



Coloratura Singing of Cleopatra in Giulio Cesare: Functional Analysis with Instrumentalization

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Abstract. It is known to all that within the opera, the application of coloratura is one of the highlights which wins applause from the audiences, in the history of Arias coloratura also plays an important role. Nevertheless, this article would focus on other functions of coloratura, for it not only pleases the audiences but also provides chances for singers to show their outstanding abilities to master the voice thus creating different versions of legendary performances. Additionally, it works for the emotions an author wants to carry in some particular scenes in a drama. Last but not the least, coloratura provides additional acoustic impacts for the final presentation of an opera and at the same time, special treatments of the orchestra must be adopted, which is significant for the abundance of acoustic effects in arias. The article takes the arias of Cleopatra from Giulio Cesare as examples, explaining the characteristics of coloratura singing in terms of vocals and orchestra, and using the audio version of part of the arias of Cleopatra from Giulio Cesare sung by singer Natalie Dessay to introduce how singer Natalie Dessay expresses this work The treatment of the cantus firmus and its characteristics.

Keywords: Cleopatra in Giulio Cesare · Natalie Dessay · coloratura style

1 Introduction

Coloratura, the rapid articulation of many notes on one syllable, at the same time present a plenty of dense musical notes rapidly, meanwhile maintain the linearity and clearance of every note, in the Oxford dictionary, coloratura is defined as “elaborate ornamentation of a vocal melody with runs and trills.” (The Canadian Oxford Dictionary. 2004), one of the most scholars and experts hold the opinion that the existence of coloratura is to amuse and please the audiences, to make the opera more attractive to enjoy, for example, in the “ARIE PER SOPRANO COLORATURA, Camillo Maffei (fl. 1562–1573) claims “coloratura’s main purpose is to please the ear”, nevertheless, this article would focus on the other functions of coloratura, for it not only “nature a voice of ornament, pleasure, and display”, but also provides chances for singers to show their prominent abilities of mastering the voice thus create different versions of legendary performances, additionally, it works for the emotions a author wants to carry in some particular scenes in a drama [1].

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The coloratura style was used extensively in the works of Handel's time, George.F. Handel will be discussed as the representative author of arias who is fond of adopting coloratura in his musical works. And some conceptions of vocal parts in the performances of the opera "Giulio Cesare" and the special techniques of Coloratura adopted by different singers will be explored, as well as mainly analysis of the method Handel applies to conduct his style of coloratura as well as the different techniques of dealing with coloratura. Each aria makes use of the ABA structure of the refrain and requires the singer to be able to make some of her unique showy displays in the repetitions after Da Capo. Interestingly, in order not to break the structure of the refrain, but at the same time to meet the basic requirement that the music serves the drama, Handel composed the coloratura in both slow tempo and fast tempo, which places great demands on the singer's technical performance of the coloratura in different episodes and at different tempos [2].

The opera "Giulio Cesare" is set in Egypt in 48 B.C. Cleopatra, a legendary politician, ascends to the throne at the age of seventeen, and she is the last pharaoh of Egypt [3]. The young queen begins a struggle for the throne with her brother, Ptolemy XIII. To take the power back to herself, she decided to ally with Caesar. When Caesar left Rome for Alexandria in 48 B.C., he met Cleopatra, who was 22 years old. Roman reinforcements arrived quickly after she and Caesar made their alliance, and after several battles, Ptolemy XIII was defeated and killed. The opera depicts the classic love story of Giulio Cesare and Cleopatra, both of whom have a certain historical dimension. Handel not only gives the music a rich sound but also has more nuance and depth in describing the personalities of the characters. The structure follows the format of alternating between narrative and lyrical arias. The types of arias are extremely rich, ranging from gorgeous florid to melancholy singing; from majestic and heroic to lively rhythmic dance songs. To enhance the drama of the music, recitative with accompaniment are often used. The long soliloquies in Giulio Cesare are richly inflected, bringing out the sadness of life, making it one of Handel's classic masterpieces of the Baroque period [4]. It has been repeatedly sung by singers of all ages in the centuries that followed. For the role of Cleopatra, there are eight arias, each of which expresses the personality of Cleopatra's character.

