

Author: Doni, Giovanni Battista
Title: Fifth Lecture on theatre music
Original title: Lettione Quinta sopra la Musica Scenica
Source: Florence, Biblioteca Marucelliana, MS A. CCXCIV.7.,
f.128r-136r

[-f.128r-] Fifth Lecture on stage music
Most Serene Principe, Most Worthy Arch-consul, Virtuous Academicians, in the previous Lecture I demonstrated very clearly (if I am not mistaken) by referring to classical authors that the comedies were divided into cantica, diverbia and Choruses, and that, besides the Chorus, which never occurred in Latin comedies, the cantica were sung throughout, unlike the diverbia, that we can call dialogues or discourses among interlocutors, where several actors intervene and converse together. There is no doubt that the tragedy was composed of these same parts, although the aforesaid authors refer only to the comedy. Moreover, I demonstrated that these cantica are found in the ancient Roman comedies by Plautus and Terence still extant, and that it is foolish to consider them as separate from the play itself, as our contemporary *Intermedi* are. Now, should someone want to learn in greater detail which were these cantica, through which features they may be distinguished from the diverbia, whether all the monologues, in which only one character recites can and ought to be [-f.128v-] considered as sung sections and how they were named by the Greeks, I shall outline my opinion on these matters succinctly. Since not every sort of monologue is can be set to music (if we want to judge impartially) for instance where one of the characters converses with himself or herself calmly and without strong emotions, especially if at length, or with the spectators themselves (although this is frowned upon) I am quite convinced that not all the monologues are really cantica, but only those that contain some particular expression of feeling, and, to say it in one word, those that are pathetic, while I am convinced that all the others should be placed in the same category as the diverbia, since it does not matter if a character asks a question that goes unanswered, as when a character talks to the listening audience, as in the Prologues by Plautus and Terence, or that, when a character talks to himself or herself there is only a character in reality although they appear to be two. However, in order to banish any scruple and be utterly honest in this curious subject, let us see what [-f.129r-] we can ascertain as proven with regard to the tragedy. Moreover, you can gather from this that such difference is very logical. Three are the roots or, so to speak, the sources of music, as Theophrastus quoted by Plutarch states: joy, pain and enthusiasm, or divine fury, which used to possess the baccantes and the prophets,

according to the false religion of the gentiles. In fact, should someone be transported by excessive joy, oppressed by unbearable pain or possessed by an extraordinary manic force (natural or divine as it may be) one alters and bends one's voice accordingly with ease and in such a way that a clear principle of singing can be recognised therein. In fact, singing is nothing by the lifting of the voice according to certain and measurable intervals, whether they be larger or smaller. Hence, it also occurs that, as Quintilian observed, that the voice of public speakers often resembles singing in their epilogues, when, transported by great vehemence of feeling, whether of commiseration, disdain or other, they burst out, as we hear them do nowadays as well, into a sort of high voice, and they swap their ordinary tone for a higher one more animated and melodious. Hence, one must believe that the ancients, unsurpassed [-f.129v-] experts of all this who invested unique study and application in matters related to music and the theatre, set to a musical melody the emotional speeches that were called cantica by the Romans and [Monodiai] by the Greeks, while they reserved the use of simple spoken recitation for the Dialogues or diverbia. In my opinion, every convenience and requirement of art and nature agrees in favour of this distinction, since art strives to follow in nature's steps for the most part. In fact, just as it occurs naturally that, when people find themselves in a lonely place, sometimes they break out into some form of song, to be uplifted from their hard work and annoying thoughts, and, if they think to themselves, they do so by way of some simple speech, as if they were debating or deliberating on some matter rather than as an outlet for their own feelings, thus it is very appropriate in the field of poetry that the same principle should be observed in the kind of imitation which occurs in the plays, in order to maintain adherence to reality and appropriateness, and that music should play a part where emotions are being represented, since music, as we see everyday, expresses them with great efficacy. Conversely, when other human matters are portrayed, such as [-f.130r-] rulings, arguments, orders, reprehensions, narrations and so on, this should be done with the use of mere spoken recitation. In fact, how would ever be possible to set words to music in an appropriate fashion, such as those in Terence *Adephi*: 'He broke down door? Let it be rebuilt. He tore the dress? Have it patched together', and so on et etcetera. Similarly, also those long arguments between servants that one finds in Plautus, where they abuse each other verbally in a myriad of ways, with new-fangled and comical words stacked one on top of the other, as it happens in the *Pseudulus* without respite, where one reads: 'A. Shameless! B. It is so. A. Wicked! B. You are correct.' and so on. Nor this principle is valid just in the comedy

