14. G. Gabrieli

Sonata pian' e forte

(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Giovanni Gabrieli (1557-1612) was principal organist and composer at the great church of St Mark's in Venice. There he continued the development of the **polychoral** style (music for two or more choirs), which had already been a feature of the works of earlier Venetian composers, notably those of his uncle, Andrea Gabrieli. There are a number of galleries in the huge building, each of which could have been occupied by singers, instrumentalists or combinations of the two. It is important to recognise that the term 'choir' just meant a performing group, whether singers or instrumentalists or both. Gabrieli wrote a large number of pieces for ***cori spezzati*** (literally 'broken choirs'), in which one group would start on its own and then be answered by the other. They would then join together for climaxes. Some of his pieces are for three or even four choirs. In 1597, he gathered together a set of vocal and instrumental pieces in a collection called *Sacrae Symphoniae* ('Sacred Symphonies'), including the famous *Sonata pian' e forte.* The title refers to the **alternating soft and loud dynamics** used in the piece. Most Renaissance music contains no directions for dynamics, so this type of instruction was very new. Instrumental pieces such as this Sonata would have been performed at important points of the church service, perhaps for the arrival of the Doge (ruler) of Venice. The term sonata at the time simply meant music to be played as opposed to sung.

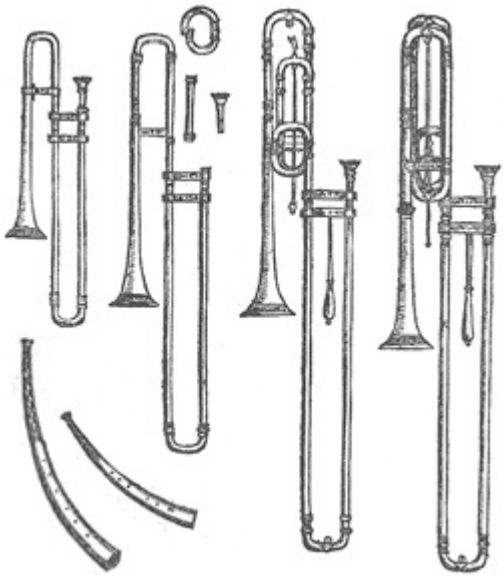
The period from the end of the sixteenth-century to the beginning of the seventeenth-century was a time of **transition from Renaissance to Early Baroque** style. Gabrieli was in the forefront of developments. His first set of *Sacrae Symphoniae* (which includes this Sonata) is in many ways representative of the older, Late Renaissance style, despite the use of dynamics. His second set, published in 1615, after his death, was much more forward looking and made considerable use of organ continuo and soloistic features (see *In Ecclesiis*, p. 269).

<u>Main features of Venetian musical style at the end of the sixteenth-century</u>

- **Polychoral** style using **antiphonal** writing (see notes in the section on 'texture')
- Both **homophony** and **polyphony** used
- **Old instruments**, e.g. cornett and sackbut still important (not yet replaced by trumpet and trombone)
- Instruments still used in a mainly **vocal** style
- **Continuo** still **not** a **prominent feature**, though it may have been used to a certain extent at this time. There was still no sense of solo and accompaniment
- **Modes** still being used
- Dissonance provided mainly by **suspensions**
- Melody frequently moving by **step**, with carefully **controlled** use of **leaps**

Performing forces and their handling

Despite the listing given in the score, the actual instruments originally used in this piece were a **cornett** and three **sackbuts** (Choir 1) and a type of **viola** and three sackbuts (Choir 2). The cornett was much used in church and ceremonial music in the Renaissance. In some ways it was a predecessor of the trumpet, but it worked in a very different way. It had a mouthpiece similar to that of a trumpet but it was smaller and made of wood instead of metal. It had a wooden tube with finger holes rather like those of a recorder.