2 A First Look at the Coloratura Style

In the first opinion, the coloratura had more to do with the ability of the castrati singers, particularly in the eighteen century, almost all vocal parts had to be sung in ornamentation in "castrati became the most influential teachers and singers and they attained legendary techniques in performance, thus the figure of the castrato is closely connected to coloratura [5]. The castrated singers were originally male, except that they underwent castration before puberty, which suppressed the production of male hormones. This made their voices less thick and coarse, and more slender and soft. In addition, males have a larger lung capacity than females, and the Baroque period preferred such a voice, closer to God. Coupled with more scientific training, the strength of their diaphragm will provide even more support, so that an individual note can last up to a minute, not only with a wider range but with a very powerful sound. So they can show off their skills

on stage at will and change an ordinary track into a very magnificent one. In Baroque opera, it is the castrato singers, not the soprano's tone, who are primarily worth studying. But Handel believed that the soprano's aria was as important as the castrato singer's, and if an opera was only sung by castrato singers, the whole opera must be insipid. The soprano can achieve a great stage effect with her tone, and her melody is already very easy to remember [6].

Natalie Dessay contributes a gentle, warm texture to the voice of the soprano, which is one of the most well-known characteristics of her coloratura. "Her coloratura has all the requisite agility and flexibility for this repertory, but she sings with an incisive warmth that focuses attention first and foremost on the music and the text. She brings this gallery of operatic portraits to life with intelligence, style, and commitment" [7]. "Dessay's recorded sound may not have the glittery edge of other coloratura sopranos, but there is something sunny and warm about her vocal concentration and musical poise that has a way of reassuring the listener" [8]. In Natalie Dessay's performance, the author found that she sang the coloratura to express her joy with a unified tone, did not show other superfluous things when expressing the characters, kept a rational and strict state when interpreting the coloratura, did not deliberately put out all the voices to express the so-called "joy", and at the same time, she took advantage of her vocal condition and the small size of the soprano genre, so that the audience could feel the warm sound when listening to this aria. The meaning of coloratura in operatic performance is also explored in Vocal Virtuosity, and it can range from technical mastery to dance, joy, and even lunacy [5]. At the same time, it is also possible to add some dance movements in rhythm to the singing of the coloratura pieces, bringing a lot of visual experience to the theatre audience's perception.

At the end of the entire opera of *Giulio Cesare*, as it is shown in Fig. 1, Cleopatra sings a very famous aria called "Da tempeste il legno infranto", from Act III, Scene II of the opera. Cleopatra sings the aria "Return from the Storm" with great joy and happiness. The tempo of this aria is allegro, using the key of E major, and the overall musical image is more cheerful, expressing Cleopatra's excitement, anticipation, and joy. Because of the speed and the perceived image of the moment, the Coloratura singing shows its dazzling characteristics [9]. The addition of the cadenza to specific words such as "infranto, desiar, bear" and other words that express the emotions of the character, on the one hand, the Italian language usually ends with open vowels such as "a", "e", "o", etc., so that the singer can better maintain the resonant position and the cadence when singing, making the tone more uniform, as in Peri and Rinuccini's preface to "Euridice" explains the reason for this for the public. "I knew likewise that in our speech some words are so intoned that harmony can be based upon them and that in the course of speaking it passes through many others that are not so intoned until it returns to another that will bear a progression to a fresh consonance" [10]. On the other hand, Handel himself wanted to capture the hearts of the audience at the end of the opera, to be applauded and applauded by the theater audience. In this regard, the coloratura singing style is particularly important.

The author finds out that Handel's aria in the opera *Giulio Cesare* is long, but uses only a few simple lines of the libretto, in which, in addition to using coloratura devices to dazzle, the orchestra plays a weaving that also serves the singer, as well as the drama and

the emotions the character is trying to express. In this aria, the orchestra plays mostly in unison with the violins, often in unison with the singer's melody, and the orchestra plays the melody line underneath while the singer sings the cadenza, further deepening the virtuosity of the cadenza and making the melody familiar to the listener. In the first phrase of the entire piece, the violin's unison accompaniment corresponds perfectly with the singer's vocal melody, revealing and reinforcing the motive of the aria's musical theme, as illustrated in the chart below as well as demonstrating that vocal melodies can be instrumentalized.

In the course of the subsequent development, as it is shown in Fig. 2, the melodic form of the vocal and orchestra began to slowly separate, and the violin part began to split in two, with the first part keeping the B eighth notes unmoved, and the second part beginning to become a downward progression, keeping the form of a third interval down with the bass voice. At this point, the singer is constantly echoing the two violin parts as they move between #G-B-#F-B-E-B-#D-B, with the intervals, increasing in distance. The music proceeds with the unique polyphonic music writing color of the Baroque period.

Immediately afterward, the music continues to split up, and at the end of the word "desiar" the cantabile rendition begins. This can be discussed with the illustration of Fig. 3. It is interesting to note that in this fast and dense section, the violin part disappears, leaving only the bass of the chord as a padding, and all the attention is focused on the vocalist's showy passage, which requires the vocalist to have a strong control of the music and to be able to sing every note accurately without the guidance of the orchestra, which is also a technical difficulty for the vocalist in performing the coloratura. This is also a technical difficulty for the singer to perform the cadenza. This concludes the first part of the A section.



