

14. G. Gabrieli

Sonata pian' e forte

(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Biography

- Giovanni Gabrieli was born in 1557.
- Gabrieli 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 were two choir 'lofts' or galleries in the church of St Mark's, each of which could be occupied by singers, instrumentalists or combinations of the two. It is important to recognise that the term 'choir' just meant a performing group.
- 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 volume of sound, 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 16th Century to the beginning of the 17th 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*, NAM p. 269).
- He died in 1612.

Main Features of the Venetian Musical Style at the End of the 16th Century

- Polychoral style using antiphonal writing (see notes on texture).
- Both homophony and polyphony used.
- Old instruments, eg. Cornett and sackbut were still important as they had not yet been replaced by trumpet and trombone).
- Instrumental style not yet idiomatic, ie. mainly vocal.
- 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 used.
- Dissonance provided mainly by suspensions.
- Melody frequently moved 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).

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 a performance of this piece.

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.

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 would be.

In this sonata, it was probable that an alto sackbut would have played the second line in the first choir. 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 Bb 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, similar 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 and 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 in their demands and Gabrieli was one of the first to indicate particular instruments in particular pieces.

Here, the instruments are grouped together in separate four part choirs or else as a full eight-part ensemble. No instruments are treated as solo or as accompaniment, though there have been suggestions that organists might have played from the bass part of each choir, improvising a chordal support as they were soon to do in early Baroque music.

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

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 Bars 37 to 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, the texture is in free polyphony, with each part being of equal melodic importance.
- 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 fifth 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, starting at bar 71, when the above motif 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 47-8.
- There are occasional passages where individual lines are heard 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 Giovanni 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 exchanged between choirs).

The music falls naturally into different sections dictated by the dialogue between 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.

Here is a more detailed analysis:

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 from the second choir. The beginning overlaps with the end of the first section. The Dorian mode is as before. New material, rather than repetition of the first choir's statement, although the repeated note idea beginning at Bar 17 could be related to the idea beginning at the end of Bar 4 in Trombone 2.

26-31: Forte tutti section. Begins and ends on 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 (eg. 31-34). Elsewhere they only last for two bars (37-38) or even one bar (59). Often the two choirs exchange the same material (eg. 37-40). After each antiphonal exchanges, there is always music of three to four bars in length where the whole ensemble joins together, usually with different melodic material (eg. 40-43). Tonality is fluid in this section.

71-80: Final tutti with frequent use of imitation, both of the dotted figure mentioned under '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 (eg. Dorian from D to D). The interval between each successive note (tone or semitone) is different in each mode. Thus the Dorian mode begins with a tone, then a semitone.
- The Mixolydian mode, a trace of which occurs at Bars 26-31, begins with two tones.
- Many modes, including the Dorian and Mixolydian, have a flat 7th (ie. 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, eg. Bars 2-3, are in trombone 2.



Composers felt free to introduce a limited number of other accidentals.

- In Bar 4 there is a *tièrce de picardie* where the third of the tonic chord is raised. Renaissance composers rarely ended a phrase 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 really 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 47-8) and a plagal cadence (IV-I) in Bars 48-9. 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, eg. Bar 47 to 53.
- The occasional second inversion appears only as a passing chord on a weak crotchet beat, eg. 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 continued to clash with the B flat of the bass before resolving on a G.
- Perhaps the most common suspensions are 4-3, eg. Bar 20, where the violin F is held on to clash with the G in trombone 5, over a bass C (the description of suspensions depends on 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, eg. from Bar 13 to 14 on G, with a *tièrce de picardie* (see notes on tonality).
- There is a special kind of imperfect cadence from Bar 44 to 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 being of major importance.
- 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 (ie. they move stepwise), eg. violin, Bar 18-21, or contain mainly steps with only occasional small leaps, eg. violin, Bars 22-25, where there is a single minor 3rd amongst all the stepwise progressions.
- Sometimes the steps are extended to form scalar movement, eg. Bar 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**, eg. Bar 10-11 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 era.
- 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 (eg. 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 dotted crotchet A in trombone 2 in Bar 11.
- 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 37-9.

Further Reading

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (2001), Volume 9, pp. 390-6.

D. Arnold, *Giovanni Gabrieli and the Music of the Venetian High Renaissance* (London, 1979)