

# Why Most *a cappella* Music Could Not Have Been Sung Unaccompanied

by Beverly Jerold



Choral music from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that lacks an independent accompaniment seems to be associated in most of our minds with an unaccompanied style—a view that has been transmitted by performing editions and recordings. The purity and precision achieved by outstanding choral ensembles is believed to be appropriate to the transparency and intricate counterpoint of the music, and a probable reflection about the performing priorities of the original singers. Conditions today, however, are vastly different from those of this period and call into question whether early musicians could possibly have had the proficiency we have attributed to them in terms of singing unaccompanied with good intonation, refinement, and control. This article will document a disparity in aesthetic goals and skill between these musicians and those of today, to the degree that unaccompanied singing would have been unlikely for most music. As others have noted, early sources are scarce and uninformative about how choral music was sung. Newly discovered documents, however, shed some light on this issue.

Among general factors affecting performance can be cited the following: 1) Much of today's expertise about unaccompanied singing can be traced directly to recordings to imitate, not only with respect to notes, but also to tone quality, intonation, and matters of style. Unlike singers of today, musicians of the past had no technology enabling them to hear fine role models at every hour of the day and night. 2) Today's singers enjoy education and training superior to anything offered in previous

centuries. During the period under consideration, illiteracy was the norm, not the exception, and few musicians had a general education beyond the elementary school level, if that. 3) Not only was the general pool of talent more limited then because of a much smaller population, but also those individuals with the most opportunity for education (and hence the most promising subjects for training), the nobility, were not available for service because of social mores. Musicians were drawn from the lower and middle classes of society. 4) Not infrequent early accounts documenting excessive absenteeism and rowdy, drunken behavior by some English cathedral 'singing men' (as they were called) suggest a shortage of musicians and an even greater scarcity of good ones. How could coarseness in everyday life not be reflected in the way music was made? This type of behavior probably tarnished the image of all musicians, so even outstanding composers achieved little respect. Taverner was described as "but a Musitian"; and Sir Thomas More, acting the common singing-man, drew forth exclamations of reproach from the Duke of Norfolk, 'God bodye, God bodye, my Lorde Chancellour, a parishe clarke, a parish clarke! You dishonour the Kinge and his office.'<sup>1</sup>

## Volume and Tone Production

Early accounts of the cathedral singing men do not accord very well with the genteel refinement we ascribe to this repertoire. In 1599 Thomas Morley (Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, formerly organist at St. Paul's Cathedral, London) describes them in this manner:

Though a song be never so well made and never so aptly applied to the words, yet shall you hardly find singers to express it as it ought to be, for most of our churchmen, so

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Beverly Jerold is the author of *Jean-Henry D'Anglebert and the Seventeenth-Century Clavecin School* (Bloomington, 1986) and other writings.

they can cry louder in their choir than their fellows, care for no more. . . . But this for the most part you shall find amongst them, that let them continue never so long in the church, yea though it were twenty years, they will never study to sing better than they did the first day of their preferment to that place.<sup>2</sup>

In plain terms, their singing was loud and coarse, and they took no interest in bettering their skills. While we fret about missing and misplaced text underlay in manuscripts, Morley complains that singers simply omitted the text and treated it like an instrumental part. This lack of concern for communicating the text suggests an aesthetic far removed from ours.

Typical of several accounts about excessive and annoying volume from singers is that from Charles Butler (1636):

Let the whole Choir endeavor so to moderate their Voices, that their words may be plainly heard and

understood . . . too much shaking and quavering of the Notes [and] harsh straining of the Voices beyond their natural pitch are odious and offensive to the ear.<sup>3</sup>

Because stone-church acoustics mask many imperfections, the level of straining had to be significant to be perceived by observers. Contrast this with the controlled *fortissimo* of today's choruses. Singers who habitually force their voices usually sing out of tune and are not listening for refinements in blend and tone quality.

Loud church singing seems to be the norm also on the Continent during this period. Besides instances cited by scholars,<sup>4</sup> there is the librettist Metastasio's late (1770) but probably still applicable description of singing at the papal chapel. In contrast to the above cases, this one concerns volume produced without undue straining. First observing that orators in ancient Rome began in early youth to make their voice "strong, firm, clear, and

vigorous" to be heard in the vast squares, he contrasts this with present practice among opera singers:

Our singers . . . instead of fatiguing themselves in rendering their voices firm, robust, and sonorous, study to make them more delicate and flexible. By this new method, they have attained the wonderful power of velocity, which astonishes the hearers, and procures them unbounded applause.


