

Mancini vs. Manfredini, or the Tril Controversy

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Abstract: *Giambattista Mancini and Vincenzo Manfredini, two great masters of the art of singing, engaged in a long-running controversy at the height of the 18th century over the training of the voice, but especially over how to perform the trill. Their dispute, which lasted more than twenty years, demonstrates the growing interest in the method of balancing the inventiveness generated by the use of ornamental formulas with the acquisition of vocal stability based on rigour and competence. The methods of applying these fundamental principles set a precedent for intense controversy, which ultimately proved to be both constructive and creative, with the happy consequence of a significant evolutionary leap in interpretive variety.*

Key-words: *Mancini, Manfredini, Tril, Pistocchi, Regole Armoniche*

1. Introduction

Giambattista Mancini argued in his book, *Pensieri, e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato* (1774) that among the greatest qualities and among the noblest ornaments of the art with which a singer should be endowed, there is no quality more worthy of interest, no ornament more pleasing to the ear than that which “*in music is commonly called trill. “O trill, the support, pride and life of song!”* (Mancini 1774, 108).

At the time, no one would have thought that they would become the main subject of controversy in a vehement and long-running controversy that spanned almost 22 years. Five different publications would engage in a vigorous debate on the issue.

2. Dissertation

Mancini, a great castrato singer but also a successful teacher at the Imperial Court in Vienna, had as his master Antonio Bernacchi (1685-1756), an important

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supporter of the Bologna school, who had campaigned all his life for a highly technical vocal virtuosity close to the instrumental use of the voice.

Vincenzo Manfredini, also trained in Bologna, Mancini's avowed opponent, was one of the important theorists and composers of his era. His pedagogical and professional activity took place in Russia between 1758 and 1769, first at the court of Peter III and then at that of Catherine the Great, where he was employed as a master of the Italian Opera Company of the Imperial Court. Having such an important position, his authority manifested itself mainly in the field of vocal technique, all the more so as his brother was also involved in this field, being a well-known castrato singer.

Shortly after the publication of Mancini's *Sopra il canto figurato*, Manfredini printed *Regole Armoniche* (based exclusively on the presentation and commentary of the main rules of musical science) in which certain footnotes created a series of misunderstandings that reached the dimensions of a real polemic. These disagreements culminated in a virulent retort by Mancini, embodied in a pamphlet entitled *Lettera... diretta all'illustrissimo Signor Conte N. N.* (1796).

The main reasons for the controversy were the issues of the causes of defective intonation and its correction by replacing the six-syllable Guidonian system (considered harmful during the period of voice formation) with a superior solfeggio system, but also the desire to unify the two vocal registers through the proper use of lip and tongue movements in support of delivery in singing. C. Burney, in one of his works, points out that in the context of that era Italian singers preferred so-called vocalizations (vocalizzi) to solfeggi (in which more syllables were used), arguing that too prominent an articulation harmed the early voice formation process by causing a too rough movement of the phonatory apparatus." (Burney 1957, 328). However, the problem of the trill was the main cause of discord, a problem which, with the passage of time, was aggravated by polemics carried to extremes (A General History of Music 1957, 353).

There were two main topics of debate and controversy: first, whether the trill is simply a natural gift or whether it can be obtained by all sorts of technical means and then how it can be taught and mastered, and second, whether this type of ornament plays such an important role in educating a singer's voice.

The first question - whether the trill can be achieved by special technical procedures or whether it is a natural gift - was part of the larger issue of whether a voice, even if it does not have a particular native quality, can be brought through judicious training to outstanding performance. Mancini was firmly convinced that through hard and technically well-organised work it was possible to reach a very special level of performance of the trill, as he reported to Charles Burney in 1772, at the time he was designing his treatise *Pensieri, e riflessioni pratiche*. From this it

can be concluded that Mancini was already concerned with this problem long before this work saw the light of print.

