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# Opera and Classical Singing

(Style CD – track 43)

Adding embellishments or ornamentations to the melody line for the purpose of improvisation has been evident throughout the history of vocal music and has appeared even as far back as the 14th Century in the Gregorian Chant. In the 17th and 18th Centuries, singers almost always improvised on a solo line, rarely singing it as written. Four types of ornamentation can be identified:

1. Spontaneous, "on the spot" improvisations by the singer.
2. Improvisations that have become traditional
3. Ornaments indicated by a written symbol.
4. Ornaments written by the composer, indicating exact note values and rhythms.

In a performance of Classical or Operatic vocal music today, spontaneous, "on the spot" improvisation is not customary. The composer has set down the notes, rhythms, tempos and dynamics, all of which, by tradition, must be sung precisely as written. However, some artists, based on their popularity and virtuosity, take the liberty of adding embellishments, creating a new interpretation which often establishes a new tradition.

## COLORATURA

*Coloratura* is a style of singing in which the singer performs vocal ornamentations that embellish the lyric, incorporating scales, arpeggios, trills, staccati, turns and appoggiature. Such ornamentation may be written by the composer or improvised by the performer. Either way the embellishment is established and well rehearsed prior to a public performance. Coloratura style is most evident in the works of composers such as Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini. Many composers wrote for the range and virtuosity of a particular singer of the time and would tailor the role for that singer. Melodic variations are often sung in a repeated section or in a *cadenza* at the end of an aria. This is when a singer has the opportunity to show off his or her virtuosity or bravura.

## The TRILL (Style CD – track 44)

The trill is used to embellish and intensify the emotional expression of a word and to show off the technical virtuosity of the singer.

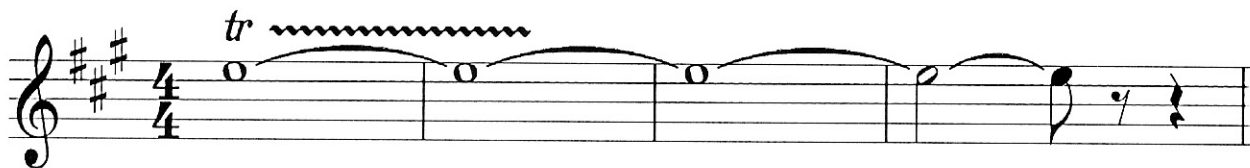
A trill is produced by alternating rapidly between 2 notes, either a whole step or a half step apart. It may appear as an incidental ornament of short duration, for example, the length of a quarter note, or it may sustain for several measures.

**Sing:**

### Whole Step Trill



It would appear in the music as:



**Sing:**

**Half Step Trill**



It would appear in the music as:



In a musical score, the lower note of the trill is written with the trill symbol above it. The sharps or flats in the key signature tell you whether the trill is a whole step or a half step.

To trill, equally emphasize both upper and lower pitches. It is helpful to *think* the upper pitch while you're trilling to counteract the tendency to stay on the lower written pitch. If you don't actually reach the upper pitch, the fluctuation will sound like throat vibrato instead of a trill and may sound out of tune. Keep support steady and the throat as relaxed and open as possible.

Often, there is a pulse or accent on the first beat of each measure or on each beat of the measure. The trill usually sounds like groupings of sixteenth notes. Sometimes to build intensity, the singer begins the trill as slowly as quarter notes and gradually speeds up to as fast as thirty-second notes.

It is helpful to use a metronome when practicing the trill.

**TRILL EXERCISES:**

1. In the following exercise, start with quarter notes and speed up to sixteenth notes.

**Sing:**



1. Now repeat the above exercise, beginning with sixteenth notes and speed up to thirty-second notes (doubling the speed).

# STACCATO

(Style CD – track 45)

The staccato is a short detached note, written with a dot above or below it to indicate a reduction of its duration by half.

The abdominal pulses that are used for diaphragmatic vibrato are used for staccato. But unlike the vibrato which is a continuous tone, the staccato is detached, having distinct breaks between successive tones. However, you must still keep the support steady through staccato passages.

## STACCATO EXERCISES

1. On the vowel "ah" (as in 'far'),

**Sing:**



2. Repeat, beginning a half step higher each time.

3. On the vowel "ah",

**Sing:**



Repeat, beginning a half step higher each time.

