

# *Opera at the cutting edge*

*Tasso's text, Monteverdi's music, Agrippa's action*



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Australian Research Council  
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1

## INTRODUCTION

Monteverdi's stage directions for the Combat of Tancredi & Clorinda<sup>1</sup> are deceptively simple: the protagonists enact the entire battle, as described by the tenor narrator.

2

Setting the context - the early seventeenth-century trend for wearing 4-foot long, razor-sharp, needle-pointed rapiers as a fashion accessory, and the period obsession with duels of honour – Dr Tobias Capwell, curator of the Wallace Collection in London<sup>2</sup>, described our performance as an 'intimate evening of renaissance violence'. In the printed score, Monteverdi claims that this 'unified representation of three actions' – text, music and sword-fighting - was 'a style never before seen or heard'.

3

Nevertheless, this sword-show is just one more example of the great variety of early *seicento* music-drama - *in genere rappresentativo, favola in musica, musica recitativa, rappresentazione, spettacolo, ballo, azione armoniche* - in the rich melting-pot that would later crystallise out into what we now call 'opera'. As such, it shares with all those other dramas the common aim of *muovere gli affetti* – moving the audience's passions.

4

In this combined session reporting on the Guildhall School of Music & Drama's production of *Combattimento* at the Wallace Collection last May, supported by the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions and in connection with the London Olympics, I will discuss the principles of historical performance practice that guided us, and how those principles were applied in rehearsal. John Sloboda's companion paper then continues, examining the interaction between performers and audience.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

For the audience at the Wallace Collection, the program booklet offered a literal, word by word translation of Tasso's text, together with a short program note setting the scene:

5

Just before dawn, the darkest hour of the night... The pale walls of the medieval city of Jerusalem can just be seen in the fading star-light. For the Crusaders, it has been a bad night: their great tower with its wooden siege-machinery was burnt down in a daring raid by two unidentified knights from the defending Muslim army. Tancredi, champion of the western alliance, leads a counter-attack, and in the confusion, the city gates are closed with one of the two raiders still outside. Little does Tancredi know that this anonymous knight is actually Clorinda, a ferocious female warrior and champion of the Muslims, with whom he is secretly in love.

6

According to Tasso's epic poem (which the 17<sup>th</sup>-century audience would have known well) the two knights fight a ferocious duel. They pause for a moment, bloodied and exhausted, and Tancredi gloats to realise that his opponent's wounds are the more severe. But for every drop of blood that is shed, he will soon pay a sea of tears.

They fight again, and the fatal blow is struck. Clorinda acknowledges defeat, and asks to be baptised. And it is only as Tancredi raises the visor of her helmet to administer the sacrament with water from a nearby stream that 'he sees her, and knows who she is.' *Ahi vista!* (Ah, sight!), *ahi conoscenza!* (Ah, recognition!).

7

In an extraordinary passage of deliberate, dramatic ambiguity, we hear that

Death is not immediate, emotions are suppressed, virtues are gathered up all in one point and kept in the heart...

(The sword's point is still embedded in Clorinda's chest, but this phrase also recalls the Virgin Mary 'keeping all these things – the Christmas mysteries - in her heart').

... so that, turning to give life with water to the one killed with steel..."

Only now does it become clear this 'not dying' but 'pulling together enough strength to control the emotions' refers not to Clorinda but to Tancredi. In Tasso's epic, Tancredi's life is wrecked by this tragedy, and he must somehow redeem himself. But Monteverdi's music-drama ends with Clorinda's dying words: Heaven opens, I go... in peace.

8

Quoting again from the program booklet:

Monteverdi set Tasso's poetry in the most modern style, his *seconda prattica*, in which passionate communication of the text takes precedence over the strict rules of counterpoint. A string ensemble plays some conventional *ritornelli*, but mostly creates sound effects for the battle: the heavy tread of Tancredi's [war-]horse ... the clash of swords; the clang of shields and helmets as the warriors move in to grapple at close quarters, [even the drops of blood.]