(where the simple spoken language is capable of many pleasant jokes, play on words, foreign terms, funny and exaggerated concepts and attractive features of this kind, which are much more successful without singing) but also in the tragedy, where sometimes I see some events take place that I am at a loss as to how music may suit them. Such passages are the ones where two characters speak in maxims, where a statement and its retort occur in consecutive verses, which the Greeks call [antilogias] and [stichomythias]. It occurs, for instance, when a tyrant maintains that it is best to be feared, while his old adviser says that it is best to be loved, as in Seneca's *Tyestes*, where Atræus discloses his wicked plot against his brother to an old servant of his. [-f.130v-] Another similar case is the argument between Eteocles and Polynikes in Euripides' *Phoenissae*, which is composed in trochaic verses. This difficulty of setting such sections to music satisfactorily is enhanced further in the passages where two characters argue alternatively with short retorts, as Medea does against the Nurse in Seneca's anonymous tragedy, as in this passage: 'A. Die! B. I want to. A. Go into exile! B. It pains me to away,' and so on. The main reason for this is that it happens to be harder to compose a graceful melody when question and answer are lively and in quick succession, as in passages where the characters threaten and provoke each other so swiftly, interspersing abuse, scolding remarks and such like, that the performer has not time to take the pitch from the instrument. Therefore, since sometimes he has to wait to hear the note that he needs, he cannot retort with the promptness required, hence it is inevitable that the whole business becomes very stale and implausible. This is what would happen in the last argument between Orestes and Menelaus, the one between Ion and Xuthus (written in long trochaic verses so that one character recites the beginning and the other one the end of the verses) and in those between Phaedra and the Nurse in the tragedy by Euripides and in Seneca's *Hippolytus* after the words 'One cannot be won over by prayers'. The same occurs where the dialogic exchange are longer, as between Creon and Antigones and Ion and Creusa. What shall we say then about those extended reports of messengers and the descriptions or long and memorable events [-f.131r-] accompanied by so many occurrences of ensuing deaths, sieges, battles and similar events. For instance, to provide a few examples, consider the narration of the Messenger in the *Phoenissae* where he describes the sortie of the Thebans besieged against the Argives laying siege to them. Would I believe that such narrations can be set to music in a way that they would not produce great boredom and annoyance? Absolutely not. Nevertheless, some will say that nowadays some tragic and tragicomic actions are performed to music in their entirety,

