

# Giovanni Luca Conforti and Vocal Embellishment: From Formula to Artful Improvisation

Murray C. Bradshaw

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

---

Bradshaw, Murray C. (1995) "Giovanni Luca Conforti and Vocal Embellishment: From Formula to Artful Improvisation," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 8: No. 1, Article 3. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199508.01.03

Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol8/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Claremont at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

## Renaissance Ornamentation

### Giovanni Luca Conforti and Vocal Embellishment: from Formula to Artful Improvisation

---

Murray C. Bradshaw

Giovanni Luca Conforti is renowned for his two publications dealing with vocal embellishment: (1) *Breve et facile maniera d'essercitarsi . . . a far passaggi* (1593), a treatise on embellishment, and (2) *Salmi passaggiati* (1601-1603), a three volume set of embellished falsobordoni. His fame is fully justified, for Brown has called his treatise "one of the chief sources of information about specifically vocal ornamentation in the late sixteenth century,"<sup>1</sup> and the embellished psalms remain "the first sacred monodies, the first [sacred] solo pieces with basso continuo accompaniment to appear in print."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Howard Mayer Brown, *Embellishing Sixteenth-Century Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 28. Conforti's treatise has been republished in a facsimile edition with German translation, Johannes Wolf, ed. (Berlin: Martin Breslauer, 1922), and by Giancarlo Rastrirolla, ed. (Rome: Società Italiana del Flauto Dolce, 1986) and Denis Stevens, ed. (New York: Pro Am Music, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Murray C. Bradshaw, *Giovanni Luca Conforti: "Salmi passaggiati" (1601-1603)* (American Institute of Musicology, Miscellanea 5/I: Neuhausen-Stuttgart, 1985), xiii.

Conforti was himself famous for his skill in singing embellishments.<sup>3</sup> In 1628, twenty years after his death, Giustiniani wrote that he was one of those who in their singing used “exquisite *passaggi* with an extraordinary effect and with a unique talent for expressing the text.”<sup>4</sup> Della Valle, in his *Discorso* of 1640 spoke of Giovanni Luca as “a great singer of ornaments and embellishments, who ascended as high as the stars (*che andava alto alle stelle*).”<sup>5</sup> And Tommaso Aceti in 1732, over a hundred years after the singer’s death, wrote that Conforti not only had a fine voice, but “was the first to discover the method of producing a vocal tremolo while holding one’s breath and using it according to the correct rules of music.”<sup>6</sup>

What is important about Conforti, then, is that he was a first-rate singer, renowned for his embellishments and expressive interpretation of the text, and that he left us both a treatise on how to learn so sing such embellishments and a number of compositions illustrating that art. He provided us, in short, with a method to approach the art of embellishment as practiced shortly before and after 1600, and, by examining his actual musical compositions, with a specific way of realizing that art.

Nonetheless, a consideration of both the treatise and the psalm settings reveals that a vast gulf exists between the etude-like exercises of the theoretical treatise and the actual embellished music, a difference similar to that between the exercises of Hanon and the piano etudes of Chopin. The *Breve* consists of a series of short exercises which Conforti encouraged beginners to practice and memorize so that “easily, in a short time, and gradually, they will become familiar, agile, and secure with them, possessed with the rules

---

<sup>3</sup> He entered the Sistine Choir as a falsetto-contralto in 1580, was dismissed on the express orders of Pope Sixtus V in 1585, worked briefly for the Duke of Sessa, sang at the French national church in Rome (1587-88), and in 1591 once again gained admission to the Sistine Choir, where he remained until his death in 1608. For further details concerning his life see Bradshaw, *Conforti*, xv-xxviii and *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> Vincenzo Giustiniani, *Discorso sopra la musica de'suoi tempi* (Lucca, 1628), repr. in Angelo Solerti, *Le origini del melodramma* (Turin, 1903; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1969), 110.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Solerti, *Le origini*, 162.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Baini, *Memorie storico-critiche della vita e delle opere di Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina* (Rome, 1828; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966), I/85, no. 127. Conforti does indicate *trilli* (or tremolos) in his music, but tells us little about them, except that “where a ‘t’ is written above or below the note line, you should sing a trill, if you know how to do it”; see Bradshaw, *Conforti*, xlvi.

for each interval” and be able to apply them to any composition.<sup>7</sup> In the three volumes of *Salmi*, though, we have numerous expressive compositions, far removed from the pedestrian exercises of the *Breve*. The question for the performer is how to find a bridge between, on the one hand, mere technique and, on the other, skilled artistry, between pedagogical exercises and the realm of true music. That such a link exists is very clearly illustrated by the *Salmi passaggiati* of Conforti.

### I. The *Breve et facile maniera d'essercitarsi*

In the introductory material to the *Salmi* of 1601, Conforti referred back specifically to the *Breve et facile maniera d'essercitarsi* of 1593. “If you wish to embellish other works [than these psalms] you can do it by yourself,” he wrote, “since in another one of my published books you can see how to embellish all the notes you wish, from one note to the next.”<sup>8</sup> At the very end of the treatise Conforti placed a brief *dichiaratione* or statement in which he noted that “beautiful and correct singing is only found in large cities and in princely courts,” and, then, only by “virtuosi” who had learned their manner of singing “not by being born with it” (that is, by innate talent), but “through practice over a long period of time, and without any method.”<sup>9</sup>

He added that he had “observed that all who sing and play have little hope of acquiring this skill except with much difficulty and over a long period of time.”<sup>10</sup> One of his goals, then, was efficiency and practicality, “so that those who sing might, in less than two months, be able to acquire a good and easy technique.”<sup>11</sup> To do this, Conforti tried “to avoid making a large

---

<sup>7</sup> “. . . à poco à poco diventeranno familiari, agili, sicuri, & possessori con regola di tutti li soggetto fatti.” *Breve*, 4R.

