenza, shown in Example 3, features primarily stepwise motion decorated with trills and mordents.

(a) written:  
Quel l'u - si - gno - lo che in - na - mo - ra

(b) as sung by Farinelli  
Quel l'u - si - gno - lo che in - na - mo - ra

[cadenza as inserted by Farinelli]

to

Ex. 3. Giacomelli, "Quell' usignolo," Act 2, Scene 4, mm. 19-24.<sup>51</sup>

Although Handel wrote most roles with specific Italian singers in mind, these singers were occasionally indisposed, making it necessary for Handel to hire English understudies on short notice. This scenario explains why researchers have found a handful of copyist-prepared manuscripts into which Handel himself notated embellishments for a singer with little experience in improvisation.<sup>52</sup> These rare autographs offer valuable insight concerning the manner of embellishment Handel felt was appropriate for his work and acceptable to his audience. The

<sup>49</sup> Burney, *General History*, II, 789.

<sup>50</sup> Winton Dean, "Handel's *Ottone*," *The Musical Times* 112:1544 (October 1971), 955-958.

<sup>51</sup> Donington, *A Performer's Guide*, 165, as reproduced by Franz Haböck, *Die Gesangkunst der Kastraten*, (Vienna, 1923), 140, from an unspecified manuscript in Vienna (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek MS 19111 No.3).

Burney provides additional examples of Farinelli's ornamentation in *General History*, II, 831-838.

<sup>52</sup> Dean and Knapp, *Handel's Operas 1704-1726*, 29.

most substantial of these autographs are three of Teofane's arias from *Ottone* that Handel both transposed and ornamented: "Affanni del pensier," "Alla fama," and "Benchè mi sia crudele."

Handel's embellishments bear some similarity to Faustina's and Farinelli's: they remain within the original vocal range, repeat in sequential passages, and rarely distort the melody. However, the composer seems to have felt more at liberty to modify his melodies than a singer would have; in some places, he replaced the existing melismas with alternate versions that he may have considered during the initial composition. Handel's ornamentation shows more variety, even within arias, than either Faustina's or Farinelli's; the singers' ornaments fit neatly into categories (i.e. appoggiaturas, arpeggios, scales, etc.), while the composer's are more often complex combinations of standard elements, as shown in Example 4.

a)

Da-te-mi pa-ce-al-men, da-te-mi pa-ce-al-men, E

b)

-rà.

Ex. 4. a) Handel, "Affanni del pensier," mm. 10-11;  
b) Handel, "Benchè mi sia crudele," mm. 62-67.<sup>53</sup>

Handel's embellishments are also surprisingly more challenging. In the larghetto "Affanni del pensier," Handel divides an eighth note into as many as six shorter notes (see Example 4a); in the

<sup>53</sup> Original manuscript: Bodleian MS Don. C.69, as reproduced in Handel, *Three Ornamented Arias*.

allegro “Alla fama,” he divides eighth notes into as many as four shorter notes. Handel’s embellishments are mostly stepwise, like the singers’, but Handel’s use more leaps, usually escape tones, arpeggios, and octave transfers. Of particular interest is the fact that Handel also embellished the B sections in two of the arias, though there is no indication that any of the ornamentation ever made it to the stage.<sup>54</sup>

Another source of Handel’s taste in embellishment comes from an autograph of “O caro mio tesoro” from *Amadigi di Gaula*. In this case, the entire score appears in Handel’s handwriting, though this version is not from the opera’s original score. Winton Dean suspects the composer wrote this score from memory, perhaps for a concert rendition.<sup>55</sup> Compared with the three *Ottone* arias, it begins simply, not varying from the original score for the first twelve measures and varying very little in the next fourteen measures. This contrast to his ornamentation in the *Ottone* arias leaves some question as to whether Handel intended it as an “ornamented” version or merely a recomposition that he intended the singer to embellish. The final eleven measures of the A section are more floridly ornamented, although the contour of the original melody remains intact. As before, the range of the embellished version matches that of the original. The divisions are primarily stepwise, and the composer has written repeated ornamental figures to replace repeated figures from the original melody, as seen in Example 5. Handel also seems to have been especially fond of escape tones, as they appear frequently throughout his embellishments in this aria and the three ornamented arias from *Ottone*.

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<sup>54</sup> From a collection of six arias from *Ottone*, only “Affanni del pensiero” and “Benchè mi sia crudele,” were completely ornamented; the ornamentation in “Alla fama” is incomplete, and the remaining arias were entirely unornamented, suggesting alternate arrangements were made before the performance. For more information, see Winton Dean’s preface in Handel, *Three Ornamented Arias*.

<sup>55</sup> Winton Dean, “Vocal Embellishment in a Handel Aria,” in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Music: A Tribute to Karl Geiringer on his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. H.C. Robbins Landon with Roger E. Chapman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 159.



Ex. 5. Handel, "O caro mio tesor," mm. 43-51<sup>56</sup>

Musicological study of documents and anecdotes from the eighteenth century has demonstrated that reclamation of historically accurate performance practice is far from an exact science. At the same time, it illuminates the common characteristics that define the Baroque style of operatic singing. These characteristics offer a historical context through which the modern singer can impart to the modern audience the beauty and passion of Handel's operatic masterpieces. Issues of taste being timeless, the modern Handelian singer will inevitably draw criticism for being either too conservative or too liberal in her embellishments; this she will have in common with her Late Baroque counterparts. Let her not draw criticism for being anachronistic!

<sup>56</sup> Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (30 H 6, pp.41-43), as reproduced in Dean, "Vocal Embellishment in a Handel Aria," 155-156.

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