## RE-DEFINING RECITATIVE

9

In order not to set up false expectations, in that program note I deliberately avoided the words Recitative, and *musica recitativa*. Similarly, for discussions with the audience I asked John to avoid the word 'expressive', which tends to be equated with 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century-style *rubato* and with the romantic concept of performance: 'the genius performer expressing their mighty emotions to a humble audience worshipping in the temple of culture'. Both terms, 'Recitative' and 'expressive' are problematic.

10

For many modern audiences, Recitative is 'the boring bit between the nice tunes'. This is a serious problem for 'early opera', which is nearly all Recitative, with very few 'nice tunes'.

The standard musicological definition of recitative calls for more-or-less rapid declamation over a static bass. And today's Early Musicians mostly interpret recitative with the 'help' of a conductor, in free rhythm, and with liberal doses of ornamentation.

11

Close reading of early sources reveals a consistent period view that differs sharply from today's early music practice. Then as now, the Italian word *recitare* means 'to act'. *Un recitante* is an actor. *Musica recitativa* is acted music, dramatic music, theatrical music. The performances are designated as *Favola in musica* (Story in Music), *Rappresentazione* (Show), *Spettacolo* (a Spectacular) or (my favourite) *Azioni Armoniche* (Harmonic Actions). Music *in genere rappresentativo* is show-style, and *recitar cantando* is to act whilst singing.

This re-defining of Recitative is supported by the anonymous c1630 guide for a music-theatre's Artistic Director, *Il Corago*. For *Il Corago*, Recitative is almost identical to the spoken declamation of a fine actor.

12

It's all about text and rhythm, specifically the slow count of *Tactus* at about minim = 60. Singers and continuo players work together to maintain the *Tactus*, symbolic of and measured by the pulse, the heartbeat; a pendulum; or the perfect time of celestial orbits.

13

Cavalieri specifies how to construct a varied libretto, structures the music with rhythmic contrasts (proportions and short, memorable phrases in repeating units) and warns singers against adding ornamentation. He recommends a spectacular show with costumes, gestures and movement. Caccini prioritises 'Text, Rhythm and Sound last of all: and not the other way around'. Peri says that some singers of the old school do use a lot of ornamentation, but this is not the best way to move the passions with his new music. Monteverdi explicitly instructs the narrator of *Combattimento* not to ornament, except in the one aria.

14

Close reading of Peri shows that he assumes the singer will follow the continuo, 'dancing to the movement of the bass', which is why he reduces the bass to slow notes, *Tactus* rhythm only, for recitatives. Viadana tells singers and continuo not to add too much ornamentation: 'do only what is written'. Kapsberger shows how to play an arpeggio on the theorbo: his right-hand fingering allows the player to define the end of the arpeggio as clearly or as subtly as the context requires. This *arpeggio commune* is the ideal way for a harp or theorbo to sustain the harmony across the two minim beats of a complete *Tactus*.

Banchieri teaches continuo students to tap their feet, to learn that vital *Tactus* beat. Agazzari distinguishes fundamental accompaniment (organ, theorbo, harp in some contexts) which should be simple, from decorative ornamentation (on lute, violin, harp in other contexts). He also calls for the continuo to imitate the *affetto e somiglianza delle parole* (the emotion and the resemblance – in sound - of the words).

Bianchiardi gives simple harmony rules, considering movement between two bass notes (confirming the short-term phrasing, two or three notes to a phrase, for recitative bass-lines). *Il Corago* defines the role of the Principal Continuo Player, to wave a hand in *Tactus* if necessary for large ensembles (who might be widely separated across the stage and wings), but not for recitatives.

15

So in contrast to today's standard practice - conductors, *rubato* and ornamentation, singers trying to be 'expressive' and continuo-players desperately trying to follow them (like the fairground game of trying to shoot ducks) – early *seicento* Recitative was about Text, Rhythm and Action uniting to move the audience's passions.