4. In the following exercise, using the vowel "ah", sing staccato.

**Sing:**



5. Repeat, a half step higher each time.

## HELPFUL HINTS

1. Keep the support steady through staccato tones.
2. Keep the vowel pure and the placement forward.
3. Avoid glottal attack by thinking the “silent H”, keeping the throat space open through tone pulses.
4. The whole phrase must flow smoothly and at the same time the individual pitches must be accurate.

## FERMATA

The *Fermata* (  $\frown$  ) is often used in operatic style. It indicates that the note below it is to be sustained for as long as the soloist and conductor decide to hold it. Sometimes this liberty is taken without the fermata. For example, in his First Act aria of *La Boheme*, Rodolfo holds his *high C* as long as he thinks he can... which is usually about 8 times longer than written. Audiences know when that high C is coming and anxiously await the moment, evaluating and comparing it to all the high C's they've ever heard.

## CADENZA

(Style CD – track 46)

The *Cadence* or *Cadenza* is an elaborate melodic embellishment, either written by the composer or created by the singer. It occurs at the end of a section or at the conclusion of an aria to add emotional excitement and to show off the singer's vocal ability and artistry. This embellishment is usually sung over the chord leading to the final chord. The conductor often gives the singer great freedom to interpret the cadenza, sometimes even taking the cue from the singer for the downbeat of the resolving chord.

The cadenza may take the form of scales, arpeggios or trills, and may be sung as detached notes (*staccato*) or smoothly (*legato*). Although the cadenza is set and well rehearsed, it should seem a free flowing flourish of spontaneous vocal expression.

**Sing:**

Ah \_\_\_\_\_ d'a - mor

With coloratura,

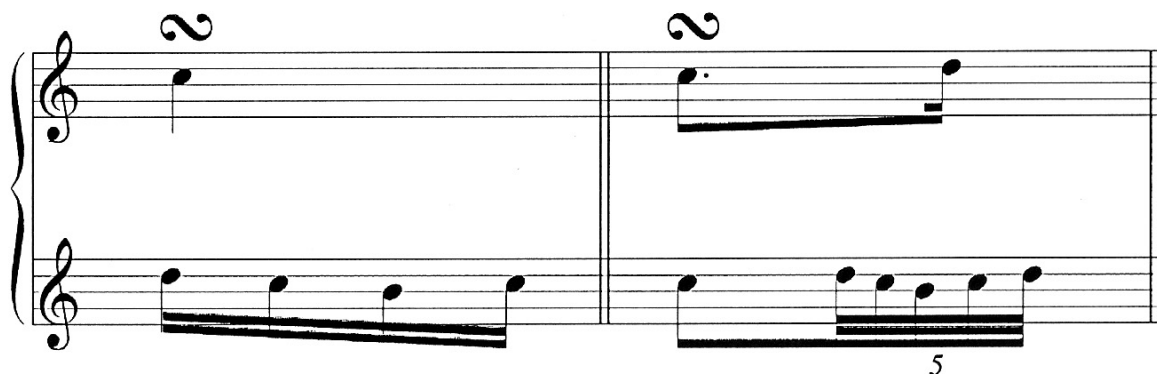
**Sing:**

Ah \_\_\_\_\_ d'a - mor

## THE TURN

The turn is an ornament made up of 4 or 5 notes surrounding a principal note. It may begin on the beat, one note above the written note or on the beat, beginning with the principal note.

**Sing:**

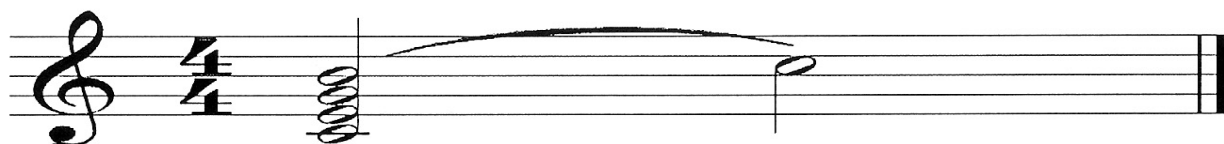


## THE APPOGGIATURA

The *appoggiatura* is a note on the downbeat and occurs usually one note above or one note below the principal note, resolving afterwards to the principal note. This ornament is divided into two types - the long appoggiatura and the short appoggiatura or "grace note appoggiatura".

**Sing:**

Long appoggiatura



**Sing:**

Short appoggiatura