Alto, tenor, bass and contrabass sackbuts,
with cornetto (bottom left) and cornettino

The sackbut was a predecessor of the trombone, with a narrower bore and smaller mouthpiece and bell. Both the cornett and sackbut were used in church choral music to add strength to vocal lines or even to replace a missing singer. Certainly, the sound was much closer to that of the human voice than the sound of the modern trumpet and trombone. Gabrieli had a regular ensemble of two cornetts and two sackbuts at St Mark's and this ensemble was supplemented for special occasions, such as when this piece was first performed.

In this Sonata, it is probable that an alto sackbut would have played the second line in Choir 1. The lowest parts in each choir would have been played on a bass sackbut. Tenor sackbuts would have been used for the rest of the parts. Notice the use of **tenor clefs** for the two middle parts in each choir. The tenor clef is a type of **C clef**. The sign points to middle C. Thus, the first note of the Trombone 1 part is B flat above middle C.

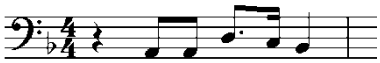
In bar 28 the violin part mentioned in the instrument list goes down to **D, a minor 7th below middle C**, well below the lowest note of the violin (G below middle C). The part would have been played on a lower pitched instrument of the violin family, close to the modern viola.

At this period there was still **no clearly identifiable idiomatic instrumental style**. Technically, the music could equally be played on groups of string or brass instruments. The **range** is quite **narrow**. The top part, for instance has a range of a **minor 10th**. If words were to be added, the music **could be sung** without difficulty. In the first choir the parts lie easily within the range of an SATB choir. Nevertheless, composers were just starting to be more specific and Gabrieli was one of the pioneers who specified particular instruments in a piece.

The instruments are grouped throughout in their separate **four-part choirs** or together as a full **eight-part** grouping. There are no solo sections and no sense of accompaniment, though there have been suggestions that organists might have played from the bass part of each choir, improvising the chords as they were soon to do in the new early Baroque style of the beginning of the seventeenth-century.

Texture

- The most obvious aspect of the texture is the division of the forces into two alternating groups in **polychoral** style.
- The two choirs answer each other with brief phrases in **antiphonal** texture from bar 37 to bar 40 and elsewhere. At other times, they have much longer sections playing as individual choirs (bars 1-25) or as a **tutti** group (bars 26-31).
- For much of the music, including the first 36 bars, the texture is in **free polyphony**, with each part being of equal melodic importance (as opposed to melody dominated homophony, where a tune in one part would be accompanied by music forming chords in the other parts).
- There is occasional **imitation**, though it rarely lasts for more than three or four notes, often at the beginning of sections. The piece begins with Trombone 3 imitating Trombone 2 a minim later, starting a fifth below. The imitation is very **free** and the leap of a fourth in the upper of these two parts is imitated by a leap of a 5th in Trombone 3.
- Sometimes it is only the rhythm that is imitated. Thus the top two parts in the first two bars begin with a very similar rhythm to that of the first part to enter.
- Occasionally the imitative strands are more separated as at bars 17 to 19, where the two lowest parts start together, followed by the upper parts entering one by one.
- The most extended passage of imitation occurs for four bars in the final section, when a short rhythmic idea is taken up in turn by almost all the different parts, sometimes omitting the first note.



- For contrast, there are occasional moments of **homorhythm** (all parts moving together with the same rhythm) as at bar 45.
- Music that is more obviously **chordal**, thus **homophonic**, can be found at places like bars 47-48.
- There are occasional passages where individual lines move together in **3rds** (top 2 parts at the beginning) or **10ths** (top parts of each choir, end of bar 28).
- The **bass parts tend to be a little simpler** than the others and have a larger number of long notes.

Structure

The music is **through-composed**; there is **no repetition of sections**. One of the developments Gabrieli brought to Venetian polychoral music was the technique of introducing **new material** when one choir answered another, rather than having a

straightforward restatement of the same music (though this does happen in the central section of this piece, when short phrases are answered back and forth between the choirs).