and that they achieve good effect. I admit that these actions are set and performed entirely to music, as I have listened to many both in Florence and here in Rome, among whom one entirely sung by ladies which was performed about three years ago. However, as to the fact that they are more successful in themselves than they would be if only the section that express some feelings were sung, I disagree. And, let me tell you the truth, do we not realise all the time how soon those long melodies being to tire those who are not utterly and unconditionally in love with music? I am positive that, should we cast a vote, hardly a person in ten would not agree that a level of tedium and boredom intervenes in this kind of music and that this does not satisfy the ear entirely. It is possible they shall reply that the fault lies with the composers, who to this day have not been able to find a sort of melody that would be suited to the stage and that [-f.131v-] has all the requirements of goodness and excellence. There is no doubt that there is scope for improvement in music generally and in theatre music in particularly so that it may be made more expressive, especially by employing different Tones as the ancients did, but this is not the heart of the matter. In fact, if we take to set to music a narrative passage, the kind of expressive, melody-based and harmonically rich music typical of madrigals and songs will be misplaced completely, and we shall see that composers avoid it altogether, in the same way as secretaries do when they write business letters, so that their style shuns any rhetorical decoration, it becomes pure, simple and it requires a small number of notes, which is the style that is common nowadays. Therefore, the tedium becomes inevitable, not only as a consequence of the repeated use of similar cadences, as many others have also observed, but also because of that uniformity produced by many syllables uttered on the same pitch, named *monotony* by the Greeks, which is something perhaps not noted by others. If you do not believe me, trust practical experience and take, for instance, that narration of the death of Eurydice written by Rinuccini, where it says: 'In that beautiful grove', and so on. Now, judge whether it achieves a better effect recited with good taste by some expert actor and merely spoken, or sung as it is, although fairly brief and pleasantly set to music [-f.132r-] as the rest of the play, which is the most beautiful among the ones composed nowadays with regard to the music, in my opinion. Therefore, what shall we do now with those long-winded narrations, for instance the one quoted not so long ago in the *Phoenissae*? How will it be ever possible to set them to music in such a way that they may be listened to without provoking boredom? This difficulty is really such that modern poets have been driven to write their theatrical texts to be set to music so that they are simpler and more

concise than the ancient ones surely to great detriment of poetic perfection, which consists chiefly in the artful nature and unravelling of said dramatic actions, which can hardly be achieved within the span of five hundred or six hundred verses. Therefore, another deliberate or unwanted consequence of this is that all these texts are rather languid and lacking in action and activity. The Romans, as we gather from Donatus, called the more active dramatic actions *Motoria*, or active, and the ones that were calmer, quieter and more languid *Stataria*, or static, because they had few emotional climaxes and lacked liveliness of action. Therefore, that sort of verbal interaction that requires quickness of reply is hardly common and when it is employed it fails to produce a good effect, as I stated above, to the extent that everyone can judge for oneself what sort of great flaw this constitutes in dramatic and representative poetry. [-f.132v-] However, it is not true, as many believe, that this reduction in the length of the text is a consequence of the fact that music renders them longer, causing the action to grow disproportionately. In fact, if one cuts out those tiring repetitions and the syllables are lengthened in moderation, even if a whole action of fifteen hundred verses were sung in its entirety, it would not turn out to be excessively long. Instead, the difficulty, I repeat, consists in the inability to find a melody that would suit narrations, deliberations and similar dramatic situations, which are calm and devoid of feeling, for which the composers themselves suffer great block of inspiration, because music is highly incompatible with them. The same occurs to Secretaries on the matter of writing compliments. Instead, the emotions fill the mind and the imagination of the composer producing beautiful and lively ideas that then take the form of the most attractive and suave melodies, especially if the composer identifies emotionally with those very feelings, as it happens usually to the poets possessed by enthusiasm or poetic fury, such as was Torquato Tasso in our time and the Jesuit Father Stephonius in the field of Latin poetry, who, warmed by a heat that possessed him because someone made him believe deliberately that it was murmured [-f.133r-] that he did not have the capacity to complete his *Crispus*, is said to have composed the last and remaining act, which is so full of inspiration and poetic warmth, in the space of one night. Somebody perhaps will say that the current Recitative style remedies to these drawbacks because, since it resembles closely everyday speech, it succeeds in being very apt to the expression of anything that may be necessary to happen on stage, but this is the point where these people commit their more notable mistake; firstly, because they believe that the stage music of the ancients was simple in style and required few notes, whereas Plutarch teaches us in his extremely learned essay