<sup>8</sup> See Plate 1 for the title page to the *Breve*, with its marred and unclear date; Conforti’s comment in his *Salmi* proves that the publication date for the *Breve* was 1593.

<sup>9</sup> “Essendomi accorto, che solo nelle Città grandi, & nelle corti de Principi, si usa il modo di cantar con vaghezza, e dispositione, & che quelli che in ciò hanno riportato lode, sono stati, per lo più, virtuosi, non in esse nati, ma forestieri ivi trasportati, li quali hanno acquistata per pratica, solo per sentire in progresso di molto tempo, & senza regola.” *Breve*, 1R.

<sup>10</sup> “. . . & havend’io osservato, che tutti quelli che cantano, & sonano, non hanno speranza d’acquistarla, se non con molta difficoltà, & lungo tempo . . .”; *Breve*, 1R.

<sup>11</sup> “. . . si potesse eseguire con una maniera breve, con la quale potranno tutti quelli, che cantano, in meno di duoi mesi, far acquisto di bona, & leggiadra dispositione”; *Breve*, 1V.



book," and "included only those [embellishments] which, in my opinion, are the most gracious and pleasant, and these I have tried to arrange with as much facility and brevity as possible."<sup>12</sup> His slim volume remains a most practical how-to-do-it book—32 pages long (including title page and frontispiece), in small quarto format, and with a *dichiaratione* of four folios at the end.<sup>13</sup>

He began the exercises with embellishments of intervals (ascending and descending seconds, thirds, fourths, fifths, octaves, and unisons), a procedure that Francesco Tosi was to recommend almost 150 years later: teachers, wrote Tosi, should persuade students "to have recourse to the fundamental rules, which will teach [them] to proceed on the bass from one interval to another with sure steps, and without danger of erring," exactly the method Conforti used in 1593.<sup>14</sup> "The usual intervals for embellishment," he continued, "are no more than nine, two by step (*mi fa* and *fa mi*), two by thirds, two by fourths, two by fifths, and the unison."<sup>15</sup> He followed these elementary exercises with a group of slightly more elaborate embellishments (pages 20-25), several illustrations of "groppi" (trills beginning on the main note and alternating with the note below) and "trilli" (vibratos or tremolos written as series of repeated notes), embellished cadences (26-32), and, finally, by a few more elaborate exercises (30-32).<sup>16</sup>

An outline of Conforti's "brief" book follows with the pages of the facsimile edition given in parentheses:

---

<sup>12</sup> "... & per fuggir la grandezza del volume, ho preso solamente quelli che à mio giudizio sono più gratiosi, e dilettevoli, & questi hò cercato di ridurli à più facilità, & brevità che sia possibile..."; *Breve*, IV.

<sup>13</sup> By placing the *dichiaratione* last and the musical exercises first, Conforti clearly signaled that the exercises are more important than the accompanying notes.

<sup>14</sup> Pier Francesco Tosi's *Observations on the Florid Song*, tr. Mr. Galliard (1742); mod. ed. (London: Stainer & Bell, 1987), p. 79 (IX, 73); Tosi's *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni* was originally published in 1723.

<sup>15</sup> "... dico che li movimenti principali, & ordinarij, che fanno il soggetto per passeggiare, non sono più di nove, duoi gradati, cioè mi fa, & fa mi, duoi per terza, duoi per quarta, duoi per quinta, & vna ferma..."; *Breve*, 3V.

<sup>16</sup> In his *Salmi* Conforti wrote that "groppi" (our modern trills) can be held twice their value since they occur only at cadences.

- a step up (3)
- a step down (5)
- a third up (7)
- a third down (8)
- a fourth up (10)
- a fourth down (11)
- a fifth up (13)
- a fifth down (14)
- unison (16)
- octave (18)
- more elaborate embellishments (20)
- list of ornaments (groppi, trilli) (25)
- embellished cadences (26-32)

For his exercises Conforti used seven different clefs (so that the same music could fit any vocal range), and now and then offered several different versions of a single diminution (as in the first diminution in Ex. 1, where a little cross in the score indicates the alternative reading).<sup>17</sup> Words, like "Salve," are given as an alternative to *solfeggio* syllables, in order that singers could "practice changing the syllables on the notes in order to get used to controlling the vowels."<sup>18</sup> Triple meter is used only now and then (indicated by a 3; see Ex. 1), but when a "3" is found "under two crome or at cadences" this is nothing else but a "trill, doubling the number [of notes], and it makes the music more attractive . . ."<sup>19</sup> Most embellishments cover one measure and only gradually, toward the end, do they become more complex. "In the beginning," Conforti warned, "embellish only with crome [eighth notes]."<sup>20</sup> Ex. 1 shows all of the different ways Conforti embellished an ascending second.

---

<sup>17</sup> "The placing of [one] note over another shows the different ways you can sing the embellishment" (la collocazione dell'vna sopra l'altra, mostra in quanti modi si può variare il passaggio); *Breve*, 2R. The notes in the first embellishment in Ex. 1 would be b-e-d-b-c, b-c-d-b-c, b-c-a-b-c, and b-g-a-b-c.