Fig. 1. "Da tempeste il legno infranto", from Act III, Scene II, Giulio Cesare, picture retrieved from <https://musopen.org/zh-hans/music/composer/giulio-cesare-arresti/>



Fig. 2. "Da tempeste il legno infranto", from Act III, Scene II, Giulio Cesare, picture retrieved from <https://musopen.org/zh-hans/music/composer/giulio-cesare-arresti/>

Fig. 3. The second part in the A section, “Da tempeste il legno infranto”, from Act III, Scene II, Giulio Cesare, picture retrieved from <https://musopen.org/zh-hans/music/composer/giulio-cesare-arresti/>

The second part in the A section moves from E major to B major, using the arpeggiated chords of B major to imitate the theme in the upper fifth. When the same coloratura passage as in the first part appears, it is clear that both violin voices are working together with the coloratura melody, building up the momentum for the subsequent #C-A, B-#G, and A-#F interval jumps in sixths, allowing the beautiful coloratura to burst forth at the highest point, and the drama of the coloratura is fully enhanced. Then again, the music proceeds through successive sixteenth notes upward in imitation, which is illustrated in Fig. 4, building up energy to the E major genus chord, at which point the violins and basses are both long, leaving life to perform the cadenza, making the music complete, well-structured, and fully wound up.

In the ABA structure, the B section often contrasts with the A section, either in intensity, modulation, or tempo. If the musical ebb and flow of the A section are not obvious, then the B section should have a distinct ebb and flow. In this aria, the A

Fig. 4. Sixteenth notes upward in imitation, “Da tempeste il legno infranto”, from Act III, Scene II, Giulio Cesare, picture retrieved from <https://musopen.org/zh-hans/music/composer/giulio-cesare-arresti/>



Fig. 5. “Da tempeste il legno infranto”, from Act III, Scene II, Giulio Cesare, in Natalie Dessay’s version, retrieved from https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ut41127WY?p=3&vd_source=d2f1842eda0ee0b9470b94448d426a0e on 9th May, 2023, Picture credit: Original

section focuses mainly on E major, which is relatively homogeneous in tonality. The tonal change is therefore more pronounced in the B section, where the short B section changes three keys in the manner of #C minor - B major - #g minor. For the aria *Da tempeste il legno infranto*, if the A section expresses fast, intense, and majestic emotions in a major key, then when the music is converted to a minor key, it needs to express the emotions in a delicate, introspective and deep way, such a contrasting rendition is more expressive of Cleopatra’s joy at being successfully rescued by Giulio Cesare and the delicate sweetness of love.

The return part of the aria, as it is shown in Fig. 5, established by Alessandro Scarlatti, the founder of the Neapolitan school, gave opera music a new expansion and established the three-part structure of the present work. It also gave the *Bel Canto* a wider scope to sing. The musical content of the recapitulation does not continue to be represented on the score but is marked directly *Da Capo*, meaning repeated from the beginning, with the words *Fine* at the end of the A’ part. In the A section, there is not a complete recapitulation, but a dynamic recapitulation with melodic variations. It is thus clear that Natalie Dessay’s ornamentation of the phrase does not exist separately from the main key, and we do not see this ornamental flourish marked in the score in the modern surviving scores. Her coloratura has all the requisite agility and flexibility for this repertoire, but she sings with an incisive warmth that focuses attention first and foremost on the music and the text. She brings this gallery of operatic portraits to life with intelligence, style, and commitment [7].

There are no markings on the score, so it is more a matter of the singer’s improvisation to win the applause of the audience and to make the aria come alive and reflect the character’s emotions. Although this particular song structure accentuates the extreme showmanship of the castrato singer, Handel likewise used this form for the soprano at the time of composition to make the whole work more balanced, while placing high demands on the soprano’s technique in singing the coloratura tone.

3 The Structure and Vocal

Carman claimed that vocal virtuosity was a source of power for women, creating opportunities for female ownership and innovation, and also that coloratura became gendered as the derivation of the female singer [5]. Improvised melodic spins and delicate rhythms combine these intense emotional outbursts with increasingly difficult technical displays

of sound. But there are also arias in the Cleopatra of Giulio Cesare that are sung at a slower tempo, while Handel also wrote coloratura singing. The aria ‘Se pieta di me non senti’ is sung in a coloratura style at a slow tempo in a wide panel. This aria appears in Act II, Scene VIII of the opera. In Ptolemy’s harem, Cesare and Cleopatra are on a date, but when a group of traitors outside the palace come after them and try to kill Cesare, Cleopatra reveals to Caesar the true identity of Cleopatra and intends to protect Giulio Cesare and fight together for love. As Giulio Cesare leaves the harem, Cleopatra is thrown into a state of worry and prays that God will keep his beloved safe. She performs this aria while feeling grief and pain.

