

# REHEARSING RENAISSANCE MUSIC

All that is necessary to develop a deep understanding of Renaissance music and how to play easily from unbarred parts is simply to get to know thoroughly a few pieces.

## GANASSI

One of the richest sources we have for understanding Renaissance music is the 1535 treatise on recorder playing by Sylvestro Ganassi. His “Fontegara”, in addition to being a brilliant compendium of improvisation examples, makes utterly clear the ideals of the Renaissance musician.

Chapter 1 begins by acknowledging that the human voice is superior to all instruments and therefore instrumentalists should strive to learn from and imitate the voice. He inspires us by explaining “I have heard that it is possible with some players to perceive, as it were, words to their music.”

After giving more than 2000, often stunningly virtuosic, improvisation examples, Ganassi sums it all up by explaining to instrumentalists: “Know that your teacher should be a good singer and that you understand that when you approach a piece for the first time, the first and most important thing to consider is the **words**.”

Instrumentalists reading Ganassi will realize that he is saying nothing short of: “Make all the sounds and all the expression of the human voice with your instrument.”(!)

Writing in the confident heyday of humanism Ganassi elucidates the Renaissance belief in the power of language and the quest to achieve an ideal communication--a perfect, heightened speech so cherished by the ancient Greeks and Romans.

## POLYPHONY

Renaissance music is made of individual voices each telling its own story. It is the ultimate musical democracy in which each individual is free to express his own ideas and all voices are equally important. It is like having several actors present the same role simultaneously but miraculously it all works out. This makes Renaissance music particularly satisfying for the performer since one is never merely accompaniment. Every voice is “the melody”. In fact, the compositional structure of a polyphonic piece depends on each voice making its own independent shapes, dynamics and expression. If we play vertically with everyone making the same tones and dynamics together, we lose the entire construct of the piece.

Remember that in Renaissance music the most important thing is the words. Renaissance composers chose their notes to illuminate the text, enabling us to speak our mother tongue more beautifully and with more meaning. **If you don't know the text you cannot fully understand the piece.**

Like Renaissance painting, Renaissance music is grand, elegant, endlessly complex - but not difficult to understand. The simple key to understanding Renaissance melodies is that they are like our spoken language:

- They are horizontal, not metered.
- The coherency is in the movement and shape of the horizontal line, not in the beat or the chords.
- They typically tend to flow forward, often speeding up.
- The rhythms are often astonishingly complex.

## HOW TO REHEARSE

Since Renaissance music consists of independent voices, we must first get to know all the personalities in the piece. Let's begin with Thomas Morley's lovely duo 'When loe by break of morning'. (Go to the wonderful [www.serpentpublications.org](http://www.serpentpublications.org) website and download the parts to this duo, for free. Click on the word Music and then on Music by Composer and scroll down to Morley.)

**1.** First, all members of the ensemble should simply read together the words as normal language; tell the story. For now let's begin with the Superius voice. Of course, reading the words two or three times is a great aid in helping to internalize what's being said. Enjoy also the sound of the words themselves; it is very much a part of the beauty of the poem. Keep in mind that Thomas Morley was a highly respected composer and a musician at the court of Queen Elizabeth I. He could choose any poems he wanted so it's our job to understand the interest he found in this text.

**2.** When you understand the story, read the words again being influenced a little by the shapes and rhythms of the melody. For all the artistry in Renaissance music we must never forget that the goal is heightened **Speech**. Be sure to sing or play at a tempo that sounds like you are speaking naturally (often much faster than you might think). Notice which syllables are stretched out, which are repeated. Remember: you already understand this! It's how you speak normally--if you linger on a syllable it's to give it more emotion. If you repeat words, it's to reflect, to say them differently and get more meaning out of them.

Be sure to enjoy also how normal this looks on the page. It would be confusing and misleading to force our language into little boxes of four beats. The single biggest problem with most modern performances of Renaissance music is the unnatural, plodding rhythm resulting from reading over-edited modern editions. You don't want barlines in your novels and you certainly don't want them in this music! It just makes it harder.

**3. Sing it!** Even if you are not much of a singer, experiencing the piece with your voice is the best practice and it becomes so much easier to do if you simply try singing a little from time to time. Remember to enjoy the sound of the words as well as the story.

**4. Play it.** Most importantly: **Hear the words as you play.** If you do this you will understand the piece!

**5. Sing the Tenor Voice.** In Morley's setting there are many similarities between the Tenor and Superius voices but they are definitely not the same and through singing each voice we develop a feeling of the personality of that voice. This enables

us to begin developing a sense of all the characters that make up the piece. **To truly understand a polyphonic composition it is vital to get to know each voice individually.**

Taking time to get to know each voice may seem a slow method at first but it's fun to realize that we are already artists with language, and we quickly realize that through understanding the words, we are truly understanding the composition. As a result, we actually learn faster and subsequent rehearsals move quickly and easily.

## **OTHER VOICES**

I often get the comment "I understand the benefits of reading from unbarred parts but how can we stay together?" Ironically, it is often easier to stay together with unbarred parts than with a modern score, if we understand how to rehearse.

We've now reached the second major stage in understanding Renaissance Music. We can appreciate that it is wonderful to hear even one voice sung with Morley's elegant, expressive ideas but now let's experience the multi-layering of Renaissance polyphony and hear different interpretations of the text simultaneously! It is somewhat like a cubist painting presenting a face from several different angles.

If we look at the two voices, we see that the Tenor enters one whole note after the Superius. Before the Tenor enters, the Superius sings the words "When loe by break of". Sing or play this first little phrase, just up to the point where both voices have said "When loe by break of morning" two times (Superius ending on e" and Tenor on c"). Besides helping us see the individual voices as normal language, another very musical benefit of playing from unbarred parts is that it encourages us to hear **phrases**.