<sup>18</sup> ". . . si possono essercitare in cambio di dire le note, per assuefare le vocali à far la dispositione"; *Breve*, 2R.

<sup>19</sup> "L'altro tre, che si vede sotto duoi crome, ouero nel fine delle cadenze, altro non voglio dire che trillo, che rendendo al doppio il numero, imbellisce il canto, & copre molti difetti"; *Breve*, 2R. Examples occur on p. 25 of the treatise.

<sup>20</sup> ". . . per vn principio passaggiare solo di crome . . ."; *Breve*, 3V.

**Ex. 1. Conforti, *Breve* (1593), embellishments  
of an ascending second (p. 3)**

Sal - ve

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Sal - ve' from Conforti's *Breve* (1593). The score is presented on ten staves. The first staff is a bass clef line with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). It begins with a whole note chord (F2, B-flat1, D2) followed by a half note chord (F2, B-flat1, D2) and a quarter note chord (F2, B-flat1, D2). The lyrics 'Sal - ve' are written below the first staff. The subsequent nine staves are treble clef lines, each containing a different embellishment of the ascending second interval (F2 to G2). The embellishments are: 1) a quarter note G2 with a grace note F2; 2) a quarter note G2 with a grace note F2 and a quarter note F2; 3) a quarter note G2 with a grace note F2 and a quarter note F2, followed by a quarter note G2; 4) a quarter note G2 with a grace note F2 and a quarter note F2, followed by a quarter note G2 and a quarter note F2; 5) a quarter note G2 with a grace note F2 and a quarter note F2, followed by a quarter note G2 and a quarter note F2; 6) a quarter note G2 with a grace note F2 and a quarter note F2, followed by a quarter note G2 and a quarter note F2; 7) a quarter note G2 with a grace note F2 and a quarter note F2, followed by a quarter note G2 and a quarter note F2; 8) a quarter note G2 with a grace note F2 and a quarter note F2, followed by a quarter note G2 and a quarter note F2; 9) a quarter note G2 with a grace note F2 and a quarter note F2, followed by a quarter note G2 and a quarter note F2. The score concludes with a double bar line and a repeat sign.



Conforti skips over the whole question of what dissonances or consonances are formed by the embellishments and the harmonies of the bass line. The students, he wrote, who have difficulties with such embellishments, that is, in not knowing which are good or what particular consonants to use, should "exercise themselves in singing, playing, or writing out embellished works."<sup>21</sup> In other words, to discover which embellishments sound good or do not sound good is a matter of trial-and-effort.

In nine days, however, the student should be able "to learn and memorize" [these embellishments], and, in twenty or more of practice, "should be able to sing and improvise in any book [of music]."<sup>22</sup> Finally, "in less than two months, you [could] . . . acquire a good and easy technique."<sup>23</sup> According to Conforti, then, it should take about two or three months to learn to embellish music competently.

To embellish, he wrote, "it will be enough to consider the quality of the note and the proper place to be embellished, and then, second, the value [of the note]."<sup>24</sup> Then you "go to a similar spot in my little book" (the *Breve*), "borrow the embellishment you need, one that sounds good, as I have said, or choose some others that, perhaps, might be even more beautiful."<sup>25</sup> Also, "you can vary them, making them longer or shorter, according to your fluency and ability."<sup>26</sup> Above all, emphasized Conforti, these embellishments must sound good; they must "delight the ears of those friends of music who

<sup>21</sup> "Et havendo forsi alcuno difficultà, che non si possa conoscere quali passaggi siano boni, hora per vna consonanza, & hora per l'altra, & che per questo si resti di essercitarsi à cantare, sonare, o scrivere opere passaggiate"; *Breve*, 3R.

<sup>22</sup> ". . . li quali in nove giorni si possono imparare, & tenerli in memoria, & in venti o poco più essercitandoli si possono fare, cantando sicuramente in ogni libro all'improvviso"; *Breve*, 3V.

<sup>23</sup> ". . . in meno di duoi mesi, far acquisto di bona, & leggiadra dispositione"; *Breve*, 1V.

<sup>24</sup> "Et per voler passaggiare qual si voglia opera, basterà solo considerare la qualità delle note, & il sito atto ad essere passaggiato, & poi secondo il loro valore . . ."; *Breve*, 3V.

<sup>25</sup> ". . . andate alle simili del libretto, & di esse recavatane li passaggi segnati, che cononeranno, come hò detto, overo pigliarete dell'altri che faranno forsi più vaghi . . ."; *Breve*, 3V-4R.

<sup>26</sup> ". . . & variare, accrescere, e [d]iminuire il passaggio, secondo la facilità della dispositione"; *Breve*, 4R.



are masterful in distinguishing the good from the bad.”<sup>27</sup> This emphasis on the practical, on what sounds good, is typical of the age.<sup>28</sup>

For teachers, Conforti advised that they have their students sing these exercises along with them, starting with the unembellished interval (in Ex. 1, an ascending second), until the students have memorized each of the embellished versions.<sup>29</sup> To become more proficient, the student “can, also, take four or more notes at a time . . . and place them one after the other,” using different-valued notes for the embellishments, and then practice singing them from memory, quickly gaining fluency.”<sup>30</sup>

In his last paragraph Conforti wrote that these exercises are also useful “for those who wish to practice on a string or wind instrument” (con la viola, ò altri strumenti da fiato). In fact, the title page of the *Breve* has a surrounding border of instruments, a recorder placed horizontally along the top, a viol and a cornett on the left border, a lute and a shawm on the right, and a transverse flute along the bottom (see Plate 1). The opposite side of the title page illustrates the power of music, one of the favorite themes of that age—Apollo, playing a violin (*viola da braccio*), charms the wild beasts of the forest (see Plate 2). For instrumentalists, Conforti repeated his advice to “play [the exercises] frequently or write them out in the manner already given.”<sup>31</sup> In order to know the character of embellishment, however, be sure you play your instrumental embellishments “with a light hand and sweet bowing, just as they are written, and their variety will stay in your

---

27 “. . . servendosi però del diletto dell’orecchie, le quali amiche del concerto, sono maestre à far conoscere il bono dal falso . . .”; *Breve*, 4R.

