

Musicologists supporting singers: The historically informed performance of vocal *appoggiatura*

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Abstract: *One of the topics in which the science of music can contribute most to excellence in performance is that of the historically informed performance of music from the past. I will propose as an example the issue of the prosodic appoggiatura, a particular type of melodic appoggiatura that is almost never written down by composers in the score, but which should always be performed by singers. The examples I give demonstrate that this performance practice was not limited to the eighteenth century, but remained in use until the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was lost due to a misunderstood respect for the written signs in the score.*

Key-words: *Italian opera, performance practice, stylistic training of opera singers, prosodic appoggiatura.*

1. Introduction

Musicology is often accused of being too distant from the reality of practical music. Musicologists discover documents, publish historical narratives, write analyses and interpretations, but only in a few cases do they have direct relationships with performers. The only point of contact exists on the philological level, but always at a distance: musicologists prepare critical editions of scores and offer them to the publishing market; performers buy critical editions and perform them. Still within the field of philology, however, there is a sector in which collaboration could and should become closer between musicologists and performers: not that of textual philology, but of performance philology. To be precise, one of the topics in which the science of music can contribute most to excellence in performance is that of the historically informed performance of music from the past.

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For many years I have been collecting sources to reconstruct some of the main performance parameters that are typical of nineteenth-century Italian opera, trying to transmit the acquired notions to young singers. The set of historical sources consists of singing treatises, letters from musicians, newspapers of the time and – starting from the very last years of the century – sound recordings.

On this occasion I will propose as an example the issue of the vocal *appoggiatura* (the so called *prosodic appoggiatura*), showing many of the practical examples that I use to instruct singers, interfacing historical musicology with performance stylistics. It is the result of research conducted at the University of Bologna within the PRIN 2020 national project *How they used to sing Verdi* (cod. 20202WAW4E_001), funded in Italy by the Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca (CUP J35E20000720001).

2. Definition of *prosodic appoggiatura*

Prosodic means “relating to prosody”, that is, to the way of intoning words, of expressively stressing them. In spoken language, the stressing of words and the intonation of the voice are typical elements of prosody. The prosodic *appoggiatura* of vocal music is linked both to the stress of the words and to the intonation of the voice. In ancient treatises on singing it is also called “musical accent”, because it falls in correspondence with the stress of the sung word (Tagliavini 1992).



The prosodic *appoggiatura* is a special type of melodic *appoggiatura* that is almost *never* written in the score (before the first third of the nineteenth century), yet it should *always* be performed by the singer. Always means always, not sometimes.

I witnessed a smart event: a young singer (but well aware of historical performance practice) and a very famous conductor (not willing to let notes not written be performed). They were rehearsing a work by Paisiello. The young singer performed the recitative and the aria with all the *appoggiaturas* that the ancient style required; at the end the conductor said: “Well, aren’t those *appoggiaturas* a bit too many?”; the singer replied: “Maestro, I made the necessary ones in the places where they were necessary”; the conductor: “Well, then make a bit less”; and the singer, boldly: “Maestro, do you want me to also remove some sharps?” The famous conductor certainly didn’t like this last answer, but the young singer was right.

I mentioned this fact because it can still happen today that some conductor, vocal coach, or artistic director tells a young singer that the *appoggiaturas* added to the printed score are not good. For this reason it is important to instruct singing students well, so that they are fully aware of this performance parameter.

3. Implementation of prosodic appoggiatura

The situation in which the prosodic appoggiatura must be inserted by the performer (if it is not already prescribed by the composer) is easily recognizable: it is when there are two notes of equal pitch, the first intoning an accented syllable and placed on the strong beat, the second followed by a rest:

It is written  but it has to be sung 

A - mo - re A - mo - re

Ex. 1. *Implementation of prosodic appoggiatura.*

The prosodic appoggiatura replaces the written note on the strong beat. That's it! There is nothing else, but it must be done.