## TEXT, RHYTHM, SOUND

16

Monteverdi's selection of Tasso's verses plunges us directly into the thick of the Action. The narrator presents Tancredi and Clorinda (whom Tancredi assumes is Saracen warlord), eager for a duel to the death.

She is on foot, circling around the steep hill (the continuo has a circular walking bass), towards the gate (high note for the singer). He spurs his horse into the chase. Now Monteverdi unites Text and Rhythm to create the Sound of Action with the *Trotto del cavallo* – the Movement of the Horse, using musical Proportions to show the equine Walk, Trot, Canter and Gallop.

Many modern performances, in a misguided search for 'expressivity', blur Monteverdi's measured changes of Proportion into a continuous accelerando. That might be how a jet-plane accelerates, but horses 'change gear' from one manner of gait to another.

17

Another temptation for modern performers is to corrupt the strict ratios of Proportion, and just zoom off at maximum speed. No doubt a crack 17<sup>th</sup>-century post-horse could have accelerated quickly to high speed, but Tancredi – dressed in armour – was riding a great war-horse, also fully armoured. A knight on horseback is the period equivalent of a battle-tank: not so very fast, but heavy, powerful and dangerous.

### Video 1 BIG HORSE

#### VISIONS

18

Renaissance theory of Emotions considers that the words of the text, poetic imagery, music and the sight of the performers on stage all conjure up Visions in the audience's minds. Spirits of Passion communicate between their minds and bodies, producing physical reactions (changes in the Four Humours). Those Spirits of Passion are also conveyed directly, by Aenergia from the performer's eyes, and by Pneuma, the performer's mystic breath.

Modern-day science would also recognise the role of mirror neurons: as Tancredi and Clorinda wield their swords, audience members (expert swordsmen all) would experience their own sword-muscles preparing for action, with all the concomitant emotions of a real-life duel.

#### SWORD DEMONSTRATION

19

Period Rapiers are long, razor-sharp and needle pointed. The guard position looks 'baroque', stylised, exaggerated... until someone points a long, sharp sword at you. Then getting low down and leaning backwards has irresistible logic. From this guard position, that most characteristic 17<sup>th</sup>-century attack the *botta lunga* (lunge), does indeed have 'incredible extension'.

In 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, these weapons were not sports equipment, but were in one sense sacred objects, in another sense a fashion statement. Fundamentally they were tools for killing. Sword skills were learnt for self-defence in extremis. So *Combattimento* is rather more than a historical romp through a kinky fight-scene. For the original audience, there would have been a chilling sense of life-and-death reality, for all the antique background of the plot.

For our participants, the focus during rehearsal on safety issues helped keep them serious about the swords.

With our audience very close to the performers (as the 17<sup>th</sup>-century audience would also have been), there was no possibility of staging a realistic duel. Trying to imagine how Monteverdi's performers might have solved this problem, I started from the knowledge that Italian courtiers would have practised with their swords for several hours, every day. Period treatises show typical sword-actions that would be demonstrated by the master and practised by his students: an attack, a riposte, a clever counter-riposte from a particularly skilled fighter. To learn effectively, such practice has to be slow, but technically perfect; safe, but deadly serious.

And so we decided to show not a fake fight, but real training drills.

20

ACTION

The 17<sup>th</sup> century looked back to Quintilian to define the three secrets of great performance.

Video Clip 2:

Question: What are the three secrets of great delivery?

Answer: Action! Action! Action!

21

During the last few decades, Early Musicians have gradually recognised the importance of Historical Dance for the sound of period music. Renaissance courtiers spent several hours every day at dance-lessons and in social dancing. Similarly, the look of early opera depends on Dance, and also on period Swordsmanship. Those same courtiers also spent several hours every day at sword-practice, and the postures and movements of fencing and dancing are related.

Both Arts held a high place in renaissance Philosophy, since Dancing and Fencing were related to Astronomy as sciences of Number, Time and Space. (Music is slightly lower, as a science of Number and Time).

