

Claudio Merulo: notes on his life and keyboard works¹

1533 Born into a wealthy family in Correggio (in the present-day province of Parma). Correggio was the seat of a court—the *Signoria* of the Counts of Correggio—which employed prominent artists and musicians, including the French Tuttovale Menon, a composer of madrigals and likely Merulo’s teacher. Claudio Merulo’s original surname was Merlotti; he then later Latinized it to Merulus, which was subsequently Italianized to Merulo.

1556 At the age of twenty-three, he is appointed organist of Brescia Cathedral. He plays the organ built by Graziadio Antegnati.

1557 He assumes the prestigious position of second organist at St. Mark’s Basilica in Venice, succeeding the late Girolamo Parabosco.

1565 He becomes first organist at St. Mark’s—handing the second organist post to Andrea Gabrieli—and holds the role until 1584, serving for a total of twenty-eight years. Gioseffo Zarlino is appointed *maestro di cappella* that same year.

During these years, Merulo was also highly active in the households of various Venetian noble families where music was cultivated.

In 1566, he opened a music printing business with a partner—an enterprise that remained active until 1571. He published madrigals by Philippe Verdelot and his own *Ricercari* for organ; the latter were part of an ambitious project to publish organ music by various composers—a project that was announced but, unfortunately, never realized.

In the following years, he had the publisher Gardano print his books of madrigals, his *Masses* for five voices (1573), the vast collection of *Sacrae Cantiones* (1578)—containing motets for the entire liturgical year—and three books of *Ricercari da cantare* (ricercars for singing).

Gioseffo Zarlino’s *Dimostrazioni Harmoniche*, printed in Venice in 1571, opens with an account of Zarlino’s visit to the elderly Adrian Willaert, accompanied by Claudio Merulo and Alfonso della Viola. During the dialogue between these distinguished musicians, we find interesting remarks by Merulo, who expresses his views on the differing expressive effects produced by a two-note chord depending on whether it is played in the low, middle, or high register. Claudio Merulo states:

“My daily experience in playing the organ demonstrates this. For when the ditone [corresponding to our major third] is heard in the voices or sounds positioned in the low register, it seems to me that a certain sadness arises in the composition from that interval—something that deeply offends my sensibilities. And truly, no one could deny this. Yet, as that interval is shifted toward the higher register, it affords increasingly greater delight to the senses; and when placed in the highest register, it yields even greater pleasure.”

¹ This text is an elaboration of the outline for the introductory talk given by Francesco Cera during his masterclass on Claudio Merulo (Bologna, September 2023).

Regarding the minor third interval, however, Merulo says:

"It sounds not merely sad, but exceedingly sad, to the point where it is almost unbearable to hear. And this is true, take my word for it, for I have often tested it on the organ. While playing a major third ("ditono") in the lower register produces a very sad effect, playing a minor third ("semiditono") creates such a jarring dissonance that it is scarcely bearable to the ear. Yet, when these same intervals are played in the middle register of such instruments, they produce a pleasing and sweet sound."

1574 Composes incidental music for a tragedy staged in Venice for King Henry III of France.

1584 Leaves his post in Venice to take up a position at the Farnese Ducal Court in Parma.

1587 Organist at Parma Cathedral.

1591 Organist at Santa Maria della Steccata. During this period, he builds a small *ottavino* organ, which is still preserved at the Parma Conservatory.

1592 *Canzoni alla Francese*, book one, is published in Venice.

1598 His *Toccatas* book one is printed in Rome, with a refined copper-engraving technique, by the Flemish engraver and printer Simone Verovio.

He dies in Parma on May 7 1604, at the age of 71. A solemn funeral is held for him at the Cathedral, where he is buried. His tomb, located at the beginning of the left nave, bears a Latin inscription and a portrait bust.

1604 *Toccatas* book two appears posthumously, published in Rome, just as the first book had been.

The second and third book of *Canzoni alla Francese* were published posthumously (respectively in 1606 and 1611), edited by his young nephew Giacinto Merulo.

Claudio Merulo, a Mannerist composer among the artists of his time

In Venice, the sixteenth century was the great age of painting. The lagoon city was the capital of the Most Serene Republic, a hub of commercial activity and a center radiating culture to the rest of Europe. This was facilitated by a thriving publishing industry that produced more music than any other city in the world; works on philosophy, science, and history were also published, enjoying greater freedom of expression than was possible in the Papal States.