One of Mancini's contemporaries, the British composer and theorist Charles Burney (1726–1814) believed that it was possible, with a great deal of time and patience, not only to make someone sing a trill where no one would have expected, but even to make that person impress with the power of their voice; He was also firmly convinced that it was imperative for the teacher to show the same understanding for a less gifted voice as for a good one *“in order to extend the ambitus, not to force anything, conforming to the natural tendency of the organ used in singing.”* (Burney 1957, 338)

The idea that Mancini was an assiduous supporter of this idea does not seem surprising, since there are recorded statements by his teacher, Antonio Bernacchi. Moreover, Bernacchi's teacher, Francesco Antonio Pistocchi states that in one extreme case, a severely damaged voice was brought back to life by both sustained and extremely well-directed work and a very special care. Mancini argues all this testimony of Bernacchi as follows:

Mancini argues all these testimonies of Bernacchi's by claiming that Pistocchi had altered his voice so much because of the disordered life he had led that it took a long time to recover it completely. And, he goes on to say, after a few more years on the opera stage, employed as a castrato soprano, he managed to destroy it completely. He apparently tried to restore it for nearly ten years, but only managed to recover three sounds from the upper register that he once, Mancini says, mastered with authority. Domenico Gabrielli (who had probably also been his teacher) composed out of necessity pieces written especially for him to demonstrate that he still had a successful command of certain sounds. Eventually, however, he regained much of his register by returning to the stage again, although in the meantime *“his voice had dropped to alto level, which should surprise no one, as it is common with castrated singers.”* (Burney 1957, 346)

Mancini was a proponent of educating patience. This tradition, which he was convinced was the keystone of success, was so well mastered in his case that as singing master of the Imperial Court in Vienna he had many successes even with members of the aristocracy, sometimes with duchesses and archduchesses who nevertheless possessed some vocal qualities. It seems that he was also an accomplished teacher of the correct teaching of the trill, his motto always being that *“the success of a good trill belongs in the main to the master”*. In case of failure, he maintained that the fault lay not so much with the disciple as with the negligence and carelessness of the teacher.

Unfortunately, unlike Mancini, Manfredini was not as patient with his less talented disciples. Having direct contact with the opera scene, he came into

contact with many professional Italian singers who had come to Russia to practise their profession with the Italian Opera Theatre. This eagerness of his, which had become proverbial, was also due to the fact that he had never had the opportunity to work intrinsically with dilettante or amateur artists as Mancini had. In *Regole Armoniche* he makes some recommendations, saying that when the master has realized that his pupil has an ugly voice, an undeveloped ear, an approximate intonation and an uncertain rhythm, it is absolutely necessary *“to advise him to give up the idea of learning to sing...”* (Manfredini 1775, 55).

Manfredini, in the first edition of his treatise *Regole Armoniche*, firmly states that the trill belongs to a natural endowment and that artificial technical elements are not enough in music, because, he says, everything there must flow from a fluid, very natural exposition (Manfredini 1775, 7).

With this claim, Manfredini tries to dynamite Bernacchi's imposing allure as a maestro, arguing that, in fact, his successes in teaching singing technique and especially trill are not convincing or conclusive enough. So he further relates how the Honourable Mr Francesco Araya Napoletano, the former Capellmeister, assured him on several occasions that the distinguished Mr Bernacchi had done his best to guide his good friend Mrs Merighi to learn the trill, using all sorts of subtleties to correct her natural faults with which she had been endowed ... *(and he was certainly capable of doing so, being one of the most illustrious of singing masters) but unfortunately it seems that he did not succeed at all.* “ (Manfredini, 1775, 7)

Mancini, after this attack on him, states in the third edition of his *Riflessioni pratiche sul canto figurato* that he has no qualms about his own reputation as a singing teacher, as he still considers himself one of the “true masters” in this field. He even claims, moreover, that he is rather concerned that many inexperienced teachers will bend an ear to Manfredini's assertions, not develop the trill through proper technique. However, Manfredini's attack did not go unheeded in his case, prompting him to change some of his recommendations on the trill.