22

Historical Action calls for much more than mere Baroque Gesture. It is full body acting, focussing on the face and eyes. The actor should have the noble posture of a painting, the communicative face of a portrait, eyes that shine with light, the elegant movement of a dancer, and the strength of a swordsman.

23

Just as Action was regarded as essential for good delivery, so embodied performance was linked to period theories of emotional communication. *Pneuma*, the mystic breath that conveys Spirits of Passion from singer to audience, is identified with the divine breath of Creation and also (this appears to be a new insight in the fields of historical acting and historical swordsmanship) with the 'communication of energy' within the body. This last point emerges from writers on medicine in classical antiquity, from which renaissance medical theory was derived.

24

This threefold connection of actual performance, celestial inspiration, and embodied physicality parallels the well-known renaissance categorisation of music as *instrumentalis* (performed by voices or instruments), *mondana* (the music of the celestial spheres) and *humana* (the harmonious nature of the human body).

## HISTORICAL SWORDSMANSHIP

25

The best Historical Dancers and Historical Martial Arts practitioners study their art in a similar way to Early Musicians, examining period treatises to learn details of historical techniques, contextualising specialist documents with wide reading of philosophical and cultural sources.

If anything, historical sword-masters are more precise than us musicians, distinguishing between the styles of particular writers from the same period and place in a way that we musicians do not. Swordsmen consider the two great Italian masters of this period, Salvator Fabris (1606) and Capo Ferro (1610) to have quite distinct approaches and study one or the other, whereas most performers happily conflate Caccini and Monteverdi as we try to understand early 17<sup>th</sup>-century monody.

26

The surviving sword-treatise closest in date to Monteverdi seems to be Capo Ferro's elegant and deadly *Gran Simulacro dell' arte e dell' uso della scherma*, famous for the 'incredible extension of the *botta lunga*' (long hit, the fencing lunge) and characterised in the first illustrated action-example by a lightning-fast parry and riposte in a single tempo. In one movement, you combine the action of blocking your opponent's attack with your own counter-attack, directing the point of your rapier through his left eye. Capo Ferro's motto is "never parry without a riposte".

27

As soon as the battle commences, Tasso's libretto is full of the technical language of period swordsmanship. *Schivare* – to avoid or 'deceive' the blade: your opponent tries to beat your sword aside, but you avoid his blade and attack. *Parare* – to parry, to use your sword to block your opponent's strike, and attack. *Ritirarse* – to step backwards so that your opponent's strike misses, and attack.

Monteverdi links the swordfighting text to the rhythm of the 'classic' swordfighting move with which all Capo Ferro's actions begin, the *cavatione* (disengage-attack). Instruments imitate the sounds of battle, violin bows mimic the movements of the swords.

**Video 3: He beats her sword, she avoids the beat, he parries, she steps aside**

28

However, there is evidence to show that Tasso himself owned a copy of an earlier treatise, Agrippa's *Trattato di Scientia d'Arme* (Rome, 1553) – the same city and year as Ortiz's book for viola da gamba *Tratado de glosas*. We used an Ortiz Recercada as an instrumental prelude to *Combattimento*.

Agrippa's approach is characterised by calculated use of angles, and by turning the body like a ball, away from an incoming attack. In one action, Agrippa combines low cunning, a sudden turn and a sharp attack to deadly effect:

29

You go cunningly in this position, with the point of the sword close to the ground and the shield wide open, leaving your chest open to attack, so that your opponent comes to strike you. But from this position, all in one movement (one *tempo*) you parry with the shield, attack with a thrust of the sword-point, turn your body, and just make a counter-pass to your opponent's left side, lifting up your shield over your head, as you see here.

30

Setting Tasso's description of Tancredi's deadly attack - *Ma ecco hormai l'ora fatal e giunta* (But, look, already the fatal hour has arrived, when the life of Clorinda must come to its end) ) - Monteverdi changes between slow and fast declamation, with the cinematic effect of 'slow-motion'.