28 For another example from the same decade, see Girolamo Diruta’s *Il Transilvano*, I (Venice, 1593), which was “essentially a practical treatise, a fact which Diruta often stresses”; English trans. by Murray C. Bradshaw and Edward J. Sohlen (Henryville Pa.: Institute of Mediaeval Music, 1984), 12.

29 “Et se quelli ch’insegnano, essercitaranno i loro scolari à far cantar seco li primi soggetti à battuta, overamente dargliene cantanno vna per volta alla mente . . .”; *Breve*, 4R.

30 “Possono ancora quelli che si diletano di passeggiare, pigliare quattro, ò più note alla volta . . . & ponerle l’vna appresso all’altra, & poi di esse pigliarne il passaggio di crome, semicrome, ò puntate, vnendoli; & essercitandosi cantandoli alla mente, diventeranno con prestezza agili di dispositione”; *Breve*, 4R/

31 “Servono anco per quelli che vogliono essercitarsi con la viola, ò altri strumenti da fiato, con sonarli spesso, ò scriverli con la maniera gia detta . . .”; *Breve*, 4V.

mind."<sup>32</sup> Lightness and sweetness are the desired qualities of all of this music, whether it be vocal or instrumental. "If you practice well, you will then be able to demonstrate [your ability] by playing and improvising them with others."<sup>33</sup>

Conforti has tried to make the leap from technical proficiency to art music as easy as possible: memorize these short embellishments, apply them as needed in a composition (sometimes stringing four or more out in a row), and keep practicing. Yet, he has skimmed over the immense leap to actual improvisation. Perhaps his most important piece of advice is that, as the student gains in agility, "he will, also, be able to acquire grace and be able more easily to imitate those who have sung with confidence for many years."<sup>34</sup> It is this "imitation of others," along with Giustiniani's comment on Conforti's "unique talent for expressing the text," that takes us from the mechanical exercises of the *Breve* into the realms of actual music.

## II. The *Salmi passaggiati* (1601-1603)

The bridge that connects Conforti's *Breve et facile maniera* and the *Salmi passaggiati* is for the student not one of empty virtuosity, the piling up of short clichés one after the other, as might be implied by Conforti's treatise, but rather using these short clichés, seldom more than a measure long, in a sensitive and spontaneous way to express the text. This was, perhaps, the whole *raison d'être* of early 17th-century music. Giustiniani, as mentioned, noted the close connection between virtuoso embellishment and expression,<sup>35</sup> as do other writers of that time. Caccini in his *Le nuove musiche* (1602) wrote that in his madrigals and airs he had "always sought to imitate the ideas behind the words," and had "observed the same rule in making

---

32 "... gioverà à far la mano leggiadra, l'arcata dolce, conoscere il genere del passaggio, come si scrivono, & reterà nella memoria la diversità di essi"; *Breve*, 4V.

33 "& havendo sopra ciò fatta bona prattica, si possono poi dimostrare, sonandoli in compagnia all'improvviso"; *Breve*, 4V.

34 "Et facendosi il scolare agile di voce, potrà anco acquistare da se la gratia; & sentendo altri, sarà assai più facile ad imitare, che quello che di molti anni hà cantato sicuro, come stà nel libro"; *Breve*, 4R.

35 Vide supra, p. 6 and fn. 4.

Plate 1. Title Page of Conforti's *Breve et facile  
maniera d'essercitarsi . . . a far passaggi* (1593)