Art historians use the term "Mannerism" to describe the art produced in Italy from the 1520s through the end of the century—the very era in which Merulo lived and worked. It was a movement that stood in open opposition to the Renaissance. From the mid-fifteenth century through the first two decades of the sixteenth, Renaissance culture looked to the Greek and Roman worlds. The architectural styles and sculpture (as well as the philosophy) of ancient Greece and the Roman Empire were regarded as the great "classics" to be emulated and used as models.

During this initial period—in stark reaction against the Gothic style—geometric and numerical proportions were rediscovered; geometry was applied to painting, the composition of figure groups, and the depiction of the human body. Numerical proportions observed in nature and ancient architecture became a reference point for music as well. This was the guiding philosophy of Renaissance art: the order God bestowed upon Creation is perfection, and human creation must therefore conform to this perfect order. The work of art—and the musical composition—is a reflection of the macrocosm within the microcosm of human artistry.

Mannerism, by contrast, deliberately breaks away from the faithful representation of the human body and the true colors of nature, seeking instead an idealized form based on an individual sense of beauty—or rather, the artist's subjective taste.

There is an indulgence in the bizarre and the unusual. The human body is frequently depicted in contorted, unstable poses. Refined and elaborate household objects of the nobility are displayed far more prominently than before. "Artificial" (*Artifizioso*) was an adjective frequently used by writers on art.

The Tuscan painter Pontormo—a major Mannerist figure—left behind a diary revealing a deeply withdrawn, hypochondriacal personality. Many artists practiced alchemy and gravitated toward cryptic, symbolic representations of concepts that transcended the image itself. Among them was Parmigianino, a renowned painter from Parma whose work Merulo certainly knew (the Antegnati organ at the Church of the Steccata in Parma, which Merulo played, featured shutters painted by Parmigianino).

Visual effects (such as iridescent colors and striking, unconventional subject matter) and the expression of human emotion (passions) increasingly became the primary objectives of the work of art.

In Claudio Merulo's Toccatas, one can hear and "see" the colorful splendor found in the Venetian paintings of Jacopo Tintoretto and Paolo Veronese. Merulo lived and worked as an organist and composer in Venice during the very years when these painters were adorning the city's churches and palaces with their masterpieces. The virtuosic, dramatic flair Merulo achieves through his expansive, multifaceted diminutions, evokes those shimmering, vibrant Venetian colors.

Particularly in his Toccatas, set in those modes which convey joy, radiant energy, and solemnity (the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, eleventh, and twelfth modes).

Conversely, his origins from Parma region can recall the Manneristic paintings of Parmigianino, with its unusual, sometimes harsh colors, and elongated figures caught in twisting poses. We perceive this last aspect most clearly in Merulo's use of dissonances arising from harmonic suspensions, especially when he is setting Toccatas in modes expressing reflection, melancholy, and sorrow (the second, third, fourth, ninth, and tenth modes).

In my view, **Mannerism** is clearly present and recognizable in Merulo's keyboard music. It manifests itself through:

- a constant pursuit of variety, achieved both through highly animated musical figures and through the exploration of dissonances (created by suspensions and stepwise motion), resulting in harmonic effects that are at times very intense.
- in sections which are particularly rich in diminutions, Merulo employs a constantly shifting motion, characterized by frequent changes of direction, leaps, dotted rhythms, occasional sudden doublings of speed (from sixteenth notes to thirty-second notes), and frequent trills of varying lengths.

- a pursuit of specific effects. On one hand, the sonic effects caused by the specific different styles of writing for the instrument; on the other, the pursuit of virtuosic effects, employed at specific moments to heighten intensity or to astonish the listeners.

Extended solo passages assigned to one hand or the other are creating a discursive, sometime eccentric, and highly unpredictable style. This somewhat anticipates the unpredictability and soloistic nature of Frescobaldi's Toccatas, albeit Frescobaldi introduces figurations that are more specifically tied to the *affetti*.

Stylistic characteristics of Merulo's Toccatas

Toccatas are largely composed with a highly logical four-part structure, almost always rigorous and consistent, utilizing wide spacing between parts wherever possible. There is nothing haphazard in the voice leading, except for occasional written-out arpeggio effects or the passing of diminutions from one hand to the other.

The lines follow a distinctly vocal style, moving primarily by step. At times, the four parts progress in ascending or descending sequences, occasionally embellished with *tremoletti* (the term Diruta uses for these ornaments favored by Merulo, who was his teacher).