that it was the most varied and artistically accomplished genre of; secondly, because, although it is true that in some ways this style approaches the character of spoken conversation, nevertheless it departs from it in that it lacks all the variations of voice that can be heard in the syllables marked with the acute accent, which constitute a kind of seasoning for every sort of speech or recitation. Therefore, since most of the syllables are uttered in this kind of unpleasant monotone which resembles the manner of declamation of the town criers, it is no wonder if the only way a pleasant sound is produced is as a result of a beautiful and attractive diction, as I have explained in detail in the very speech addressed to Don Camillo Colonna. Equally, I believe to have demonstrated authoritatively that, although this style is called nowadays recitative, nevertheless is more suited to the recitation of rhapsodies or heroic poems than it is appropriate to the stage, where we say with greater accuracy that the actors enact the representation of a script rather than recite it. Nevertheless, I feel that some admirers of the style of performance in use nowadays under the erroneous assumption of imitating the ancients perhaps, shall grant me that singing is not suited to dialogues or arguments between characters in the comedy. Perhaps there shall be someone also who does not appreciate singing even in those sections that are called cantica in Latin but who is adamant that the tragedies should be sung in their entirety at any cost, on account of the fact that, since tragic subjects are more majestic and tragic verses more lilting and resounding, music is all the more suited to them. I want to reply to this by saying that, if we want to follow the example of the ancients, there seems to be no room to doubt that the tragedy is divided, as I said above, into those three same parts into which the comedy also is divided, although this is not stated explicitly by the authors, and, consequently, that the dialogues of the tragedy should also be performed without singing. However, if we want to rely on logic, given that I grant that the tragedy has greater affinity with music than the comedy, nevertheless, since the same issues mentioned above occur in relation to the singing of it, it would be much more wise, in my opinion, to banish singing from its dialogic parts. [-f.133v-] This (to summarise in a few words the reasons that convince me of it) can be clarified with the aid of the following considerations. Firstly, it will be possible to write dramatic actions of more balanced proportions and appropriate length, so that it will be possible to weave and unravel the dramatic knot, and arrange within the text any sort of speech that occurs in the most well-structured tragedies. Secondly, not only the tedium to which such long compositions go usually subject will be avoided, but, because of the variety and the

reciprocal alternation of spoken word and singing, the dramatic action will please more than those that contain just a single manner of performance. Thirdly, since ordinary singers often lack that verve and grace that performing on a stage requires, one may add to them other actors, more expert and endowed with expressive mannerisms, to perform those parts that do not require singing, and this would enhance the beauty and gracefulness of the performance. Fourthly, if the number of the sung numbers is reduced, the composers would write them more willingly and with greater application and artistry, so that the whole performances would turn out to be more beautiful and appealing. Fifthly, the singers would be able to learn them by heart much better if they are shorter and also they would [-f.134r-] sing them more loudly, which is something in which singers nowadays are particularly at fault, either because of their laziness or because they want, as they say, to imitate too closely the tone ordinary conversation. Moreover, the singers would apply themselves more if the melodies were more attractive and expressive. Fifthly, there would be no need for so many singers; on the contrary, one would be able to choose only the best ones, and among them only those who had good and strong voice, some elegance in their gestures and pleasant deportment, so that it would not occur that one would see some climb the stage who cannot be heard because of their weak voice or are so inappropriate and clumsy in their acting that they move the audience to laughter rather than produce any enjoyment in them, which is the main priority in performances taking place in front of princes, so that everything that occurs on stage may be exquisite and refined in its own way. I must add on another consideration to this one, which will be the sixth one, namely, that, if a smaller number of singers are employed, the cost (which is nowadays exorbitant, if a good result is to be achieved) would fall, and what is saved could be invested usefully towards other aspects of the staging as well. I could add some other reasons to support this latest one, but I overlook them to avoid becoming long-winded. As for the rest, since one can doubt with reason that the abrupt transition [-f.134v-] from the spoken word to singing and from singing to the spoken word may produce a negative effect, I want you to know that there is a way to remedy this, upon which I would be glad to have you express your opinion, if the lack of time and my vow not to repeat what I said elsewhere allowed me to talk about it, since I have already discussed this matter in the aforesaid Discourse which has appeared in print. Now, I want to add here that the act of mixing spoken word and singing within a tragedy is nothing new, since, as I have been told, the Mime by Father Stephonius was performed in Rome in that fashion, and some other similar dramatic actions were performed in Mantua, where, under duke