He thrusts steel into her sweet breast, by the point / it is immersed and greedily drinks blood

(Now Tasso pauses in erotic contemplation of the violence, and Monteverdi goes into slow-motion)

and the cloth woven from fine gold / which holds her breasts tenderly and lightly / is filled with a hot stream. She already feels / she is dying, her legs fail her, weak and languishing....

(Back to real speed)

He follows up to victory, the transfixed / virgin is menacingly accosted and pushed.

(Slow-motion again)

She, as she falls, her afflicted voice, movingly, says her last words...

**Video 4: *Ma ecco hormai l'ora fatal e giunta***

31

Sword-master Guy Windsor (Principal of the School of European Swordsmanship in Helsinki) and renaissance specialist Ilkka Hartikainen (Espoo Historical Sword Society) helped me puzzle over this dilemma: which source, Agrippa or Capo Ferro, would be appropriate for *Combattimento*? Careful consideration of the actions described in Tasso's libretto led them to conclude that the weapons must have been rapier and *rotella*.

32

The *rotella* is a big, circular shield – somewhat old-fashioned in Agrippa's day, definitely out of date for Capo Ferro, but mentioned by both writers. For courtiers of Monteverdi's time, the sight of a *rotella* would have created an impression of antiquity, very suited to this story of the Crusades.

And when we looked at the *rotella* actions in Agrippa and Capo Ferro, we found they were almost identical. There are only so many things you can do with a huge, heavy metal shield on your left arm.

33

On this basis, I created the final fight-script in collaboration with Dave Rawlings of the London Longsword Academy, who coached our double cast of performers. According to Monteverdi's directions, the actors 'make the steps and actions in the way that the text expresses, nothing more nor less, observing these diligently in the timing, hits and steps. And the instrumentalists [observe] the aggressive and soft sounds; and the Narrator [observes] the words, pronounced in time so that the three actions [fight, music, text] come to meet each other in a unified representation.'

## FINALE

34

The choice of rotella is supported by Tintoretto's painting of Tancredi and Clorinda, which provided the model for our staging of the final Baptism scene, the moment when Tancredi recognises whom it is that he has killed.

This final scene raises complex questions in both original and modern contexts. There are gender and religious issues about a male crusader forcing baptism on his female, Muslim victim, though the 17<sup>th</sup>-century audience would have been aware of Tasso's back-story, that Clorinda, raised as a Muslim, had been born a Christian.

For our performers and audience, we focused on dramatic, emotional questions: who – if anyone – has won? Who has lost? As we watch Clorinda – seemingly happy and lively, 'heaven opens, I go... in peace', we can only begin to imagine the turmoil of emotions in which she and Tancredi are embroiled.

We worked carefully to unite Tintoretto's painted scene, Tasso's poetic imagery, and Monteverdi's careful notation of rhythm (the narrator's speech, in fast declamation, leads directly into Clorinda's words without modern *rallentando*: her speech mixes long and short notes), scoring (high tessitura for the whole ensemble, the voice surrounded by a halo of string sound), and bow-strokes (Monteverdi specifies long bows, dying away).

We did not impose a production decision on the emotions. We left the audience to consider who won, who lost, and to decide when to break the long silence with their applause. In initial discussions with the performers, and in rehearsal, we focussed on this final moment as the crux of the whole drama.

## EMOTIONS

35

The seventeenth-century concept of Passions refreshes our ideas of emotions: not 'expressed' in the romantic sense, but

- **enacted** (with Historical Action, with period gesture, dance and swordsmanship), embodied (with period posture, but by performers who are 'fellow courtiers', fellow humans with whom the audience can identify),
- **experienced** (by performers and audience, perhaps alike)

and (we hope)

- **exchanged** (between performers and audience, the performance 'moving the passions' of the audience, audience members exchanging glances or comments with each other, the audience's reaction inspiring the performers, performers inspiring each other.)