Great care is devoted to the writing of ornaments, whether long trills or short *tremoletti*. These should be interpreted as effects, often involving more beats than are explicitly notated (see Silvestro Ganassi's discussion about *tremuli* in "La Fontegara", Venice 1535; see further below in this text under "Document on performance practice").

A refined approach to dissonance is achieved through skillful use of suspensions, particularly in the inner voices.

Rapid figurations derive from the art of diminution: a practice common to instrumentalists and singers of the period, as documented in treatises such as those by Bassani, Della Casa, and Conforti. Extensive passages of *diminuzioni* are assigned to either the right or left hand, while the remaining three voices are grouped in the other hand. These soloistic passages display a wide variety of movement, achieved through frequent changes in note values, shifting in speed from eighth notes to sixteenth notes and thirty-second notes.

The occasional introduction of dotted figures involving very short note values (sixteenth and thirty-second notes) creates a highly energetic, crisp effect, sometimes taking on an expressive, emotive quality when set against dissonant harmonies.

The character of the specific mode in which the Toccata is composed is reflected in the nature of its harmonies and musical passages. However, space is almost always given to a display of virtuosity, usually reserved for the final section of all the toccatas.

Structure of the Toccatas

Toccatas generally open with long note values, moving in half notes and whole notes, with pronounced harmonic suspensions and adorned by the occasional appearance of passages in eighth or sixteenth notes. Some toccatas begin with a single theme imitated across the four voices. The model of the sixteenth-century Italian motet underpins this polished, elegant four-part vocal style. This imitative opening gives way to increasingly frequent rapid passages, imitated between the hands in a crescendo of intensity and virtuosity.

A contrapuntal section follows. The style of these contrapuntal passages differs significantly from that of Merulo's *Ricercari* (1567). While the *Ricercari* move primarily in half notes and quarter notes, the contrapuntal sections in the toccatas move in quarter notes and eighth notes. Themes are much shorter and simpler, sometimes consisting of just four notes moving by step or with a single leap. These themes lend themselves to continuous imitation, very often in *stretto*. It is evident that these contrapuntal sections are rooted in the practice of contrapuntal improvisation, generated from simple, brief thematic cells that nonetheless allow for constant harmonic variety. The simplicity of their motion enables continuous—and sometimes surprising—harmonic variety, creating an effect of rapid harmonic shifting.

The final section, following the contrapuntal section, returns to the rapid runs used at the beginning. The harmony very often holds on much longer notes in the bass—a whole note or a double-whole note on a single chord—while a dense series of runs, trills, and even sweeping, acrobatic flourishes unfolds, passing rapidly between the hands. The effect is one of mounting agitation and sonic brilliance, resulting both from the powerful resonance of sustained harmonies—particularly if one considers, on the organ, the addition of notes held by the pedals—and from the extreme virtuosity of the hands.

Especially in these concluding sections, one also finds a voice movement which involves eighth notes in an *arpeggio* like style. These also create a distinct effect on the instrument's sound, gently shaping it and drawing it away from its customary solidness. These arpeggio movements are meticulously notated note-by-note, and completed with ties indicating which notes are to be sustained.

Merulo and the Canzone alla Francese

In 1592, the Venetian publisher Alessandro Gardano published the *Canzoni d'intavolatura d'organo di Claudio Merulo a quattro voci, fatte alla francese*. In composing this genre, Merulo follows the tradition of the Italian keyboard Canzone featuring diminutions (in the manner of Marcantonio Cavazzoni and Andrea Gabrieli). However, in a highly original approach, he does not exclusively model his work on vocal *chansons* by French composers; instead, he applies diminutions to his own earlier four-part instrumental Canzoni. Merulo's Canzoni for four instruments survive in four part-books held at the Biblioteca Capitolare in Verona. In the keyboard arrangements of his earlier Canzoni, one can observe a wide variety of style. Passages of eighth notes and sixteenth notes alternate with dotted rhythms, syncopations, and figures that pass between the hands, creating an effect of variety and brilliancy. This remarkable variety clearly parallels the style of his great Toccatas. Like Andrea Gabrieli in his *Canzoni alla francese*, Merulo

leaves the sections with repeated-notes and imitative lines unadorned by diminutions, embellishing them only with occasional *tremoletti*.

In his keyboard Canzoni, Merulo does not always adhere strictly—measure by measure—to the original four-instrument Canzoni. He makes occasional adjustments, freely shortening some measures and lengthening others. The second book of Canzoni, published posthumously by his nephew Giacinto Merulo in 1606, again features Merulo's own Canzoni arranged with keyboard diminutions. The third book, released in 1611, contains exclusively keyboard arrangements of *chansons* by Franco-Flemish composers (Crequillon and Lassus), following a long-standing practice employed by Andrea Gabrieli and others.