Attention: this is only one of the possibilities for performing the prosodic appoggiatura. It can in fact be placed in three different positions with respect to the main note: superior appoggiatura (from above), inferior appoggiatura (from below) or distant appoggiatura (from above or below). The one in Ex. 1 is a superior appoggiatura: the added D “leans” on the C descending from above.

In the next fragment from a Rossini's recitative, the word “felici” is set to music with two notes at the same pitch:

Malcolm



Mu - ra fe - li - ci

Ex. 2. *Rossini, “La donna del lago”, “Scena e Cavatina Malcolm”*

The first A, on the strong beat, hosts the accented syllable “-li-”; the second A is followed by a pause: it is precisely the melodic situation that requires the insertion of the prosodic appoggiatura. But there is no single solution. See the various possibilities in Ex. 3:

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- The appoggiatura from above (Ex. 3a) is the most common and spontaneous. It is an appoggiatura set on the higher degree, usually one tone away from the main note.
 - The appoggiatura from below (Ex. 3b) is more refined and more intense, because it often requires the alteration of the degree of the scale to obtain the distance of a semitone. It is therefore used less frequently than the upper appoggiatura, but it is more interesting.
 - The distant appoggiatura is prepared by the previous note, that is, it repeats the preceding note, and can therefore be an appoggiatura from the bottom to the top (as in Ex. 3c) or from the top to the bottom (in a different melodic situation). The distant appoggiatura is typical of vocal writing (more than instrumental). Often the composers themselves prompt it, either by writing down the vocal part directly in full notes, as it should be performed (see the first graphic solution of Ex. 3c), or by adding a grace note to guide the performer (as in the second part of Ex. 3c).
 - The prosodic appoggiatura can finally be replaced by a *fioritura* of variable profile between the two equal notes: in this case, the pitch of the first note does not necessarily have to be modified (Ex. 3d, 3e, 3f).
 - Summarising: two notes at the same pitch followed by a rest; the first sets an accented syllable and must be sung differently from the written pitch: it will become an appoggiatura from above, from below, at a distance, or will be followed by a *fioritura*.

f 
li - ci

e 
li - ci

d 
li - ci

c 
li - ci li - ci

b 
li - ci

a 
li - ci

Malcolm



Mu - ra fe - li - ci

Ex. 3. Rossini, *La donna del lago*, “*Scena e Cavatina Malcolm*”:
different possibilities for implementing the prosodic appoggiatura.

4. The modern performance practice

In short, there are many ways to fulfil the prosodic appoggiatura obligation. For this reason, it is wrong to hint one of them in modern editions, as it is done in the *Neue Mozart-Ausgabe* scores (Ex. 4), because singers are thus led to believe that there is only one way to perform those passages, while it would be much more interesting for each singer to propose his or her own personal interpretation.

Recitativo

SUSANNA
FIGARO
Co - sa stai mi - su - ran - do, ca - ro il mio Fi - ga - ret - to? - Io

Continuo
(Cembalo,
Violoncello)

3
SUSANNA
guar - do se quel let - to che ci de - sti - nail Con - te fa - rà buo - na fi - gu - ra in que - sto lo - co. E in que - sta

6
FIGARO
SUSANNA
FIGARO
stan - za?... Cer - to: a noi la ce - de ge - ne - ro - so il pa - dro - ne. Io per me te la do - no. E la ra - gio - ne? -

Ex. 4. Mozart, *Le nozze di Figaro*, the first-scene recitative from the score of the *Neue Mozart-Ausgabe*, published by *Bärenreiter Verlag*.

It is therefore better to educate singers and conductors to recognize by themselves the points where appoggiaturas should be inserted and performed in a variety of ways. If we do not educate singers, in the end they will not perform the appoggiaturas even if they find them printed as a suggestion, considering them just an option: how many times have you heard an appoggiatura added in bar 2 and bar 4 of Ex. 4, even though most performers use precisely that vocal score by Bärenreiter?