Modern actors tend to be concerned with finding sufficient emotional intensity. From where can they 'channel' emotion, how can they 'find motivation'? Period sources show a markedly different point of view: the passions of performance are so strong, that they can easily run out of control. An actor risks his spiritual and mental health by taking on so many different identities, by going through such unbalanced and excessive changes not only to the *affetti* of his mind and soul, but to the four Humours within his body.

36

In our project, sword-training (which all ensemble members tried) influenced not only the physique but also the psychology of our performers. Our female viola-player acquired a special glint in her eyes as she took hold of the long, deadly rapier. The hard work and discipline of martial arts training toughened slightly 'precious' voice-students into stage 'troupeurs'. Our narrator realised that the sword-fighters depended on his text to time their actions effectively (for the audience) – and safely (for each other).

In one rehearsal, concentrated work on the battle sections noticeably stirred up the emotions of all the participants so much that it required considerable effort to calm everyone down to work on 'normal music', let alone on contrasting, peaceful sections.

In this production, I never had to ask the participants for more energy, but I frequently had to "cool them down" – this was noticeably different from previous projects with similar groups of students.

Even in a drill, even with blunted swords, due respect for the weapon and consideration of the safety of your partner is vital. The discipline of sword-training and the bond of trust between sparring partners inevitably influence the emotions.

37

I sent all the performers a translation of Monteverdi's Preface, drawing attention to its support for in-tempo Recitative, synchronisation of Text, Music and Action, and to the audience's reception of the 1624 performance:

so moved by the emotion of shared passion that they were almost bursting into tears. And they gave applause...

Our cellist and lirone-player replied:

I do hope we might too elicit such an emotional response from some listeners. -  
That would be a greater achievement than wowing with swordsmanship I think. –

Our Tancredi commented that in the final scene, he did not need to act. This was his friend, she was dying. The emotions were almost overwhelming, and (just as Tasso writes) he had to pull together all his strength to keep them under control.

#### VIDEO 5: Final Scene

38

See accompanying Powerpoint pdf for sources cited.

See below for further details of the performances and the printed program note.

## Performance Details

There were four performances with two casts. Each cast gave one lunchtime and one evening performance. The lunchtime performances were in the Great Gallery of the Wallace Collection, with the audience seated close around the central strip of the performing area. The evening performances were in the Courtyard, with the audience seated 'cabaret-style' at small tables.

After a short fanfare, ALK introduced each lunchtime performance with a 5-minute talk, drawing the audience's attention to a specific aspect of the show. To provide comparative data for Professor Jane Davidson's audience research questionnaires and interviews, these two talks were contrasted:

### Lunchtime performance 1: **Constant Time**

Period priorities (text, rhythm and sound), *tempo* and *measure* in music and swordsmanship, "set your clocks to the year 1600".

### Lunchtime performance 2: **Changing Emotions**

Emotions not expressed, but enacted, envisioned. Gestures seen in paintings, enacted on stage. Drumming/conducting as gestures. No conducting in this period! "What do you feel as you see this music?"

*Combattimento* has no 'overture', so we played an Ortiz *Recercada* to set the tonality and tempo. [See main script above] To re-create the sense of surprise engineered by Monteverdi for the first performance (after several madrigals performed *concertante*, this embodied action began unexpectedly), during the Ortiz, non-singing cast members posed wearing conventional concert-dress, as if about to sing *Combattimento*. The arrival of the actual cast, in costume with swords, and from opposite directions, then provided an element of surprise.

The evening performances were longer and more elaborate. The same fanfare was played three times (as was the custom in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italy) as a 10-minute and 5-minute warning and as the beginning of the show. In between the fanfares, members of the company and audience volunteers joined in with sword exercises directed by our Swordmaster, Dave Rawlings. After the final fanfare, ALK made a ceremonial entrance, conductor's baton in hand, and took up a fencing guard-position. DR then cut the baton contemptuously out of ALK's hand – dramatizing the point that conducting was not appropriate to this repertoire!