He qualifies his assessment somewhat by saying that if the trill is not a natural endowment it can be acquired, but with hard work and tenacity. In support of this he comes with the argument that the old masters did not leave the naturally endowed voice without perfecting it, resorting, whatever the difficulties encountered to assiduous labour, having unlimited patience, and using the best methods to help their pupils attain their long-desired goal, thereby unwilling to improve nature herself where *“she is not too generous; but where she has generously provided a certain endowment, however small, this seems to me an advantage not to be neglected . . .”* (Mancini 1774, 160)

This makes things clearer and eventually leads to the belief that a trill can be made excellent if there are as few natural endowments as possible. The dialogue between Burney and Mancini sheds more light on this point

Charles Burney states that as far as the rapidity of the trill is concerned, Mancini was convinced that the vast majority of pupils ruined themselves vocally and that this was due to impatience and haste on the part of both teacher and disciple; as far as it appeared, none of those who could perform passages requiring laryngeal work in the case of a trill were fully successful. Here again, Mancini concludes that there can be only one explanation: *“the neglect of the master of the natural data of the disciple, who, not using the advantage he might have by using these passages, fails to execute a true trill.”* (Burney 1957, 339)

Both Mancini and Manfredini, in their treatises, explain at length the manner in which the trill should be taught. They both affirm the importance of learning it and acquiring the art of playing it from an early age. Mancini even argues that the education of the voice in the upper register should be started without too much delay, because “a voice that is not well conducted from the earliest years of life and that acquires a lot of vices in execution is not cured as easily as one thinks”. (Mancini 1774, 159)

This statement has great significance and is at the same time almost revolutionary, if we look at the singing manuals of the time where we find naive solutions to the problems of the trill, (which consisted in the judicious alternation of the two sounds), consisting simply in going from fourths to eighths and then to sixteenths, practically doubling the speed each time. Manfredini takes a big step forward by tackling the problem of gradually increasing trill execution speed.

Mancini, on the other hand, more than Manfredini, argues that a pupil, having a beautiful but not very agile voice, can work on it by softening it, by a progressive gradation of speed, i.e., using a speed not too great at the first lessons, but gradually accelerating afterwards, taking into account the ease acquired by tenacious and continuous study. He suggests the same strategy for achieving a nice, good quality emission. For example, he suggests playing a melodic line by repeating it a few times in a low tone intensity. “When it is played well in this way, we then try to gradually increase the speed and, step by step, we then seek to perform the piece in its true manner: confidently, quickly, clearly and evenly.” (Mancini 1774, 163)

As a curiosity, the Papal Roman School, had one hour a day dedicated to training vocal agility and particularly the trill; most candidates needed about an hour a day to practice this. In addition, the vocals and solfeggios were tailored to the individual needs of the aspirant and were usually composed by composers of Italian origin such as Porpora, Leo, Durante, even Mancini, sometimes by Hasse or even Mozart. Vocal collections usually included at least a few exercises dedicated to the trill.

Mancini argued that all these trill and agility exercises had to be studied and performed in full voice, otherwise all sorts of imperfections could creep in, such as faulty intonation or unsteady rhythm. His main concern, however, was the special training of singers both for the opera stage and for those destined for small, chamber music spaces. The greatest care was given to strengthening the volume of the voice, both when studying and performing the trill.

By the mid-18th century, many of the patterns of the coloratura passages had become outmoded. In their place appeared an extremely varied array of new passages requiring great technical virtuosity in execution. Colouratura patterns were constantly changing as singers invented more and more complicated passages, raising the bar higher and higher. The malleability and mastery of the performer became greater and greater with each passing day, and the demands of the audience increased accordingly. Antonio Bernacchi (1685-1756) was considered to be the promoter of this new type of vocal virtuosity, encouraging the penetration and rapid evolution of this new style of performance, borrowed largely from instrumental music.

The generation of Farinelli's students was the most influential, pushing vocal virtuosity to its limits. Charles Burney describes this new way of singing by saying that his voice had never been great, but in those moments, when so little of it remained, his refined taste and *“an artificial way of singing, which only teachers and some of the more intellectually gifted audience could feel or understand, were noticeable.”* (Burney 1957, 760)

The 18th-century music writers often had more or less friendly polemics, both about the quality of the singers' voices and about the quality of their ornamentation (especially the trills). Among them, Manfredini recognised only the so-called “natural” trills as being of quality. For him, a good “natural” trill had to have three main qualities: it had to be fast, clear and uniform.