Ferdinando (who, as you know, was a prince more than averagely learned versed in matters of music and poetry as any other intellectual) such spectacles were performed with great magnificence. Moreover, some have practised to some advantage the variety consisting in having the Deities act and sing on stage, while the other characters only have speaking parts. This has been done not only in these places, but also at Bracciano, as I was told in Rome by Signor Duca himself not long ago. However, although these kind of performances produced pleasure and satisfaction, as far as I have gathered, nevertheless, I believe firmly that they would please much more in conjunction with the sort of instrumental accompaniment that I described already in the previous Discourse. It is left for me, in order to keep the promise that I made you, [-f.135r-] to identify certain passages in the ancient comedies and tragedies that are known expressly as true and undisputed cantica. Marius Victorinus, an ancient and very learned grammarian, appears to provide a very clear method to identify them in the comedies of Plautus and Terence the half verses that he and the others who wrote on prosody call clausulas are found more frequently in the cantica than in the other parts of the comedies we note such manner of short verses in the second Act of s' *Mostellaria* at the words 'I remember', et cetera, et cetera deduce that this section is a canticum and that it provides some hallmarks that distinguish the cantica from the diverbia or dialogues. These distinguishing features, therefore, can be observed from two aspects of the text, namely, from the subject matter and from the kind of verse employed. In fact, if the subject matter of the Monologues is such that it needs to be sung because of its nature or if it contains a profound expression of emotions, then we can state without a doubt that it is a canticum, especially if it is accompanied by a variety of verses of the sort that is suited to music and it is not used commonly in the dialogues, whose standard verse is mostly Iambic in the works of Greek and Latin poets. For instance, it is evident that the scene of the charm in Seneca's *Medea* that begins 'I pray you, o silent people' [-f.135v-] and use very clear trochaic verses thus, Vos precor vulgus silentum, is a canticum because of the quality of the subject matter, which certainly has to be sung in every language, even if the variation of the verse did not highlight it as such. Moreover, the use of such words as Decantatio, Incantatio, Carmen magicum, which mean, Spell, Incantation and magic word, and all contain the Latin word for singing (canto) are proof of this. The first scene of Seneca's *Hyppolitus* appears to be a canticum because it is written in anapaestic verses; the one from Thyestes that begins 'Hearts inhabited by far-away ills', because it contains also an expression of extraordinary joy; the

elegiac verses uttered by *Andromacha* in Euripides' tragedy because, besides the fact that this meter is entirely appropriate for sad and lugubrious matters, they contain a fully-fledged lament, all of these passages can be classed as cantica without without fear of error. We must also be confident that the laments performed by one of the characters together with the Chorus in many tragedies, especially towards the end, which Aristotle calls [kommous] in his poetics, are none other than true cantica, although, if we consider them as a dialogue between several characters, in some way they may appear to be diverbia. There are many of this sort in Euripides' *Andromacha*, so that there is no shortage of examples. Here is another one from our Roman author of tragedies, Seneca. In his *Hippolytus*, Theseus laments his misfortunes with those trochaic verses 'Pale mouth of Avernus,' and so on, while [-f.136r-] in the *Troades* the first chorus where the women of Troy together with their queen Hecuba take turns to deplore their misfortunes and the ones of their Homeland can and must be considered a canticum. As such it was performed in Rome at my instigation, although with very simple staging and with little preparation, gaining great praise from the those versed in such matters. Let this be enough consideration afforded to this matter, since it is now time for me to lower the sails of my Discourse and to refrain from venturing too far into the gulf of these intriguing studies of mine, so that I may not add to your boredom with my inelegant style and this may not add to the peculiar novelty of the subject matter and contribute further to its obscurity and neglect.