(Not that these voices were delicate by our standards, for they had to fill immense theaters like the San Carlo in Naples.) This style of singing, says Metastasio, can never afford the pleasure derived from a "clear, firm, and robust voice, which affects our organs of hearing with equal force and delight, and has the power even to penetrate the soul." Unlike the singers of opera, those in the papal chapel continued the ancient method:

The singers of the pontifical chapel, though from their childhood educated in the modern school, when they are admitted in that choir, are obliged rigorously to abandon all the applauded embellishments of common singing, and to accustom themselves, as much as possible, at so late a period, to swell and sustain the voice.<sup>5</sup>

Strong and robust singing, which had likely been a tradition at the papal chapel for centuries, implies a slower tempo than we consider appropriate. It may be that the original longtime values of the notes provide a more accurate visual impression of the tempo than the halved values of today's editions.


### Rhythm and Other Matters

Even with the technological marvels of the twentieth century, our professional singers still experience at least one of the problems that would have made unaccompanied singing very difficult in 1600. Consider rhythm, which was such a formidable barrier for early ensembles that they often had to resort to audible time beating. Foot stamping was one tried-and-true method.



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In 1678 Johann Caspar Printz counsels the leader against striking with a cudgel on a solid surface so strongly that "one hears these thundering blows farther away than the singers themselves."<sup>6</sup> Today, conductor Nicholas McGegan says singers are still weak in this area:

The other thing you need (besides harmony), which is also very poorly taught to singers, is rhythm. I find when I'm working with singers who were or still are good instrumentalists . . . that their sense of rhythm is so much stronger. . . .  
 \*Some singers merely sing out of time because they've never been disciplined to sing in time.<sup>7</sup>

We have metronomes and recordings to aid in acquiring a rhythmic sense. Could early choirs have stayed together in the elaborate polyphony without outside assistance?

According to Thomas Mace, being a Master in the Art of Singing "is no such easie Task as is vulgarly thought to be." This is still true today. Instrumentalists can produce the right pitch simply by applying a finger in the correct location, but the unaccompanied singer must produce it without any external help. Consider how much greater the singer's task is when he/she has only a one-line vocal part (like an instrumental part) to read, as did the early singers. Without some knowledge of what the other contrapuntal parts are doing, it is easy to lose one's way with either the notes or the counting. Our beautifully laid-out modern scores of early music, where the rhythmic location of each note in relation to the other parts is shown with exactitude, give us an incalculable advantage. Moreover, aside from those early singers with an interest in composition, few would have had much knowledge of harmony or counterpoint.

### Problems With Pitch Accuracy

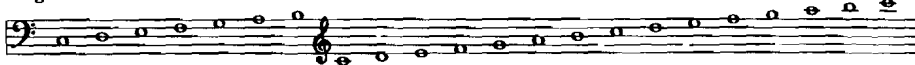
Lacking all our advantages for automatic ear training, early choirs found it difficult to sing in tune, a subject Johann Joseph Fux discusses in his famed *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725). Writing from Roman Catholic Vienna, he defines all music written for full choir as being in "a

capella" (the spelling in early texts) style, which is divided into two types: one unaccompanied by organ or instruments, and the other with accompaniment. The first and older manner, he says, is still in use in most cathedrals and at the Emperor's court during Lent. But music to be performed in this way must remain within the diatonic genus (Figure 1a). Otherwise, the voices will be out of tune: "Intonation is difficult for the voices when they have no help, not even from other instruments." Composers thus should write musical lines that are easy and natural for singing.<sup>8</sup> His further advice to avoid keys having too many sharps or flats was

probably related to the fact that they are visually more confusing to the singers, even though the music may remain within a diatonic compass.

If a composer wants to venture into the chromatic genus (Figure 1b) by using accidentals, Fux recommends doubling the vocal parts with instruments. Concerning Figure 2, he has the pupil ask what instruments to use, since they are needed in this style. The trombones usually play in unison with the alto and tenor, but what do the violins do? According to the teacher, all the violins in this "a capella style" should play in unison with the discant voice.<sup>9</sup>

a. genus diatonicum modernum



b. genus chromaticum modernum



Figure 1. Fux, a. diatonic genus; b. chromatic genus (clefs modernized)

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From Fux's text, we can determine the following: 1) both accompanied and unaccompanied works in this style are classified as "a capella"; 2) at least in certain



Figure 2. Fux, Table 45, figure 12.

areas, cathedrals were able to support a tradition of unaccompanied singing; and 3) to be performed with reasonable intonation, the music for unaccompanied singing had to be diatonic—the importance of which Fux says he has learned from long experience. Thus music of any harmonic interest could not have been sung unaccompanied with the intonation we expect.