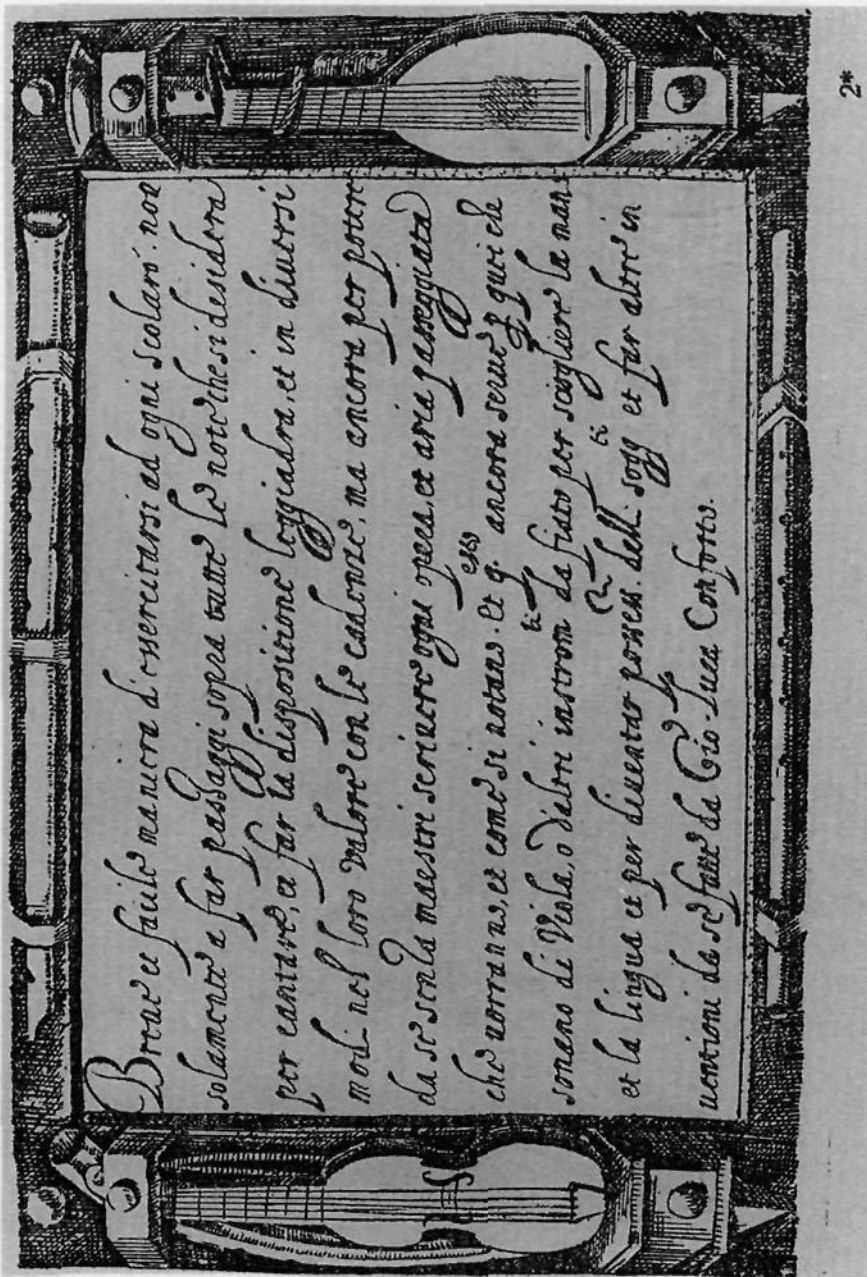




Plate 2. Page from Conforti's *Breve et facile maniera d'essercitarsi . . . a far passaggi* (1593)





*passaggi*," although some embellishments, "for a bit of decoration," could be added here and there.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, this early 17th-century approach offered a new kind of text expression, one that very clearly moved away from the surface expression of the madrigalists toward a deeper and even allegorical expression of the underlying meaning. Conforti now and then used obvious madrigalisms, as for the word "sagittae" in verse 5 of example 2, where the swift melodic lines and echo effects "paint" the flight and disappearance of the "arrows," although he usually expressed the text by far more subtle means. It was this that Galilei was after when he so roundly condemned composers who would set words like "to disappear," "to swoon," "to die," by making "the parts break off so abruptly, that instead of inducing the passion corresponding to any of these, they have aroused laughter and at other times contempt in the listeners, who felt that they were being ridiculed."<sup>37</sup> Galilei espoused simple musical textures, a clear declamation of the text, and an expression of the inner rather than outer meaning of the text, of *sensus* rather than *ratio*. Conforti applied this new approach to his own embellishments.

The first volume of the *Salmi* (1601) consisted of nine embellished falso-bordoni for soprano, the second (1602) of nine for tenor, and the third (1603) of the same for bass voice. It is one of the largest surviving sources for embellished music, containing about 132 psalm verses. The falso-bordone itself was an ideal genre for embellishment—Kuhn thought the very heights of embellishment had been reached in this music<sup>38</sup>—since it was essentially a harmonized psalm tone with many repeated chords and two main cadences, a mediant for the first half of the verse, and a final one for the last half. The falsobordone was extremely popular in those days, so much so that Pietro Cerone wrote in 1613 that "in these kingdoms of Spain the singing of psalms in figured music is not customary except in falso-

---

<sup>36</sup>Giulio Caccini, *Le nuove musiche* (Florence [1602]); mod. ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock, ed. (Madison: A-R Editions, 1970), 46.

<sup>37</sup>Vincenzo Galilei, *Dialogo* (1581); trans. and ed. by Oliver Strunk in *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1950), 316.

<sup>38</sup>Max Kuhn, *Die Verzierungs-Kunst in der Gesangs-Musik des 16.-17. Jahrhunderts, 1535-1650* (Leipzig, 1902; repr. Wiesbaden: M. Sandig, 1969), 35. On the overall history of the genre of the falsobordone see Murray C. Bradshaw, *The Falsobordone, a Study in Renaissance and Baroque Music* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: American Institute of Musicology, 1978).

bordone."<sup>39</sup> In 1615 Francesco Severi, another singer in the Sistine Chapel, brought out some *Salmi passaggiati* remarkably similar to Conforti's,<sup>40</sup> and the conservative Lodovico Viadana, who published a huge amount of falsobordoni during his lifetime, included embellished falsobordoni in his famous *Cento concerti ecclesiastici* of 1602 almost as a matter of course.<sup>41</sup>

Each piece of Conforti's *Salmi* is based on a psalm tone cantus firmus, which was, however, not written down. It is an "ideal" melody, the basis for the entire composition, but one that can be realized if necessary in the continuo accompaniment. Furthermore, Conforti did not always embellish the actual ideal melody, but rather, like a jazz player of today, the harmonies derived from that melody, as can be seen from the opening verses of the psalm *Nisi Dominus*, as illustrated in the following example.<sup>42</sup>

**Ex. 2. Conforti, *Salmi* (1601), "Nisi Dominus"  
(tone 5, verses 1, 3, 5)**

Vs. 1      Psalm Tone 5  
Recitation      Mediant Cadence

Soprano      5      10

1. Ni - si Do-mi-nus æ-di-fi-cá-ve-rit do - - - - - mum,

(Organ) Bass

<sup>39</sup> Pietro Cerone, *El melopeo y maestro*, 1613 (facsimile ed., Bologna: Forni, 1969), II, 689.