In Italian opera there are many occasions to insert prosodic appoggiaturas on each page: after changing so many notes, the resulting melodic profile when listening is very different from the one written on the page. In the Rossini recitative of Ex. 2, each successive bar requires the introduction of prosodic appoggiaturas:

Malcom

Mu - ra fe - li - ci, o - ve il mio ben si ag - gi - ra!

Do - po più lu - ne io _____ vi _____ ri - veg - go.

Ex. 5. Rossini, “*La donna del lago*”, “*Scena e Cavatina Malcolm*”.

With the three added appoggiaturas, the recitative sounds softer, more *cantabile*, more natural. After hearing a performance in style (e.g. in Cecilia Bartoli’s rendition), the written version will sound harsh, angular, artificial, unnatural (as in most other available performances). Performing this passage as written is respect for the printed sign, but not for the *Belcanto* style (it is respect for the ink, not for the author’s expectation).

The nineteenth-century singing treatises are very clear and precise on the problem of the prosodic appoggiatura. I will only mention the most famous: the one by Manuel García *jr*, published in French in 1842-47 and quickly translated into Italian, English, German, which is today a reference text for ancient operatic performance practice. “In Italian singing the appoggiatura can hardly be considered an ornament, so necessary is it to the prosodic accent”, wrote García: not an optional ornament, therefore, but an obligation! And a little further on: “The effect of the two equal notes would be unbearable” (GARCÍA 1847, II: 40, 42).

The prosodic appoggiatura is not just a question of recitatives, as is often believed. The *cantabile* pieces also need the same treatment, as in this Mozart’s aria, one of the most famous in the entire history of opera:

Susanna

Deh, vie - ni, non tar - dar, o gio - ia bel - la!

Ex. 6. Mozart, “*Le nozze di Figaro*”, “*Aria Susanna*”.

But if you search for performances of this aria on *YouTube*, only in one out of fifty do you hear the stylistically indispensable prosodic appoggiatura added on the word “bella” (G - F).

5. The causes of the progressive misunderstanding

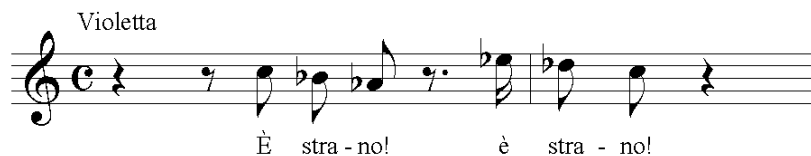
Why has this stylistic awareness been lost? Because, during the nineteenth century, composers wanted progressively become the sole authors of their music, taking away from performers the role of co-authors that they had had in the previous century. And so they began to write in the score more and more dynamics and articulation signs, for the voices as well as for the instruments of the orchestra: just browse through a score by Rossini and one by Puccini, to see how much the prescriptive signs on how to perform the individual notes have increased.

About appoggiaturas, already an author like Bellini began to write many of them with grace notes, choosing himself a single solution from the various possible:

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system is for the character Pollione, with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is marked 'Recit.' and contains the lyrics 'Sva-nir le vo-ci! e dell'or-ren-da selva li-berò il'. The piano part is marked 'col canto'. The second system is for the character Flavio, also with a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is marked 'var-co.' and contains the lyrics 'Profferisti un In quella sel.va è morte: Norma tel dis-se.'. The piano part includes a 'p' dynamic marking.

Ex. 7. Bellini, *Norma*, "Scena e Cavatina Pollione"
from the standard Ricordi vocal score.

