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Dolce Napoli: Approaches for performance

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Overview of Conclusions

Chapter 1

The twenty-seven Italian Baroque recorders that are currently extant have unjustifiably been neglected in previous studies. One of these had never been included in any prior written study. The aesthetic, constructional and musical qualities of all these instruments confirm that in parallel to a blossoming repertoire, there was also high-level recorder making in Italy in the Baroque period. The seven makers identified thus far – Giovanni Maria Anciuti, N. Castel, Francesco Garsi, Paolo Grassi, Carlo Palanca, Giovanni Panormo and Domenico Perosa – are all concentrated in the north (Venice, Milan, Turin etc.), the only exception being Panormo, who was active in Naples. The materials used in the Italian recorders that I studied range from simple fruitwood to ivory, and all are finely turned on the outside and carefully designed and bored on the inside. Using previously known designs as reference points for comparison, the observation of the external shapes of especially the foot joints of those recorders divide the instruments into five categories: 'similar to English', 'similar to German', unique, 'drop/bulb', and straight/'traverso-like'. With the data extracted from the technical information of the instruments studied it was evidenced that, as a whole, the bore of Italian Baroque recorders stands midway between English and German instruments. I conclude therefore that these instruments demonstrate the wish to balance a broad sound and ease of speech. The voicing of the recorders that were analyzed in detail is not uniform, with the exception of Anciuti's instruments, which lack chamfers, an important detail that identifies a conceptual link between Anciuti and Grassi. The pitches of all the recorders are also varied, ranging from c. A=403 Hz to A=440 Hz, with most instruments concentrated around A=415 Hz. This gives us a fascinating window on the variety of pitches that co-existed in the Italian peninsula during the Baroque period. Archival research on the biographical details of most of the makers is in its infancy, and future studies would certainly benefit from greater and more specific information regarding them. In particular, it would be useful to know more about their education, the geographical expansion of their work, and their clientele. Out of the twenty-seven Italian recorders which were listed, only one G alto was found, the other instruments being thirteen altos (in F), five sopraninos, three voice-flutes, two tenors, two sopranos and one bass. Finally, out of the seven Anonymous instruments included in the comparative studies here, six are particularly similar in internal and external design to the Italian instruments studied, and can therefore be considered as unsigned Italian Baroque recorders.

Chapter 2

The ninety-one instrumental works and fifty-three vocal works presented in detail in Chapter 2 form a sizeable repertoire for the recorder in the Baroque period in Naples, and one which is still mostly unfamiliar to modern performers. Furthermore, two of the works discussed in the present study had been hitherto unknown. The more demanding of these Neapolitan works, which make use of the higher range of the recorder, are indicative of the existence in Naples of recorders that work well in the higher range, and attest to the level of technical skills of the players for which the works were composed. As has been shown by the two versions of Francesco Mancini's Sonata III, it is safe to assume that in Naples the 'normal' recorder range was slightly higher than in England, for example. Only thirty of the 144 works listed here hint at the possible need for a recorder with double holes. Considering the scarcity of recorders with double-holes extant today, this suggests that our modern expectations of how those notes should sound in order to be 'acceptable' is far from the reality of how they sounded in the eighteenth century. Stylistic traits that are observable in the Neapolitan repertoire for the recorder include theatrical elements such as contrasting fast/slow sections, abrupt pauses, surprising harmonic progressions; tempo indications such as *Amoroso*, *Spiritoso*, *Comodo* etc.; musical material evenly distributed among all instruments; interesting bass lines; abundance of works in minor keys; especially vocal melodic lines; a style on the border of the Galant, lighter but still deeply rooted in a complex and well studied manner; and fugal second (or third) movements – an important trademark of the writing of the older generation of Neapolitan composers that is shared with their younger colleagues. The examples of ornamentation in the *solfeggi* and in the sonatas show that ornamenting was also a compositional skill that was taught and exercised. The vast majority of the Neapolitan recorder repertoire exists only in manuscript form. This attests to the private life of the instrument in that city, but the fact that these works are dispersed in a variety of 'foreign' collections serves as proof of the popularity of the composers outside of Naples. Although the greater part of the dated works falls within the years 1724–1725, the totality of the repertoire of vocal and instrumental music is dated between 1695 and 1759.