<sup>40</sup> Modern edition by Murray C. Bradshaw in *Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era*, 38 (Madison: A-R Editions, 1981).

<sup>41</sup> On Viadana's extensive use of falsobordoni, see Murray C. Bradshaw, "Lodovico Viadana as a Composer of Falsobordoni," *Studi musicali* 19 (1990), 91-131. The solo pieces in the *Cento concerti* have been edited by Claudio Gallico, *Monumenti musicali mantovani 1* (Mantua: Istituto Carlo d'Arco per la storia di Mantova, 1964).

<sup>42</sup> This is exactly what happened in the evolution of the vocal falsobordone into the keyboard toccata; see Murray C. Bradshaw, *The Origin of the Toccata* ([Rome]: American Institute of Musicology, 1972); "The Toccatas of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck," *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziek Geschiedenis* 25 (1975), 38-60; "Andrea Gabrieli and the Early History of the Toccata," *Andrea Gabrieli e il suo tempo* (Studi di musica veneta, 11; Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1987), 319-346.

Recitation Final Cadence

in va - num la-bo-ra-ve - runt qui æ - di - - - - - fi-cant

Vs. 3 Recitation

e - am. 3. Va - num est vo - bis an-te lu-cem

Mediant Cadence

sur - - - - - ge - - - - -

Recitation

- - - - - re: Sur-gi-te post-quam se-de-ri - tis, qui man-du-

Final Cadence

ca tis pa - nem do - lo - ris.







All of the embellishments in "Nisi Dominus" are taken from the *Breve*. Conforti did exactly what he had advised his students to do—find out what notes (intervals) need to be embellished and then embellish them with appropriate and attractive ones drawn from the *Breve*. In looking at a few measures from one of the more complex verses of Ex. 2 (verse 5), it is obvious that in m. 47 (and its "echo" in m. 48) Conforti embellished the notes f to f (a unison) and f up to c (a fifth up), and that in m. 50 (and its "echo" in m. 51) the notes c-a-f-f-c (two thirds down, a unison, and a fifth up), all notes based on the triad built on the bass note f, which in its turn was the bass for the ideal chant melody (the recitation note c). Each of these embellishments is made up of a stringing together of smaller embellishments found in Conforti's *Breve*. In Ex. 3 the vocal embellishments from verse 5 (Ex. 2) are placed on the top line, the organ bass on the second line, and the short exercises from the *Breve* on the third. (The numbers above the *Breve* part give the pages on which these short embellishments are found; they have been transposed, their rhythms simplified, and asterisks added to indicate the basic pitches being embellished.)

### Ex. 3. Comparison of *Salmi* (1601) and *Breve* (1593) Embellishments

*Salmi* (47) x x x (50) x x x x x x

(sa)-git - - - tæ ma - - - - - nu

*Breve:* 16 13 8 8 16 13

x x x x x x x

The mediant cadence of this same verse (5) shows a three-measure embellishment of the b-flat triad (54-56) followed by the embellishment of a fourth down (57-58), and of a unison (58) and an ascending third (58-59). For the long b-flat triad (54-56) Conforti embellished the notes d to b-flat (third down), b-flat to b-flat (unison), b-flat to d (third up), d to c (step down), and c to d (step up). All embellishments are taken from the *Breve*.

#### Ex. 4. Comparison of *Salmi* and *Breve* Embellishments

*Salmi* (54) x x x x x x x x

(po)-tén

*Breve*: 8 16 3 3 16 16 3 3

x x x x (58) x x x x

tis.

5 3 11 16 13

x x x x x x

Although it is easy to track down these small figures, it is another thing to explain to the student why one setting is so much better than the other, and why one embellishment works so much more easily than another. The basis for coming to understand this difference, though, is the desire of Conforti and other composers of the time to express the text not by obvious madrigalisms but in more subtle and meaningful ways. The succession of embellishments in the *Salmi* is far more than a pastiche of memorized motives.

In the two “recitations” of verse 1 (1-5 and 11-14), in Ex. 2, Conforti settles on one note (a), embellishing it hardly at all, but supplying each recitation with a flexible declamatory rhythm and melody. Such recitations must be sung freely. As Conforti described it, “from the beginning of the verse up to the line with two dots, even if written in measured time, you can sing without it [measured time], but from these two dots up to the first dot of the words of the verse . . . you must always sing with a beat.”<sup>43</sup> The two dots occur at 6 and 14, just where the psalm tone cadences are beginning. Recitations, in short, are to be sung in a free, declamatory fashion, but cadences strictly in time, although Conforti stated that you should “sing embellishments of four or five beats as quickly as possible, so that you do not have to take a breath.”<sup>44</sup>

The recitations move along in an easy flow with different agogic accents (“Nísi Dóminus aedificáverit . . . in vánum laboravérunt qui . . .”) with rests or long notes marking off and emphasizing the different phrases and words. With the two main cadential words, however, Conforti makes a move, discreet as it is, towards text expression. “Domum” moves gently up the scale (with a modest crescendo more than likely) and then down, by way of a “soft” e-flat, to its final note c, with the steady rhythms and upward motion symbolizing the solid “house” which God alone can build. But the notated e-flat adds an element of sorrow, and the rhythm of the second recitation (11-13) is a bit more agitated—“in vain do they labor.” Its cadence with agitated dotted rhythms and a repetitive kind of melody (16 mirrors 15, as does 17 with its outlining of a fourth) reflect the anxiety of those “who build it.” The slow, final measures bring this brief but expressive verset to an end.