The dance-suite *Die Fechtschule* (The Fencing School, the music includes imitations of sword strikes) accompanied swordsmanship demonstrations from DR and the cast, together with baroque dance.

Wallace curator Dr Tobias Capwell gave a 15-minute talk connecting weaponry, high Art and the culture of the Duel. At the end of his talk, another band of dancers, in period costume and wielding swords, burst into the hall and danced the *Battaglia*, a choreographed battle.

After a short tuning-break, the Ortiz *Recercada* and *Combattimento* concluded the performance.

The second evening performance was followed by the Audience-Performer discussion session led by John Sloboda, reported in his presentation, a companion piece to this paper.

At this venue, it was not possible to screen translations in supertitles or other visual aids. The audience's approach to the show was guided by preliminary advertising (emphasising drama, music and swordsmanship), the permanent exhibitions of the Wallace, the special display of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italian rapiers with accompanying texts, the spoken introductions, the enacted sword-displays, and the program note [see below].

See below for Program Note and Listings (for each of four performances).

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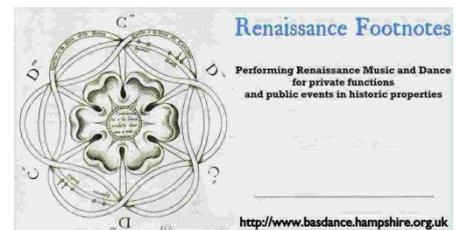
<sup>1</sup> Claudio Monteverdi *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, text from Torquato Tasso *La Gierusalemme Liberata* (1581), first performed in 1624, published in *Madrigali guerrieri, et amorosi con alcuni opuscoli in genere rappresentativo, che saranno per brevi episodi fra i canti senza gesto* (Book VIII, 1638)

Please see linked Powerpoint for other sources cited.

Numbers in the main text refer to Powerpoint Slides.

This presentation can also be viewed, complete with video examples, at [www.TheHarpConsort.com](http://www.TheHarpConsort.com)

# Combattimento



*Words by Torquato Tasso*  
*Music by Claudio Monteverdi*  
*Swordplay by Capo Ferro & Camillo Agrippa*

*Directed by*  
*Andrew Lawrence-King*



*Scintillating baroque ...*





Just before dawn, the darkest hour of the night... The pale walls of the medieval city of Jerusalem can just be seen in the fading star-light. For the Crusaders, it has been a bad night: their great tower with its wooden siege-machinery was burnt down in a daring raid by two unidentified knights from the defending Muslim army. Tancredi, champion of the western alliance, leads a counter-attack, and in the confusion, the city gates are closed with one of the two raiders still outside. Little does Tancredi know that this anonymous knight is actually Clorinda, a ferocious female warrior and champion of the Muslims, with whom he is secretly in love.

It is against this dramatic background, familiar to all 17<sup>th</sup>-century readers from Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Jerusalem Liberated) that Monteverdi creates a musical depiction of the Combat between Tancredi and Clorinda. *Testo* – the Text – is the tenor narrator, representing Tasso himself. Two more singers embody the roles of the protagonists, all three declaiming their lines in the style of 17<sup>th</sup>-century 'new music', accompanied by continuo instruments.

A string ensemble plays some conventional *ritornelli*, but mostly creates sound effects for the battle: the heavy tread of Tancredi's horse as it accelerates from trot to canter to gallop; the clash of swords; the clang of shields and helmets as the warriors move in to grapple at close quarters. Monteverdi's stage directions are deceptively straightforward: Tancredi and Clorinda enact Tasso's poetry, exactly as narrated by the *Testo*.

Just as Early Music performers study 17<sup>th</sup>-century treatises in order to recreate historical techniques for instruments painstakingly copied from surviving originals and period imagery, so practitioners of historical weaponry study treatises on swordsmanship in order to fight competitively with modern copies of 17<sup>th</sup>-century rapiers.

