

Commentary

John Dowland (1563-1626), known in Elizabethan England as a performer of great prowess, is known to us today as one of the most prolific and significant composers of song in Renaissance England (Holman, 2009). His compositional work comprises lute solo pieces, madrigals, and songs for voice and lute. Today, he is best-known for his lute songs, some of which are famously melancholy (*Flow my tears*, with little doubt, belongs in this category). He printed four volumes of songs throughout his life. *Flow my tears* appears in the second of these volumes (Dowland, 1600).

Flow my tears was famous in its own day, as it is now among the genre of Renaissance song. As is the case with many of his lute songs, Dowland wrote both the lyrics and the music. This wonderfully melancholic and cathartic song has been performed and recorded a multitude of times. Every soloist or ensemble of renown connected with early music is likely to have this piece in their repertoire; even Sting has recorded it (the reader is tentatively directed to Sting and Edin Karamazov's album of Dowland songs: *Songs from the Labyrinth*, released in 2006).

Given this song's history, then, one could assume that a new edition could have little to offer the performer. However, little has been done by performers to re-create the improvisatory techniques manifest in Renaissance performance. This edition attempts to aid the performer in re-creating the style of improvised embellishment practised by Renaissance singers by presenting an example of embellishment alongside the original melody. The accompaniment used is taken from Fellowes (1922).

This example has been created thanks to the writings of contemporary musicians and music

theorists, and modern analysts. All of the contemporary sources comment on the style and technique of embellishment in singing. These include the writings of Giovanni Batista Bovicelli (fl 1592-4), Giulio Caccini (1551-1618), Adrianus Petit Coclico (1499-c.1562), Hermann Finck (1527-1558), Giovanni Camillo Maffei (fl 1562-73), Diego Ortiz (1510-1570), Lodovico Zacconi (1555-1627), and Dowland; the modern analysts are MacClintock, Brown and Toft. There is, unfortunately, little written on this topic by those living in Elizabethan England. Because of this, it is not possible to give definitively Elizabethan commentary. The sources used are from Germany, Spain, and Italy and are all from the same period as Dowland. However, musical style - in madrigals, especially – did cross over between European countries (Brown, 1976: 53). As well as this, there is some commentary given by Dowland on musical style. Musical technique was still more ubiquitous across Europe (evident through the consistencies in commentary from the contemporary sources). Using these sources is the closest we can get to Elizabethan style and technique. Through letters or treatises, the writers would explain the techniques and style of improvisation in song, with musical examples. Through an analysis of these guides and examples I have collated a series of rules which one can use as a template for re-creating embellishments used in Elizabethan England. This edition of *Flow my tears* was created using these rules.

The rules cover the instances in which one should embellish a melody, the methods to be employed, as well as more artistic guidelines.

- (1) Embellishments should take place on long notes. Semibreves, breves, and other long notes can all be extensively embellished, in innumerable ways. Zacconi (1592) writes that one can “ornament them as one pleases” (MacClintock, 1979: 72). He also writes that groups of minims can be embellished as a whole – this can be applied to crotchets, too.

(2) The first and last pitches of a phrase should remain unchanged. In all given examples from Coclico (1552), Maffei (2009), Finck (1556), and Zacconi (1592), the first and last pitches remain unchanged without exception. The length of the first note is usually shortened as it is used as a springboard for the embellishments, but the length of the final note is always unchanged.

(3) Embellishments are mostly stepwise and scalic. This can be observed in the examples given by Finck (1556) and Zacconi (1592). The majority of embellishments exemplified follow this rule, but not without exception. There are situations in which thirds, fourths, fifths, and octaves can be used – this is best seen in Maffei's *Letter on Singing*:

- Thirds can be used to extend embellishments, as shown in Figure 1
- Fifths and octaves can be used to set off embellishments, as shown in Figure 2
- Fourthths, while less common, can be used in the same manner as thirds



Figure 1



Figure 2

Some writers also ascribed different characteristics to different intervals: a third being “lively” (Brown, 1976: 33). The stepwise nature of embellishments is also shown in that they can be used to connect the intervals of the original melody.

(4) Embellishments must not compromise the harmony. This is seen in examples given in the

writings of Maffei (2009) and Zacconi (1592) and is stated explicitly by Coclico (1552). The embellishments do not serve to change the harmony, but to exemplify what is already there.

- (5) Embellishments should consist of note values of equal length (Zacconi, 1592). The major exception to this rule is cadence points, which are the most rhythmically interesting places for embellishment. There were a number of different rhythmic formulae used at cadences (Brown, 1976: 21), which can be seen in use in this edition. To work out which length of note values to use, the following can normally be applied: a phrase with minims and crotchets can be embellished with crotchets and quavers. There is also wider freedom given to the final cadence of a song in that a *ritornando* is acceptable (Bovicello, 1594) and extra time can be taken for embellishment (Toft, 2014: 148).
- (6) Embellishments should usually follow the contour of the original melody. Extended embellishment does not have to resemble the original melody closely, but it is usual that the momentum and climaxes of an embellished phrase will fall in a similar place to that of the original melody. Toft (2014: 149) writes that the singer can “stray far away” from the melody but in examples given by Coclico (1552), Finck (1556), and Maffei (2009) this is not a common occurrence in embellishments of any length.
- (7) Between half and all eligible notes in a piece should be embellished. Although Ortiz (1553) does warn against overuse of embellishment, examples given by Coclico (1552) and Zacconi (1592) of whole embellished pieces are around two-thirds embellished.
- (8) Embellishments should not obstruct the words. This is, perhaps, the most important rule. One can extrapolate from this message that embellishments should, in fact, accentuate the words and ameliorate a song's literary content. This is to be noted in the performance of

Dowland's music especially, who disliked embellishments that were “blind” to the music. (Toft, 2014: 149, quoting Dowland “To the reader”). Caccini (1973: 2) was of a similar view, and stated (quite plainly) that “titillation to the ears” was no substitute for expressing the meaning of the song. It is therefore important to prioritise the meaning and characterisation of the song when embellishing.

While following these rules, one must be conscious of the intentions of embellishing a song: to make a song more beautiful and more interesting, as well as showing off one's own talents (Brown, 1976: 53) (Maffei, 2009). One hopes that this never comes at the expense of the music.

The performer can either perform *Flow my tears* with the exact embellishments written in, or use it, along with the above rules, as a template for creating embellishments for this song and others like it.

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