---

<sup>43</sup> Bradshaw, *Conforti*, xci.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*



Ex. 5. Conforti, *Salmi* (1602), "Nisi Dominus," verse 3

(25) Tenor

vs. 3 Va - num est vo - bis an - te lu - cem sur

(Organ) Bass

(30)

ge - re:

(35)

(40)

súr - gi - te post - quam se - de - ri - tis, qui man - du - ca - tis pa

(45)

nem pa - nem do - lo - ris.



In verse 3 (see Ex. 5)—the performance is *alternatim*—Conforti embellishes the two recitations (21-25 and 33-38) far more so than in verse 1. The long note on “vánum” and the drawn-out flourish on “vóbis” (set off, too, by moving up to c but down again to a seem to show the “vanity” of those who “rise before the dawn.” With its winding melody and rhythmic changes (from steady eighth notes through a dotted figure, half and quarter notes, to swiftly flowing sixteenths), the cadence (26-32) reflects the tedious effort of rising “ante lucem.” Even the unexpected leap of a fifth at 29 allegorically mirrors the laborious effort involved. Conforti is speaking in an allegorical musical language very different from the word painting of the madrigalists.

The second recitation (33-38), even though it seems with its modest embellishments most unlike a recitation, rises up to c three times only to fall back down each time—reflecting the weariness of those who thought they might rest but must now “arise, after you are seated,” to eat “the bread of sorrow” (*panem doloris*). The final cadence (38-44), with the words “*panem doloris*,” moves gently up to d and falls slowly down to the final d, “sorrow” being expressed, too, by the long-held e (41-42) with its low pitch and its outlining of a diminished fifth with the emphasized b-flat of the previous measure.

Conforti approached the fifth verse (whose embellishing motives were analyzed in Exx. 3 and 4) in a more madrigal-like way, with both “*sagittae*” (arrows) and “*manu*” (in the hand) being more floridly set than any other words so far—with the rising melody of “*sagittae*” picturing the rising of the arrow at the beginning of its flight, and the down-up motion of “*manu*” its winging through the air—and with echo effects depicting the disappearing shots.<sup>45</sup> Such elaborate embellishments are usually reserved for cadences, but Conforti clearly took advantage of the text to do so in this opening recitation. The unchanging harmonies, however, as well as the ideal melody mark these measures (45-52) as recitation. The embellishments continue with the cadence (53-60), starting on a strong and lengthy b-flat major harmony (54-57) with the *passaggi* emphatically marking out the basic notes of that chord (54-55) and then doing it once more (55-56), before ending forthrightly in f major with slow moving harmonies (57-58) followed by a final flourish (58)—all expressing the sense of the “powerful man” (*potentis*). Conforti’s emphasis of the b-flat harmony was deliberate—he did it in

---

<sup>45</sup> Echo pieces were beginning to be used around this time, one being written, for instance, by Jacopo Peri for the famous 1589 *intermedi* celebrating the marriage of the Grand Duke of Tuscany and Christine of Lorraine in Florence; the most well-known echo piece of the day was probably Monteverdi’s “*Possente spirto*,” in *Orfeo*, Act III—see Tim Carter, *Music in Late Renaissance and Early Baroque Italy* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1992), 154.

verse 3 for "surgere" (26-28), but less so in verse 1 with its quiet setting of "domum" (6-7).

The second recitation opens with a peremptory setting of "ita filii" (so the children), the irrevocable fate of the children being allegorically expressed by slower rhythms and an ascending-descending melody (61-62). The following cadence starts with an unexpected and sustained d, which then slowly over three measures (64-67) and almost violently falls from the high d down to e, rising decisively at the end to an a, all mirroring the text "of those who are shaken" (excussorum).

Each individual line and phrase of these verses is expressed in its own way, depending on just what aspect of them Conforti wished to emphasize. The fertility of his imagination can be seen in a parallel setting of verse 3 from the tenor volume (1602), where the words "surgere" and "panem doloris" receive a slightly different interpretation.

The recitation rises slightly from a to c, "vanum est vobis ante lucem" (vain is it for you before the dawn) and flows directly into the cadential setting (29-36) for "surgere" (to rise). Here Conforti chose not to set "surgere" in an obviously vigorous and madrigalesque way, but rather to show the sheer physical effort and vanity that such a "rising" might involve. Its tediousness is revealed by the steady movement from b-flat up to a sustained f (29-30), followed by a gradual and wearying sequential descent with eighth notes over three measures (31-33) and with a doleful e-flat written in. After that lengthy descent the music "rises" again, but with some effort, to an emphasized c (33-36). It may seem paradoxical that Conforti set "surgere" not with vigorous, rising melodies, but with a laboring and wearisome kind of music, yet he is very typical of other composers of that time—Caccini, Peri, Cavalieri, Monteverdi, Grandi—whose new approach towards the text strove to express not the surface meaning but the underlying feeling and content of the words, of their *sensus* rather than *ratio*.