After the two voices finish together with the word "morning", the Superius, as in speaking, should relax momentarily, breathe naturally and then start a new 'sentence' (without marching rigidly onward!). The Tenor voice can easily hear that both voices end together then the Superius starts the new phrase during the second half of the Tenor's half note, singing "My" and then "love" during the Tenor's quarter rest. Stated simply, the Superius begins the new phrase two notes before the Tenor. As soon as the Tenor hears this, it will always know when to come in and **the two voices will always be together!** Reading from separate parts actually helps us hear the piece. When we learn to hear the imitation at the beginning of every phrase, we will never be out of sync again!

To internalize this, let's start this new phrase from where the Superius sings the words "My love" the first time.

## **SUPERIUS**

morn - ing, My love hir self a- dor - ning, My  
love hir self a- dorn - ning,

TENOR

break of morn- ing My love hir self a- dor -  
ning, My love hir self a- dorn - ning.

Notice how each voice finished the phrase (with the word “adorning”) in its own way. The Superius ends with a confident G-F. Meanwhile the Tenor has lyrically settled on the F half note, two notes before the end of the phrase, and while holding this half note it gets hit half way through by the Superius’ G half note. The Tenor should bring out this dissonant, expressive moment and linger slightly on the F before resolving gracefully to the E quarter note. **It is very important to enjoy these very different characters in each voice for this is the most typical Renaissance cadence. The majority of all Renaissance phrases end this way.**

We heard the phrase “My Love” begin with the Superius singing two notes before the Tenor. Notice that when the words “My love” are said the second time the Superius again begins two notes before the Tenor. Hearing this helps us stay together while feeling free to breathe and speak the words naturally.

After cadencing together on F at the end of the word “adorning”, it is easy for the Tenor voice to hear the Superius begin the new phrase “When loe by” half way through it’s F whole note. As soon as the Tenor hears that the Superius sings “When loe by” before it enters, the voices will always be together!

With elegant craftiness, by the time we get to the words “My love” in this phrase, Morley has reversed the two voices so that now the Tenor sings “My love” two notes before the Superius. If the Superius hears this, it is very easy to stay together.

When we end with the word “adorning.” the final time, be sure to hear the dissonance on the half note F in the Superius voice.

You will notice immediately that both voices start the new phrase “Doth walk the woods” together, and end this short phrase atypically without the dissonance-resolution figure, which we call a suspension.

In the following phrase, the Tenor voices begins by singing the word “Gathering” (two notes) before the Superius enters. These words are sung a second time, with the same imitation, but this time in a higher range inviting us to sing even more joyously. It is even said a third time but this time beginning with and indulging in the word “sweet”. Notice the suspension on the word “plenty” at the end of this phrase in the Superius voice.

The final section of this story begins elatedly with the “The birds enamour’d...”. The Tenor voice can enhance this enchanting moment by making a short, inviting space before starting the new phrase. This will be no problem for the Superius who simply waits for the Tenor to sing “The birds” (two notes) before entering.

Imagine what the poet must have been feeling to write “The birds enamour’d sing and praise my Flora”. Every word is rich with imagery and there is a dramatic swell of emotion with each word more enraptured than the one before--“enamour’d...sing...praise...my...Flora”. As if that were not enough, the phrase is repeated for even more emotion: higher in the Tenor and more rising in the Superius. All this is building to the real climax; the birds themselves are so enthralled by Flora’s beauty that they exalt her as a new goddess of the dawn. Still not finished, Morley repeats this entire section, letting us satiate ourselves with his majestic phrases, and finally ends with the mellifluous word “Aurora”.

Fortunately, we have an entire collection of elegant Canzonettes to Two Voices by Morley. Rehearse several others this way and you will soon find how intuitive it becomes, how desirable it is to play from separate parts, and how soon you begin to feel at home in this repertoire. These Canzonettes are available in clear, modern notation (as used in this article) and may be downloaded for free at [www.serpentpublications.org](http://www.serpentpublications.org). They are also available in the original facsimile edition.

## **MOST BASIC POINTS**

\* Renaissance music is like spoken language -- expressive, extremely varied, unbarred, moving forward, often speeding up, frequently relaxing on the last note of the phrase and starting each new phrase organically, not markedly on the next beat.

\* Every voice tells its own story.

\* All voices are equally important.

\* When singing, sound like you are both speaking normally and singing beautifully.

\* When playing an instrument, **hear the words as you play**.

Renaissance polyphony is conceived to work naturally as a conversation. Counterintuitively, if we simply march through the piece keeping a stiff, artificial, steady beat, the phrasing sounds wrong, we lose the conversational quality of the piece and it actually becomes more difficult to hear how the voices work together. Renaissance composers knew what they were doing. If you sing or play as you would speak the words, the music comes alive and it actually becomes easier to stay together because it sounds right! Trust the music and trust your conversational abilities. Above all, have fun!

The great awakening of the Renaissance was made possible largely through a renewed understanding of classical Greece and Rome. After centuries of suppression from the Church, the inspiration of antiquity allowed European Society to make some of its greatest cultural achievements: the discovery of the individual, a heroic belief in human genius, and a sense of harmony between man and his surroundings.

In an age of tragic partisanism, Renaissance Music offers an idealistic alternative: a true musical democracy in which each individual has the freedom to speak in his own voice, tell his own story yet still work together enjoying the rich harmony of intertwining opinions; a social contract; E Pluribus Unum.

John Tyson