Tosi, argued in his well-known treatise that the high vocal register must be “even”, “marked with distinction”, “solid” with the ability to execute passages in a fast tempo, but still sufficiently moderate (*“even, marked, strong, light, moderately, agile, these are the most beautiful qualities”*) (Tosi 1723, 25). Mancini, for his part, took up Tosi's ideas, further emphasizing the need for distinct clarity, so that the sounds that make up the trill can be audibly perceived equally. However, there seems to have been a difference of opinion as to the optimal speed at which a trill should be played; while Mancini preferred a moderate tempo, Manfredini noted in his score's indications such as 'fast' or even 'as fast as possible' (Manfredini 1775, 26). Other descriptions of eighteenth-century trills include appreciations or indications such as 'fine', 'open' or 'bright'.

For Mancini, the trill was the pinnacle of virtuosity, of paramount importance, the coveted desideratum of every singer. His greatest fear was that teachers and singers would gradually replace this ornament with other types of flourishes or other patterns of virtuoso coloratura.

Manfredini, on the other hand, considered the trill as a mere ornament, having nothing special. In his manual, *Regole Armoniche*, he simply lists it, classifying it as a melodic flourish that any instrumentalist or singer can add at will, giving it no special place even in the more extensive section on singing; practically a single paragraph is reserved for it, whereas Tosi or Mancini in their treatises each devoted an entire chapter to it.

Mancini and Manfredini, despite their differences of opinion, have noted in unison that an improvised cadenza (*cadenza libera*) without the trill passes unnoticed, and is even of questionable taste. Moreover, an acceptable cadenza consists in principle of a *messa di voce* followed by a trill. However, the trill was not accepted in a slower piece such as a *siciliano*, because the general character of the melodic development did not allow its introduction. The most unpleasant effect, Tosi said was created by a trill placed in a place where the portamento was missing. Tosi was convinced that a singer's technique was inadequate if he was unable to play a trill on all the notes of a key and in different tempi.

But Manfredini stands by the following principle: that the trill has nowhere near such an important place in the art of music and is usually given more importance than it deserves. He firmly asserts that the use of portamento, vocal sustain, fluidity, continuity, refined *pianissimo*, are the true beauties of singing, the trill being a mere adornment of all these things, fitting in where it is expected, in other words "*in a cadenza or elsewhere, but it can also be omitted. How many times have I heard soul pieces in which not even the trill was used!*" (Manfredini 1775, 7)

Mancini was surprised that Manfredini had almost no appreciation for the trill, arguing that arguments based on sentimentality made no sense because they allowed the intrusion of other external factors, neither belonging to the song nor to the music, but involved in conveying passionate feelings.

Mancini also insinuated that Manfredini's view of the work was naïve because he had no solid knowledge of the durability of voices. Decades before him, Tosi earnestly pointed out that certain voices that do not commonly use the high register are only "superficial" examples that should not be imitated. So, for Mancini and Tosi, the shallow singer who is unable to correctly interpret a sound located in the high register will never impress, and in a stage performance, where a voice with great experience and range is required, will prove ineffective.

In Mancini's opinion, such a voice will never be good for opera, because on stage one is looking for flowing, fluid, *pianissimo*-covered sounds... which then have to be

combined with vivacity, agility of voice, vibrato, detachment, strength and expressiveness, etc., "in fact, a perfect complex comprising so many different aspects that the protagonist of a leading role must be able to sustain." (Mancini 1774, 164)

3. Conclusion

The Mancini-Manfredini trilogy controversy can help the 21st century researcher understand the relevant issues that ultimately led to the execution of a quality trilogy, valid then, in the 18th century, but also now, in the contemporary world. The controversy between the two great masters of bel canto, sometimes humorous, sometimes harsh, or dogmatic, expressed in pertinent comments on the ideal type of voice, the right age, the necessary agility, persevering study, patience, control of breathing and vocal delivery, gradually increasing tempo, etc., is an invaluable and useful tool for recreating 18th-century vocal music. Mancini's fear of the gradual disappearance of the treble and its importance in the singer's art seems not to have been unfounded, as 20th and 21st century music no longer emphasises the treble or vocal agility. Nevertheless, all these disputes, which to us today may seem ridiculous, is an irreplaceable tool for the researcher who tries to restore the atmosphere and music of that era.

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