The recitative for the last half of verse 3 starts with a lyrical setting of "arise after you sit" (surgite postquam sederitis). After a pause, a steady recitative then begins on "you who eat" (qui manducatis) followed by an embellished cadence on "the bread of sorrow" (panem doloris). In the cadence the striking repetition (45-48) of the skeletal descending melody of 42-44 with its fast, jerky rhythms and trill (vibrato)—and after a held note and a rest (44-45), and with a dramatic repetition of the word "panem" (bread)—all express allegorically the *sensus* (emotion) of "panem doloris," as does the notated b-flat.

### Conclusion

Despite Conforti's effort at practicality and his desire to help students learn to embellish within three months, artful embellishment must have remained difficult to achieve. Many years after Conforti, Couperin wrote in his *L'Art de toucher le clavecin* that just "as there is a great distance between grammar and declamation, there is also an *infinite* one between the printed page and a good performance."<sup>46</sup> The distance is equally infinite between the elementary exercises of Conforti's treatise and the sensitive and expressive improvisations of his *Salmi*. The actual music of that day moved far beyond mere exercises in virtuoso display, because the great desire to express the inner meaning of the text had become of paramount importance to singers and composers.

Galilei was the first to articulate the desire to create a music that would imitate not "the sound of one word only," but rather "the complete thought and meaning of the words and of the whole text."<sup>47</sup> Conforti falls securely in this camp, and, indeed, his falsobordoni present us with two ways of approaching the text-music dialectic of the early 17th century. His musical recitations, on the one hand, are usually presented with a recitative-like declamation, and his cadences, on the other, with sweeping and expressive *passaggi*. The result is a contrast of styles in which the text is first presented in a more or less straightforward recitative fashion followed by a freer, more emotional ending, *explicatio* followed by *sensus*. The brilliant and melismatic cadences, indeed, are "a way of pouring forth spiritual emotions in a manner that reached back at least to Augustine (d. 430), who viewed music above all as the language of the heart."<sup>48</sup> Conforti in his recitations was mostly concerned with a "rhetorical, simple, clear, and declamatory *explicationes textus*, tied not so much to ordinary speech as to heightened declamation," and in his cadences with a "melismatic, florid, and emotionally charged *expressiones textus*, during which the singer often

---

<sup>46</sup> "Comme il y a une grande distance de la Grammaire, à la Déclamation; il y en a aussi une infinie entre la Tablature, et la façon de bien-jouer;" François Couperin, *L'Art de toucher le clavecin* (Paris, 1717; facs. ed. Geneva: Éditions Minkoff, 1986), preface.

<sup>47</sup> Vincenzo Galilei, *Il primo libro della prattica del contrapunto*, trans. in Carter, *Late Renaissance*, 186, from Claude Palisca, *The Beginnings of Baroque Music* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1953).

<sup>48</sup> Murray C. Bradshaw, "Text and Tonality in Early Sacred Monody," to be published in *Musica Disciplina*.



moved beyond mere words—'ratio' [in the recitations] followed and enlivened by 'sensus' [in the cadences]."<sup>49</sup>

It is also easy to overlook the very obvious fact that Conforti was not writing in the traditional Renaissance manner associated with the *prima prattica*. His music "contrasts markedly with the supposed gravity of the *stile antico* canonized by Palestrina and his contemporaries."<sup>50</sup> There is no attempt at polyphony. Conforti conceived this music from the first as solo music with a bass line over which the accompanist was to fill in the harmonies. It is put together as a series of small, discreet phrases, much like the recitatives and songs of Peri and Caccini. Conforti came down very much on the side of the *seconda prattica*, at least in his avoidance of polyphony, use of declamatory, speech-based melody, and emphasis on text expression. The Artusi-Monteverdi conflict was, as Carter noted, essentially a "sense-versus-reason debate,"<sup>51</sup> that is, about whether or not the effect that a piece of music produces takes precedence over following the rules. Conforti was allied firmly on the side of *sensus*, the point of view "that considers harmony not commanding, but commanded, and makes the words the mistress of the harmony."<sup>52</sup>

The true style and spirit of embellishment around 1600, then, is found only partly in the *Breve et facile maniera* and in other manuals of embellishment. It is in the *Salmi* of 1601-1603, and in works like it, that the contemporary *musici et cantores* could begin to see and understand not just the technique but the very art of embellishment. For these texts, Conforti created melodies of great elegance and rhythms imbued with a freshness and spontaneity "far beyond the dry examples of his pedagogical treatise. The entire art of embellishment, as practiced around 1600, was an art of melody and rhythm, of unity and variety, of artistry and taste,"<sup>53</sup> and, in the hands of the best composers and singers, of a supreme desire to express not only the outer sense of the text (*ratio*) but its inner meaning and emotion as well (*sensus*).

---

<sup>49</sup> Bradshaw, "Text and Tonality."

<sup>50</sup> Carter, *Late Renaissance*, 227.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 146. On this debate, see especially Claude Palisca, "The Artusi-Monteverdi Controversy," *The New Monteverdi Companion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 127-58.

<sup>52</sup> Foreword to the fifth book of madrigals (1605) by Giulio Monteverdi writing on behalf of his brother Claudio; trans. in Strunk, *Source Readings*, 409.

<sup>53</sup> Bradshaw, *Conforti*, xlv.