Merulo and the Ricercare

The *Ricercari d'Intavolatura d'Organo. Libro Primo* (Venice, 1567) constitute the first keyboard work published by Merulo himself, who briefly operated as an independent publisher. In contrast to the generation of the 1540s (Girolamo Cavazzoni, Annibale Padovano, Giulio Segni, Jacques Buus)—which employed in the Ricercari a succession of multiple themes, each generating a distinct section in the manner of a motet—Merulo prefers to imbue the Ricercare with a sense of thematic unity. He limits the number of themes to two or three, presented in successive sections. Sometimes, he employs a single theme for the entire piece, interspersed with brief appearances of other subjects.

Merulo writes out the diminutions in his Ricercari, which appear only occasionally and never overwhelm the contrapuntal texture. Some ricercars conclude with brief Toccata-like episodes or, more precisely, passages of diminution.

The relatively simple contrapuntal style of these Ricercari appears to stem from a practice of contrapuntal improvisation. Merulo employs very simple themes, creating particularly long developments, through continuous repetition of the subject, while gradually generating changing and sometimes surprising harmonies.

Documents on performance practice

Trills and *tremoletti*

Silvestro Ganassi: *La Fontegara*, Venice 1535.

The *galanteria* (grace) “which derives and arises from the trembling of the finger upon the note of the flute itself.”

“That [trill] which spans by a third—or more or less—will be lively and *augmentata*; the moderate type involves the span of a tone or less; the gentle or placid type varies by a semitone—or more or less than a semitone.”

Girolamo Diruta, *Il Transilvano*, Venice 1593.

One should employ *tremoli* [short trills] when beginning a *Ricercare*, *Canzona*, or any other piece. Likewise, when one hand plays multiple parts and the other plays only a single part, the *tremoli* should be executed in that single part. Beyond this, they may be used at the organist's discretion, bearing in mind that a tremolo performed with grace and appropriateness embellishes the entire performance, lending the harmony a lively and elegant quality.

Changes in tempo

Nicola Vicentino: *L'antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica*, Rome 1555.

“And sometimes a certain manner of proceeding is used that cannot be written down: such as playing softly and loudly, quickly and slowly, and—in accordance with the words—altering the tempo to demonstrate the effects of the passions, the text, and the harmony.”

“A composition sung with changes in tempo gains great grace from that variety, as opposed to proceeding without variation to the end [...] And the movement of the tempo should be adjusted—slower or faster—according to the words.”

Ludovico Zacconi: *Prattica di musica*, Venice 1592. To the person beating the *tactus*, he recommends: “When broadening or tightening the tempo, do so with such manner and method that what is being sung is not put at risk.”

Giovanni Battista Bovicelli, *Regole, passaggi di musica*, Venice 1594. “In rapid passages of sixteenth notes, it is very effective to hold the first note a little longer.”

Vincenzo Galilei: *Dialogo della Musica antica e della moderna*, Florence 1581. He considers truly competent only that organist who has a clear grasp of “those affects he intends to convey and which are etched in his mind.”

Specifications of the Antegnati organ played by Claudio Merulo at the Church of the Steccata in Parma. (after a description in the 1593 contract)

Organ built by Benedetto Antegnati in 1573 and later modified by Costanzo Antegnati in 1593 at the request of Claudio Merulo, who had become organist in this church in 1591.

Keyboard of 50 keys (FF to a''), lacking FF# GG# and g#''

Pedalboard of unknown range, pulldown; the CC, DD, and EE pedals sounded only with the Principale 16' (and were likely coupled to the corresponding keys), while the remainder were permanently coupled to the manual

Principale primo 12'

Principale secondo (bass) 12'

Principale secondo (treble) 12'

Ottava

XV

XIX

XXII

XXVI

XXIX

XXXIII

Flauto in ottava

Flauto in duodecima

Fiffaro

Recent studies on the life and music of Claudio Merulo

Giuseppe Martini *Claudio Merulo. Regesto documentario a cura di Michele Basile Crispo*. Parma 2005. Ordine Costantiniano di San Giorgio di Parma

A Messer Claudio, Musico. Le arti molteplici di Claudio Merulo da Correggio (1533-1604) tra Venezia e Parma. A cura di Marco Capra. Parma-Venezia 2006. Marsilio-Casa della Musica