This is corroborated by Johann Mattheson's 1717 remark: "Where are the

singers who can sing a single aria without instruments and stay on pitch?" He has never heard unaccompanied singing from anyone but the itinerant choirboys. And in his 1731 book, he asserts:

Nowadays no one sings like the itinerant choirboys without instruments or accompaniment, for from that derives a much greater degree of poor intonation, out-of-tuneness and flating of the voices than through all the false intervals in well-tempered instruments.<sup>10</sup>

Mattheson's last clause requires some clarification, for it refers to his disagreements with the theorists who opposed equal temperament because it contains no pure (i.e., having no beats) interval but the octave. These theorists reasoned that the more pure intervals a temperament has, the better it will be. As Mattheson sought to convey on many occasions, this is not the case in actual practice. In equal temperament, the tiny amount each fifth is narrowed is barely perceptible to the ear and makes all keys usable, something no unequal temperament can accomplish. On paper, however, equal temperament gives the appearance of being deficient because of all its "impure" intervals. Thus the argument was between theorists, who considered pure intervals on paper the most important issue, and practicing musicians, who wanted the tonal freedom that only equal temperament can supply. Mattheson's sentence, therefore, means that unaccompanied singing produces a false intonation many times greater than that of equal temperament's "impure" intervals. In support of his statement about the weakness of vocal intonation, he cites a sentence from the 1609 treatise of Johann Lippius.<sup>11</sup>

Another contemporary citing faulty intonation is Pier Francesco Tosi, whose 1723 vocal treatise cautions the teacher to pay special attention to developing a good sense of pitch in his pupils: "I can in all truth say that (aside from a few singers) modern intonation is very poor."<sup>12</sup> Reports of this nature continue for well over a hundred years.

Half a century before Tosi's book, Thomas Mace asserts that even the "best-

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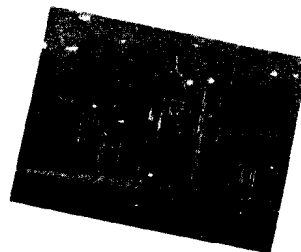
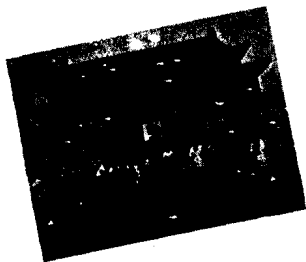
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accomplish'd Voice, adjoined to the most exact Ear . . . together with the most perfect and profound skill in the Art of Musick” needs support: “No Voice has ever been found able (certainly) to sing steadily and perfectly in Tune, and to continue it long, without the assistance of some Instrument.”<sup>13</sup> This indicates no acquaintance with unaccompanied singing of the type we admire. Since he had more than fifty years of singing experience at the time he wrote, he likely began as a chorister around 1622–25, when cathedral music was flourishing; he was appointed a “singing-man” in the choir of Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1635. In describing music-making before the Civil War (1642), he specifies that the following vocal pieces were accompanied by the organ or, when unavailable, the theorboe:

The Best which we did ever Esteem, were Those Things which were most Solemn, and Divine . . . viz. Mr. Deering's Gloria Patri, and other of His Latin Songs . . . besides many other of the like Nature, Latin and English by most of the above-

named Authors [e.g., William Lawes, John Ward, Mr. White, Mr. Coperario].<sup>14</sup>

Much of this music lacks an independent accompaniment. Similarly, Butler refers to Thomas Tomkins's “When David heard” as being performed “with consonant instruments.”<sup>15</sup> Yet this vocal piece contains no instrumental parts or directions for instruments.

Mace also provides information useful for evaluating the related issue of whether choirs would by choice have been reduced to one on a part. Writing when English cathedral music was feeling the ill effects of the Cromwell era, he laments its deficient condition:

First, by the General Thinness of most Quires . . . [where] there is but allotted One Man to a Part; and by reason of which it is impossible to have That Service constantly performed, although but in a very ordinary manner, (Thinly, yea very Thinly).<sup>16</sup>

Implied is that such a state of affairs, which resulted from extremely low wages and the lack of attention from church authorities, was unheard of in earlier times. Before the Civil War (1642), choirs were much more liberally constituted.

Another indication that support was needed to keep voices in tune is the gambist André Maugars's account of his 1639 visit to Rome: “They equip their choirs better than we do, giving each one a small organ, which indubitably lets them sing with better intonation.” Describing a program he heard in the long and spacious church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, he recalls two large organs elevated on either side of the main altar, each with its choir. Along the nave were eight other choirs, four on each side, standing in a gallery about eight to nine feet high, and separated from each other by about the same distance.