The next step would have been to abolish the prosodic appoggiaturas as ornamental notes, in favour of their notation with full notes. For example:



Ex. 8. Verdi, “La traviata”, “Scena e Aria Violetta”

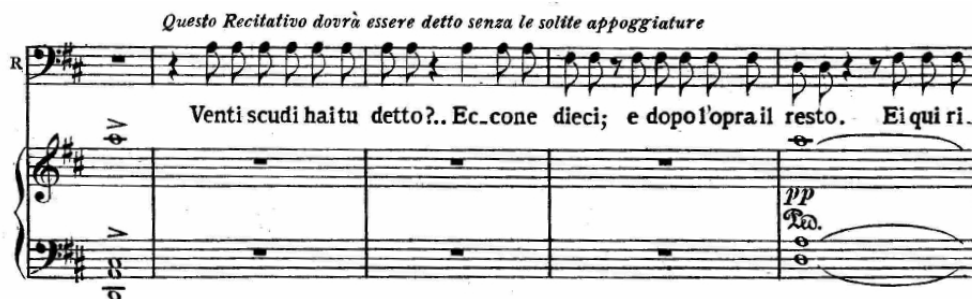
which is nothing other than the performative notation of what Rossini, just thirty years earlier, would have written without appoggiaturas:



Ex. 9. Verdi, *La traviata*, “Scena e Aria Violetta”: the same passage as in Ex. 8, as it would have been written by a composer of the previous generation.

But the performance of Ex. 9 by a conscious nineteenth-century singer would have been the same of Ex. 8.

At that point, if Verdi had wanted a certain passage to be performed without the addition of the usual prosodic appoggiaturas, he would have had no other solution than to request it in words: “This recitative must be sung without the usual appoggiaturas”:



Ex. 10. Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Recitative act III from the standard Ricordi vocal score.

Without Verdi's verbal prescription, the passage would have been sung in this way by every singer of the mid-nineteenth century, that is, with the "usual appoggiaturas":

Rigoletto

Ven-ti scu-di hai tu det-to?.. Ec - co-ne die-ci; e do-po l'o-pra il re-sto.

Ex. 11. *Verdi, Rigoletto, Recitative act III embellished with the "usual appoggiaturas".*

The effect would thus be softened; the dialogue would lose that crudeness that the situation requires and which Verdi was evidently aiming for.

6. The persistence of the phenomenon

How long did all this last? Much longer than we imagine. Verdi's *Aida* ends with this memorable slow cabaletta:

Aida

O ter - ra ad - di - o, ad - di - o val - le di pian - ti,

Ex. 12. *Verdi, "Aida", final scene*

In making its piano paraphrase, Liszt wrote down that theme in this way, adding the appoggiaturas:

Ex. 13. Liszt, “Danza sacra e duetto finale” d’Aida

a symptom that the common performance practice of such a vocal phrase was different from today’s.

Singers continued to insert prosodic appoggiaturas well into the new century: the first musical recordings tell us this unequivocally (Crutchfield 1983). A passage like this,

Ex. 14. Verdi, “Simon Boccanegra”, “Scena e Aria Fiesco”.

which today is sung exactly as written, was enriched with appoggiatura (E instead of D on the syllable “-di-”) by all the major basses who recorded the aria in the early twentieth century: Vittorio Arimondi (a Verdi singer: he took part in the first performance of *Falstaff* at La Scala) in his 1907 recording, José Mardones (star of the Metropolitan Theatre in New York) in 1910, Lev Sibirjakov (the principal bass of the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg) four year before.

When did people lose sensitivity to all this? It was during the first half of the twentieth century, when the false myth about the (presumed) respect for the written text began to spread. It is significant to note that a bass with a more recent

career, such as Ezio Pinza, still performed the appoggiatura in his 1923 recording, but no longer in the 1945 remake: that is a sign of the compliance with a new performing method, which had by then lost contact with the ancient vocal practices.

7. Conclusions

On 6 December 2023 the agency of the United Nations UNESCO inscribed “The practice of opera singing in Italy” on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. One way to preserve the practice of opera singing is also to safeguard its ancient performance practices, which musicologists have the tools to study, recover, and transmit to today’s performers. As long as musicologists and performers do not continue to live in two separate hemispheres of the same musical world.

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