Chapter 3

Naples has a rich past, which has left a diverse and interesting cultural legacy. It was not only a musical capital in the eighteenth century, sought after by music lovers, but also made popular by the beauty of its geographic location. Naples was equally famous for the dramatic backdrop of the Vesuvius, its violent eruptions, and, ironically, the richness these created in the soil produced (and still produces) great wines, for example. The dichotomy created by beauty and pleasure on the one side, and turbulence and sorrow on the other, was explored by artists of the city, as well as described in the chronicles of visitors through the centuries. The recorder or “flauto” was present in the conservatories of Naples, where it was clearly distinguished from the traverso (“flauto à traversino,” “traversino” or “traversiero”). Although the conservatories bought recorders for the students, as the expense lists show, we unfortunately have no mention of the names of makers. The presence in Naples of an abundant variety of foreign musicians and *luthiers* offers us the possibility of considering that the recorders used in the city also came from abroad. I postulated that if, for example, the famous instruments by the Denners reached not only the north of Italy but also as far as China, they could have easily reached Naples. The conservatories were financially supported by various patrons, some foreign, for example, from the Low Lands; diplomats (for example, John Fleetwod) and the viceroys of Naples (Cardinal Althann and Count Harrach) were also foreigners who had strong links with their own countries and who were art patrons during their Neapolitan stay. In this case, it is plausible to link Naples with instrument makers in these regions as well. A further avenue for the arrival of foreign instruments in Naples was found by retracing Ignatio Rion’s travel south: having come from Venice (where he had access to Venetian but also transalpine instruments), passing through Rome and finally arriving in Naples, this famous oboe (and recorder) player serves as an example of how instruments might have entered Naples with the musicians themselves. Inventory lists of aristocratic figures of the time confirm the presence of the recorder in this private realm, a fact that is corroborated by two paintings, by Giuseppe Bonito and Carlo Amalfi, which portray the recorder exactly in this setting. A review of the Baroque recorders found in the iconography of the rest of Italy, especially Venice, for traces of their design, confirmed that the instruments depicted can actually be easily linked to some of the actual instruments studied in a variety of their design profiles.

Chapter 4

Reviewing all the information presented in the previous chapters, in view of combining all this knowledge with performance in mind, I confirmed in this chapter the main origins of instruments for the Neapolitan repertoire: from Habsburg cities, from Venice and made in Naples. Further to those, we noted that instruments brought to Naples by foreigners might have originated further afield, such as the instruments by Peter Bressan, among others. Reversing the order of inquiry, and looking at what the music tells us, I concluded that the majority of the repertoire can be played on (a copy of) the Panormo alto, for example, but that a few of the more technically virtuosic works would be better rendered by using an instrument with easier high notes, such as those by Jacob Denner. On further aspects of performance practice I proposed that the works with strings be performed with one player to a part, for textural as well as acoustic balance. We saw that the continuo group indicated for these kinds of works varies considerably, but includes cello, double bass and harpsichord, and possibly archlute. Still, I suggested that the sonatas be performed with only a harpsichord when the writing is one of equality between soprano and bass voices, and with harpsichord and cello in the works in which the bass is simpler and more Galant. On the matter of pitch in Naples, A=410–415 Hz seems to be the point where diverse sources meet, and that means that many of the recorders studied would be 'suitable'. Finally, combining the tuning found on the recorders with other relevant historical information, I proposed an adjusted form of 1/6 comma meantone to be what would work best for the performance of the Neapolitan repertoire, as a compromise demanded by the impossibilities of 'just intonation'. Last, my reflections on the impact of this study on my own playing made me realize that more than finding instruments for the Neapolitan repertoire that was mapped – my original quest – I discovered a world of possibilities for the performance of this music through re-evaluating my relationship with my instrument, through learning to listen to the instruments themselves, old and new. Being limited by the possibilities of the instruments I discovered during this study created a source of motivation, which has permeated other repertoires and my entire approach to music: I am less forceful of my pre-conceived ideas and more open to the inspiration already present in the music and also, constantly being offered by my recorders.