The music falls naturally into different sections dictated by the arrangement of the two choirs. Thus, there are long initial statements by each choir followed by a powerful *forte tutti* section. A series of **shorter antiphonal sections** then follow, punctuated by short tuttis (three to four bars each). A longer final tutti (10 bars) completes the piece. Many of the sections **overlap** for half a bar or more.

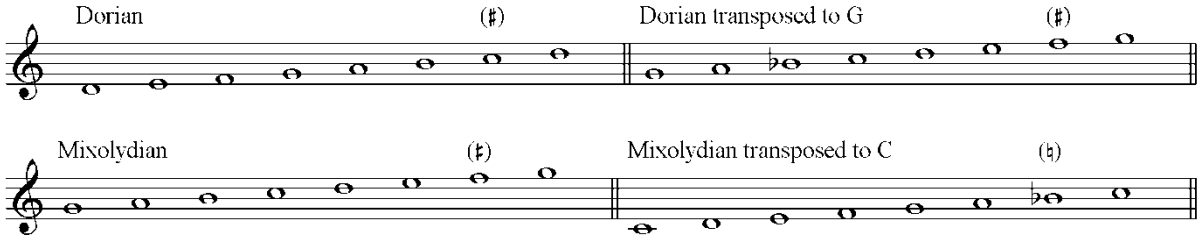
The table below provides a more detailed analysis.

Bar	**Comment**
1-14	First, lengthy statement by Choir 1. Dorian mode transposed to G. Phrase lengths 4, 5 and 5 bars long, respectively.
14-26	Answer by second choir. Beginning overlaps with end of 1st section. Dorian mode as before. New material, rather than repetition of the Choir 1 statement. Repeated note idea beginning at bar 17 related to idea beginning at the end of bar 4 in Trombone 2.
26-31	*Forte tutti* section. Mixolydian mode, transposed to C. Distinctive scalic idea in top parts of both choirs and 5th trombone.
31-71	Central antiphonal section. Sometimes phrases are as long as four bars (e.g. 31-34). Elsewhere they only last for two bars (37-38) or even one bar (59). Often the two choirs exchange the same material (e.g. bars 37-40). After each passage of antiphonal exchanges, there is always music of three to four bars in length where the whole ensemble joins together, usually with different melodic material (e.g. bars 40-43). Tonality is fluid in this section.
71-end	Final tutti with frequent use of imitation, both of the dotted figure mentioned under section on 'texture' earlier, and of a descending scalic figure, related to the one in bars 26 to 27 – itself related to the figure in Trombone 2, bar 3. The music ends with a ***tierce de Picardie*** on G.

Tonality

- During the late Renaissance, when this piece was written, **modes** were very gradually being replaced by the modern major and minor key system.
- There are parts of this piece which seem to suggest **modern tonality**, whereas at other times the music appears more obviously modal.
- Despite hints of **G minor** at the beginning, the music here is really in the **Dorian** mode.
- A mode is a white note scale (e.g. Dorian from D to D). The interval between each successive note (tone or semitone) was different in each mode. Thus, the Dorian mode begins with a tone, then a semitone.
- The **Mixolydian** mode on the other hand, begins with two tones.

- Many modes, including the Dorian and Mixolydian, have a **flat 7th** (i.e. a tone between the 7th and 8th notes). The **seventh** note would often be **raised at cadences**.
- In this piece the main mode is Dorian **transposed** up a 4th to G, so the third note of the scale becomes a B flat. The seventh note, F, is often raised to F sharp, e.g. Trombone 2, bars 2-3.



- Composers felt free to introduce a limited number of other accidentals.
- In bar 4 there is a *tierce de Picardie* where the third of the tonic chord is raised. In fact Renaissance composers tended to avoid cadences ending on a chord with a minor 3rd.
- The main 'tonic' note in the music at bar 26 is clearly **C**. The frequent B flats show it is not in C major, however. The music here is in the Mixolydian mode, transposed up a 4th to C.
- At other times, the music moves closer to more modern tonality. The music at bar 45 is in **G minor** and then modulates to **B flat major**, though it is established in a modal way with a **II-I cadence** (bars 46-47) and a **plagal cadence** (IV-I) in bars 48-49.

