

Josef Mons

Vocal and Instrumental Ensemble Music for Sacred and Secular Occasions

In order to stylistically characterise the following musical compositions, I would like to quote from an article about my work (*Early Music Review 99/2: 20th CENTURY*), written by the English music critic Clifford Bartlett:

“The composer would be insulted were I to call his music pastiche. He goes back to styles of c.1600, but develops it in his own manner. He understands the style that he uses as his point of departure and can convincingly write within it, which can make the odd 'wrong' notes and chords feel more disconcerting than telling. But now that music from many periods is a vital part of our culture, why does new music has to develop from or react against only the immediately previous generation?”

In addition to that, it should be mentioned that others also associated this music with the so called 'fantastic style', which may be an appropriate characterisation too.

Musicians who are familiar with the performance practice of music of the late Renaissance can resort here to the usual way of playing. Those who are not, will acquire a key prerequisite for a vibrant performance of the here presented compositions by bearing the following seven points in mind:

1. Make yourself familiar with playing 'con sprezzatura' (mostly a slight agogical accentuation within the faster passages without affecting the beat). For the affetti passages keeping a consistent basic tempo isn't mandatory.
2. A permanent vibrato, as often applied on modern strings, is not advisable. This would not support the transparency of the contrapuntal - of course sometimes monodic - chromatically enhanced modal structure of these compositions. Instead of this, a light sound, animated by occasional messe di voce, would be much more suitable. Singers should also keep this in mind; their performance too will benefit by attaining a more 'sleek' sound. Especially with regard to the madrigal „Willkommen o silberner Mond“, I wouldn't like to hear any vibrato at all from the singers.
3. If playing 'come sta' isn't specifically required, gaining some knowledge about the application of ornaments within pre-baroque music, would be very helpful. Typical baroque ornaments like trills, starting on the upper note, and arbitrary grace notes should not be played here.
4. Should the piano be your instrument of choice for presenting a basso continuo part, here too, the player may embellish his performance with some arpeggiati.
5. Regarding the tuning, it has to be said: the more harmonic the tuning is the clearer will be the contrast between consonance and dissonance, which constitutes one of the special characteristics of this music. Singers as well as players of wind instruments or fretless strings, who are well attuned to each other, will be able to achieve this very well within those pieces where no basso continuo is required - off course, having an archicembalo or a similar disposed organ available for the basso continuo part, would create a different situation. Concerning performances with viols and lutes, I would like to suggest the following for the case that the usual meantone tuning creates dissatisfying results with a particular piece: Adjusting the tuning towards the specific harmonic requirements here might sometimes be a better solution than directly turning to equal temperament.

6. Most of these pieces could be performed with various kinds of instrumentation and therefore are presented here in different keys. For example, regarding the Canzon Seconda and apart from the unornamented basic version, particularly ornamented versions for different instruments are available like an especially elaborate one for the violin containing a number of double and triple stops or, inter alia, a version for valved horn in B-flat (I thought of a modern corno da caccia) - trumpeters, flugelhornists, clarinetists and saxophonists (soprano and tenor) of course can play from the same notes too. Concerning the four part canzoni, two kinds of broken consort did sound particularly charming and therefore shall be mentioned here: firstly treble, alto and tenor recorder accompanied by a bass viol and secondly cornett, viola da braccio, tenor and bass trombone.
7. The names of the movements are meant to be merely descriptive and do not refer to the classical tempi. The added tempo markings may be seen as deliberate suggestions, which - cum grano salis - should leave enough margin for individual interpretations.

Perhaps more specific ideas regarding performance and instrumentation can be found in the scores, the occasional audio examples (which in particular might give an impression of what I mean by 'con sprezzatura' - alas, these are all presented in equal temperament) and the prefaces given with some of these pieces. Finally I would like to add, proofreading of the here given scores and individual parts has been done over and over again with meticulous care, wherefore these should be regarded as reliable.

Josef Mons
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Note: since 2018, the musical works of Josef Mons are no longer subject to GEMA fees.