For each choir there was a portable organ, as is customary. One should not be surprised, for in Rome can be found more than two hundred of these, whereas in Paris one would

scarcely be able to find two at the same pitch.<sup>17</sup>

With reference to standard Italian organs, which do not have as many registers and different tone colors as French organs, Maugars believes that most serve only to support the voices and enhance the other instruments. From his account, it appears that any unaccompanied singing in Rome at this time had to be exceptional.

Perhaps these portable organs were similar in appearance to a positive organ from Michael Praetorius's 1619 *Syntagma musicum* (top of Figure 3). Also shown is a Regal organ of small, rasping reed pipes, which a century later, to Mattheson's annoyance, was still being used here and there.

Thus the portable organ is a further means of vocal support to add to the ample documentation in the modern literature about the use of winds, brass, and stringed instruments to accompany early singers. By being placed in the midst of the choir, its pitches were easier to grasp than those from a large organ at some distance, whose pipes were enclosed in a case. Because less volume was required

from the portable organ, its tone would have been nearly covered by the singers, giving an illusion of unaccompanied singing.)

### The Meaning of "a capella"

As Fux indicates, music sung a capella encompasses not only unaccompanied singing by the full choir, but also that with organ/instruments doubling the vocal lines. "Capella" refers to the entire musical establishment, which often includes instruments. Our use of "a capella" to designate unaccompanied singing appears to have originated later.

Other sources do not mention unaccompanied singing when defining "a capella," but associate the term with using instruments to double vocal lines.<sup>18</sup> According to Heinrich Christoph Koch's *Musikalisches Lexikon* (1802), for example, the term a capella primarily specifies that instruments are to double the vocal lines in church music. Originally, he says, it meant a style in which the parts were strongly constituted with many voices. (This can be seen in Praetorius's discussion of Capella, which he associates with the Emperor's court and other large

Catholic music establishments.<sup>19</sup> Koch's first meaning is found also in Gustav Schilling's 1840 *Encyclopädie*.)

Johann Gottfried Walther's 1732 *Musikalisches Lexikon*, too, defines a capella as having instruments double the vocal lines in unison with them. Under "Capella" in his 1705 *Dictionnaire de musique*, Sébastien de Brossard refers to the Italian da capella, which requires that "all the voices and instruments of each part perform the same thing together to make more volume "bruit," even in the entrances of fugues." Because bruit usually signifies "noise," it gives us an idea of the decibel level he has in mind.

A belief in an unaccompanied performing tradition seems to have originated more from modern ideals as to how this music should sound than from documentation in early sources. Exclusively unaccompanied traditions are said to be securely documented only for the choirs of the Sistine Chapel and of Cambrai Cathedral, where there was no organ and no record of instrumentalists having accompanied singers.<sup>20</sup> However, are we certain that a portable organ never furnished the necessary intonation support in these

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locations? In 1784 Christian Carl Rolle mentions that the singers of the papal chapel were accompanied by organ, but not instruments.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the case, Maugars's account of the extensive use of the portable organ in Rome opens up a new avenue in our investigation of early practices.

If we were somehow able to hear this repertory sung by a choir of the period, we would most likely be profoundly disappointed, for it would lack the refinement we believe suits the music so well. Besides an intonation far from modern standards, rhythm would have been much more erratic than ours, blurring the clarity of the individual parts. The overly loud singing mentioned in early sources implies coarseness and absence of unity in the ensemble. These factors indicate that accompaniment would have been necessary for all but the simplest music.

An unaccompanied style sounds so "right" to our ears: It cannot be denied that this polyphonic repertory, sung superbly by modern ensembles, produces an effect enchanting to modern sensibility. This is perfectly acceptable, as long as no claims are made for its representing historical practice, and there is a climate receptive to alternative performances with organ or instruments.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cited by John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p.320. Taverner: *Tudor Church Music*, i., I. More: Roper's *Life*, ed. G. Sampson (with Utopia) (1910), 236.

<sup>2</sup> T. Morley, *A plain and easy introduction to practical music*, edited by R. Alec Harman (New York: Norton, 1973), 292–293.

<sup>3</sup> C. Butler, *The Principles of Musik* (London, 1636), 116 (spelling modernized).

<sup>4</sup> Christopher A. Reynolds, "Sacred Polyphony," *Performance Practice. Music before 1600*, edited by H. M. Brown and S. Sadie (New York: Norton, 1990), 189–190.

