

DEAR UNCLE MAX

Send questions to Dear Uncle Max, AGO National Headquarters, 475 Riverside Dr., Suite 1260, New York, NY 10115.

Did “a cappella” in the 15th and 16th centuries always mean unaccompanied singing? If it had other meanings, what implications are there for current conductors performing early music?

J.D., Mass.

Let's start with a literal translation and go from there. Grove's gives, "In the style of the church (chapell)," goes on to say, "Normally, choral music sung without instrumental accompaniment." In the Grove article on the History of the Chorus, James G. Smith writes, "Notwithstanding later views of the 16th century as the age of a cappella singing, Renaissance sacred polyphony was often performed by instruments and voices combined. No doubt, all-vocal performances sometimes occurred; the Sistine Choir, for example, was particularly noted for its singing without instruments. On the whole, however, choirs of this period probably performed more often with instruments than without." It could well be that there is something in the term, if indeed it referred to the Sistine Chapel, built by Pope Sixtus IV (whose pontificate was from 1471 to 1584), that makes one suspect it could have been used to refer to the way things were done, as in:

- (1) with a slight sneer, with some evident envy, "Well, after all that's the way they would do it at the Pope's cappella!" or
- (2) with great praise, "Wow, how they perform things there! Wish we could do the same (guess we'll try)."

It is worth noting that "a cappella" is the correct spelling though "capella" was used by Giovanni Gabrieli for sections marked for chorus alone; even J.J. Fux in his *Gradus ad Parnassum* gives us "Stilus a Capella." "A Cappella style" is still used to describe the Palestrina style.

By now, the term has lost any capella association by being used to describe any choral singing done without accompaniment. My wish would be that we not use the term. What is wrong with unaccompanied (same number of syllables)? It tells what it is without the ambiguity of the a cappella label.

It is clear that in ordinary practice choral music was performed by using instruments to double the choral lines. This practice can be seen in most illustrations from the 16th century; you might look at the woodcut from the title page of Hermann Finck's *Practica musica* of 1556 for an example. The woodcut shows the men in the center and back, with the boys (looking like dried-up little men) singing in front and an instrumental group with cornetts and sackbut behind. The dog, rather lean-looking with his ribs sticking out, is preparing to attack some unidentifiable round object under the feet of the boy choristers—they do look like potatoes (pieces of bread?). The whole group is facing one large music desk with the four parts clearly visible—Disc. on the left, Ten., Alt., and Bas. on the right. The size of the music stand is happily adequate for those with cataracts.

We have had a visual picture of music in the 16th century, so let us have another picture, a verbal one. This time we look at the scene through the eyes of Francisco Guerrero, 1528–99, the third of the great Spanish polyphonic composers (Victoria and Morales being the other two). He was in charge of the music at the cathedral in Seville from 1554 to



1599, 45 years. On July 11, 1586, he sent a letter to the cathedral chapter that dealt with the "Order which must be observed by the instrumentalist in playing." It reads, "First, Rojas and López shall always play the treble parts: ordinarily on shawms. They must carefully observe some order when they improvise glosses, both as to places and times. When the one player adds glosses to his part, the other must yield to him and play simply the written notes; for when both together gloss at the same time, they produce absurdities that stop one's ears. Second, the same Rojas and López when they at appropriate moments play on cornetts must again each observe the same moderation in glossing: the one deferring to the other; because, as has been previously said, for both simultaneously to add improvised glosses creates insufferable dissonance. As for Juan de Medina, he shall ordinarily play the contralto part, not obscuring the trebles nor disturbing them by exceeding the glosses that belong to a contralto. When on the other hand his part becomes the top above the sackbuts, then he is left an open field in which to glory and is free to add all the glosses that he desires and knows so well how to execute on his instrument. As for Alvánchez, he shall play tenors and the bassoon. At greater feasts there shall always be a verse played on recorders. At Salves, one of the three verses that are played shall be on shawms, one on cornetts, and the other on recorders; because always hearing the same instruments annoys the listener" (quoted from Robert Stevenson, *Spanish Cathedral Music in the Golden Age* [University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961]).

The instrumentalists at the cathedral were all paid, drawn from all over Spain, and expected to be the best in the land. The instrumental group described above would also play at outdoor processions and special events. Does the description above refer exclusively to how they are to perform with singers? Alone? Does it describe heterophony with a gloss in the instrumental part and not in the singing? Does the description "a verse played on recorders" mean recorders alone as alternatim? The next line seems to imply otherwise. It is best not to try to read the description as an exact road map but rather as possibilities. The universality of this interesting picture may be questioned, but it is certainly suggestive.

You may wonder at the lack of a mention of an organ—the cathedral had all kinds of trouble with the contract for a Grand Organ from a Flemish builder; that's another story.

It needs to be mentioned that the score in the Finck woodcut with its spatially separated vocal parts, not in a score arrangement as we expect today with one part line above another, led directly to the invention of figured bass. If a vocal bass line was all the organist had to play from, he had to have some way of knowing at least the harmonic progressions; this then easily became an independent part in its own right, leading directly to choral music with free and independently written parts for voices, organ, and instruments. A gargantuan leap!

Just in passing, I am going to include a sample cadence from Diego Ortiz's *Tratado de Glosas*, Roma 1553, which gives first the notes for a cadence and then various ways of ornamenting it. Perhaps Señors Rojas, López, and Juan de Medina improvised something similar:

Clausulas en A la mi re

In addition to glosses, a permitted addition made by the good judgment of the performer was called Musica Ficta or Musica Falsa, the introduction of some chromatics by the addition of a B^b not notated, or at cadences, a C[#], F[#], or G[#] to create a leading tone or to avoid a tritone. Sometimes this gives a variant reading in modern editions depending on the editor's taste and discretion—it was probably so in the 16th century as well. See the differing solutions in bars 29, 30, and 31 in the Palestrina motet, "Dies sanctificatus." The first is from Thomas Benjamin's *The Craft of Modal Counterpoint* (Schirmer Books, 1979), the second (never mind the halving of the rhythmic notation) from *Palestrina: Ten Four-Part Motets for the Church's Year*, edited and translated by Alec Harman (Oxford University Press, 1964).

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Yes, we know that unaccompanied singing existed but nothing suggests it was categorically normative.

Quite apart from any historical considerations, unaccompanied singing is one of the very best ways to train a choir to listen carefully and be exacting in what they do—besides, if well done, how gorgeous! Are you game for doing it with sackbuts and shawms, plus added ornamentations? I'll listen with pleasure either way.

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