The music ends in G minor with frequent E flats detracting from a sense of Dorian modality. There is a perfect cadence in bar 77, though the final cadence is plagal.

Harmony

- The chords used are in **root position and 1st inversion**, with the former being more common. This is standard for the time.
- There are some passages of **continuous root position chords**, e.g. bars 47-53.
- The occasional **second inversion** appears only as a passing chord on a weak crotchet beat, e.g. the end of bar 53.
- **Suspensions** are the main form of dissonance. Perhaps the easiest places to look for them are in the second choir, where there are no 'difficult' tenor clefs.
- In bar 16 there is a **7-6** suspension. The A in Trombone 4 is held on to clash with the B flat in the bass before resolving on a G.
- Perhaps the most common suspensions are **4-3**, e.g. bar 20, where the violin F is held on to clash with the G in Trombone 5, over a bass C (the numbering of suspensions is always calculated by working out the position of the clashing note above the lowest sounding note).
- Cadences are used to punctuate the music. **Perfect cadences** are by far the most common in this piece. There is perfect cadence from bar 13 to bar 14 on G, with a *tierce de Picardie* (see notes in the 'tonality' section).
- There is a special kind of imperfect cadence from bar 44 to bar 45, called a Phrygian cadence (IVb-V).
    - Other cadences include **VIIb-I** in bar 4.

Melody

- The first point to make is that melody is **not the most essential characteristic** of this piece. Texture and sonorities are more important.
- In music as contrapuntal as this piece often is, **melodic interest moves from part to part**, and can often be found in different simultaneous parts, as in bars 1-2, where the main melodic interest is in the two middle parts.
- Most of the melodic lines are **conjunct** (i.e. they move stepwise), e.g. violin, bars 18-21, or contain mainly steps with only occasional **small leaps**, e.g. violin, bars 22-25, where there is a single **minor 3rd** among all the stepwise progressions.
- Sometimes the steps are extended to form **scalic** movement, e.g. bars 27-30, both **descending and ascending**.
- **Large leaps are rare**. There is an **octave** leap in the cornett part at the end of bar 67. This helps add drama to the *forte tutti* entry.
- Most of the larger leaps are **4ths**, e.g. bar 10 in the cornett.
- **The note following the leap usually lies within the interval of the leap**. So in bar 10 the cornett leaps up a 4th and then descends within that interval. This was standard procedure in the Renaissance.
- **Repeated notes** are a distinctive feature of the melody lines. The cornett at the beginning has four repeated Ds.

Rhythm and metre

- As noted at the top of the score, the editor has added a **time signature** – in this case split common time (two minim beats in the bar).
- Gabrieli omitted a time signature, as many composers did at the time.
- In general, the bars are of even length, though there are two longer bars (30 and 44) notated in **3/2** - three minim beats to the bar.
- There was usually a singer or instrumentalist in each of Gabrieli's choirs who provided some kind of visual beat, but there was **no concept of a strong first beat of the bar** – something which was a feature of the later, Baroque style.
- Some of the more homophonic sections seem to have a more pronounced rhythmic drive (e.g. bars 45-50).
- **Syncopation** was a common feature of Renaissance style. **Weak beats** were frequently **emphasised** with longer notes, as in the cornett part of bar 8.
- Syncopated notes were often made more effective by being approached by **leap**, like the C in bar 10.
- A distinctive feature of Gabrieli's sonata is the use of **dotted notes** for the beginnings of phrases, either dotted minims, as at the beginning and bar 26, or dotted crotchets as in bars 37-39.

Further reading

Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (Oxford, 2001), Vol. 9, pp. 390-396.