Unlike *Da tempeste il legno infranto*, which is written in $\sharp f$ minor, the structure is still that of an ABA refrain aria, but it undergoes several transpositions in the A section alone. The first phrase is sung from bar 8, but in bar 9 the melodic minor of $\sharp E$ and $\sharp D$ appears with characteristic changes of tone. In the following bar 15 $\sharp B$ begins to appear thus shifting to $\sharp c$ minor and remains there for some time. Bar 25 used a continuous upward modal progression in a small dot. These are manifest in Fig. 6. Bars 26–27 progress through the preceding repetitions as well as imitations, and at the highest point the characteristic notes of $\sharp G$ and $\sharp A$ and the termination of the through-bass B-E, the tonic shifts to b minor. After a series of coloratura singing it returns to the dominant key of $\sharp F$ minor. With four transpositions in just one A part, Handel here fully expresses Cleopatra’s worry and unease about her beloved Caesar and her fear that she might die even while fighting with him.

For difficult vocal works, slower music is often much more difficult to sing technically than faster music, requiring the singer to have extremely strong control and to have enough breath to support the full timing of a long note. It is also necessary to ensure that the singer’s resonance position is more focused and that the sound pipe does not deform as the body sways. It is only then that the tone sounds smooth and full and round. The same is true of the slow movement, in which Handel’s writing does not mimic the melodic progressions, but rather employs more of an increasing and decreasing pitch relationship, reflecting the instability of the music. A more exaggerated interval jumping progression of the seventh is also used (bars 26–27 a- $\natural g2$). This requires the singer to ensure musical fluidity while being aware of the large spans between dissonant intervals and placing greater emphasis on pitch accuracy.

Fig. 6. “Se pie ta”, from Act III, Scene II, Giulio Cesare, in Natalie Dessay’s version, retrieved from https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ut41127WY?p=3&vd_source=d2f1842eda0e0b9470b94448d426a0e on 9th May, 2023, Picture credit: Original

In Natalie Dessay's singing, it is universally acknowledged that the immediate impression given to the audience is that she has an ethereal and full tone in this cantata. Because most of the coloratura passages throughout the coloratura section are concentrated in the upper register, the register that best reflects the soprano's tone, singing with feeling at a very slow tempo would be required to make the melody more tense and extended, allowing each note to be articulated with roundness and transparency. This delicate treatment is more similar to the tone of castrato singers when they sing, and shows a side effect of Handel's 18th-century application of the melodic lines of castrato singers to the soprano. Natalie Dessay's excellent interpretation of this aria illustrates to modern audiences the most important way of singing in the 18th-century Baroque period. Instead, it is the coherence, conflict, and vocal resonance that are more evident in the fast-paced coloratura passages.

When modern singer learns to grasp the coloratura technique, especially younger learners tend to make their voices sound clumsy and heavy, which is not true. When performing continuous sixteenth notes, people sing with a lighter voice and intensity song, with an even voice and a rounded voice, reflecting the feeling of lightness. Each note should be even and coherent while ensuring a sense of granularity, avoiding getting stuck between each note and no transition. One of the coloratura characteristics in Handel's works is that there are many jumping intervals in Handel's works, and most of these intervals occur in the transonic region, which means people will not easy control and it will not easy to grasp this technique. F sharp to A, which is the darker area of the singer's and requires special and high vocal skills to perform well. It is important to keep the larynx stable and ensure strong breath support during the leaps to produce good resonance. The coloratura expression, represented by the castrato singer, was also much in evidence in the soprano interpretations of 18th-century opera to enhance the operatic stage. It also provided an opportunity to draw on the innovative approaches of Mozart in the late 18th century and Rossini in the 19th century. At the same time, a systematic understanding of the reasons for the powerful showmanship of castrati singers contributed to the development of Bel Canto opera and how singers were trained.

4 Conclusion

This article focuses on the coloratura between Allegro and Largo tempo, the existence of coloratura is much more than the cheers from the audiences. The coloratura rendition under the fast movement gives the audience a shocking feeling, while the slow movement shows an ethereal and silent character. It functions not only for the singers but also the drama itself, due to the complexity of Baroque opera and the condition in the time of Handel, coloratura carries the emotions that the composer wants to express, at the same time, assists with the combination of singing methods in coloratura and the contexts of the plots.

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