<sup>5</sup> From a letter to Saverio Mattei of 25 April 1770, translated by Charles Burney in *Memoirs of the life and writings of the Abate Metastasio* (London, 1796), vol.2, 405–406.

<sup>6</sup> J. Printz, *Musica modulatoria vocalis* (Schweidnitz, 1678), VII, §11: "... dass

man solche donnernde Schläge weiter höret/ als die Sänger selbst." Cited by G. Schünemann, *Geschichte des Dirigierens* (Leipzig, 1913), 112.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard D. Sherman, *Inside Early Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 248.

<sup>8</sup> J. J. Fux, *Gradus ad Parnassum, oder Anführung zur regelmässigen musikalischen Composition*, trans. by Lorenz Christoph Mizler (Leipzig, 1742), 183: "Diese doppelte Gattung des Styls a Capella herrscht noch zu unsern Zeiten: Ohne Orgel und andere Instrumenten, blos mit Singstimmen: und mit der Orgel und andern Instrumenten. . . . Bey der ersten Gattung dieser Composition muss man sich vor allem des vermischten Geschlechts enthalten, und der versetzten Tonarten, die allzu sehr mit Creutzen und weichen b angefüllet sind, und nur blos das diatonische Geschlecht nehmen: Ausser dem wird die Zusammenstimmung niemahls die verhoffte Würckung verursachen. . . . Nemlich den Stimmen ist die Intonation schwer, wenn sie keine Hülffe, auch nicht von andern Instrumenten haben. . . ." Also 53–54.

<sup>9</sup> Fux, 191–192, Table 45, Figure 12.

<sup>10</sup> Mattheson, *Grosse General-Bass-Schule*, facsimile of 1731 Hamburg second edition (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1994), 113: "Singt niemand heutiges Tages/ wie die Currente/ ohne Instrumente oder Accompagnement; denn daraus entsteht eine viel grössere Unreinigkeit/ Falschheit und Versinckung der Stimmen/ als durch alle unrichtige Intervalle in woltemperirten Instrumenten." The previous quotation is from his *Beschütze Orchestre* (Hamburg, 1717), 83.

<sup>11</sup> J. Lippius, *Disputatio musica secunda* (Wittenberg, 1609), unnumbered p. 2 of text: "Nonnihil commoditatis, & perfectionis videtur accedere vocali ab instrumentali Musica, propter vocis humanæ inconstantiam, solitudinem, & terminos exiguos."

<sup>12</sup> P. F. Tosi, *Opinioni de'cantori antichi e moderni*, facsimile of 1723 Bologna edition and supplement to J. F. Agricola, *Anleitung zur Singkunst*, ed. E. R. Jacobi (Celle: H. Moeck Verlag, 1966), 11: "Io posso dir senza mentire, che (a riserva di pochi Professori) la moderna intonazione è assai cattiva."

<sup>13</sup> Mace, *Musick's monument*, facsimile of 1676

London edition (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1966), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Mace, 235.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Mace, 23.

<sup>17</sup> A. Maugars, *Response faite à un curieux sur le sentiment de la musique à Italie*. Rome 1639, notes and appendices by Joël Heuillon (Paris: GKC, 1992), 13–14: "ils . . . disposent mieux leurs choeurs que nous, mettant à chacun un petit Orgue, qui les fait indubitablement chanter avec plus de justesse. . . . A chaque choeur il y avoit un Orgue portatif, comme c'est la coutume: il ne faut pas s'en estonner puis' on en peut trouver dans Rome plus de deux cens, au lieu que dans Paris à peine en sçauroit-on trouver deux de mesme ton." Also p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> On instruments doubling parts in English music, see John Morehen, "English Church Music" in *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain*, ed. Ian Spink (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), vol. 2, 141.

<sup>19</sup> Praetorius, *Syntagma musicum*, facsimile of 1619 Wolfenbüttel edition (Kassel, 1978), III, p. 133.

<sup>20</sup> Reynolds, p. 191. For an idea of the quality of singing, see Richard Sherr, "Competence and incompetence in the papal choir in the age of Palestrina," *Early Music* 22 (1994):607–628.

<sup>21</sup> C. C. Rolle, *Neue Wahrnehmungen zur Aufnahme . . . der Musik* (Berlin, 1784), 87: "Zu Rom, in Anwesenheit [sic] und Gegenwart des geistlichen Oberhaupts der Catholischen Christen, des Pabstes, bestehet die Ausführung der Kirchenmusik alsdenn allemal nur . . . in 32 singenden Personen, ohne alle weitere Instrumental-Musik, ausser mit der einzigen Begleitung der Orgel."

—CJ—