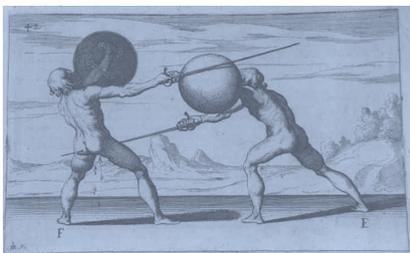
Two period sources are particularly relevant to *Combattimento*: Ridolfo Capo Ferro's 1610 *Gran Simulacrum* (Great Representation) of the Art and the Use of Fencing and Camillo Agrippa's 1553 treatise on the *Scientia d'Arme* (Science of Arms), which – significantly – includes a Dialogue on Philosophy. It seems that Tasso himself owned a copy of Agrippa's book. So as an 'overture', we will play a *recercada* from Ortiz's training book for musical variations, published in the same city (Rome) and year as Agrippa's sword treatise.

Monteverdi set Tasso's poetry in the most modern style, his *seconda prattica*, in which passionate communication of the text takes precedence over the strict rules of counterpoint. Similarly, the swords and sword-play in the 1624 first performance would have been in 17<sup>th</sup>-century, not medieval, style. At most, an 'olde worlde' ambience might have been hinted at by the use of actions and equipment of the previous generation: 16<sup>th</sup>-century cuts as well as Capo Ferro's lunge and thrust; and the large round shield, *rotella*, also seen in Tintoretto's painting of Tancredi and Clorinda.

Our 21<sup>st</sup>-century production does not aim at modern realism. Rather, in the intimate surroundings of a courtyard within an art gallery, we are trying to approach the mindset of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century courtiers who first performed Monteverdi's dramatic masterpiece. What would their vision have been of Tancredi and Clorinda, how would they narrate Tasso's story, how would they have enacted this poetry of combat?

Since they could not have fought a realistic duel with sharp weapons, one possible answer is that they would have presented the kind of exercise routines that all courtiers studied for several hours a day at the sword-school. Such training drills are set out and illustrated in Capo Ferro's and Agrippa's books. Typically, there is an opening move, which would only succeed if your opponent did absolutely nothing to defend himself. And the obvious defence is to evade the attacking sword, and counter-attack.

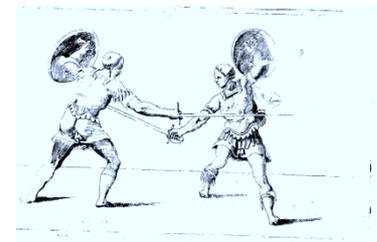
This is the scenario for many drills in Capo Ferro's book: you know that this counter-attack is coming, and you already have a combined parry-and-riposte prepared. However, a really experienced opponent would be one step ahead of your game. Agrippa shows how even a well-timed attack can be avoided, by stepping off the line, just as a ball rolls away if you push it.



Capo Ferro shows typical tactics with *rotella*. You make a high feint, and your opponent responds by lifting his shield. But the large *rotella* now blocks his view, and you disengage your sword underneath his shield, and make the real attack with a low thrust. A more experienced opponent would have pushed his shield forwards, or parried with the sword, so as not to block his view of your attack.

Agrippa illustrates another action, with an elegant turn of the body – *scanso della vita*:

*“The swordsman craftily comes in with the point of his sword close to the ground, holding his shield open so as to expose his chest. As soon as his opponent goes to thrust, then all in one tempo he meets the thrust in quarta [specifying the angle of the sword], changes to parry with the shield, and makes a thrust whilst raising his shield over his head, turning his body and counter-stepping to the enemy's left side, as seen here.”*



For sword-fighting as for music, Tempo and Measure are crucial concepts. For a swordsman, a tempo is a moment, an opportunity for you to attack, or a space of time within which you must defend yourself and – moving even faster – riposte in *contratempo*. Measure is distance – are you close enough to strike without moving your feet, or do you need what Capo Ferro calls ‘the incredible increase of the long blow’, the fencer's lunge?

17<sup>th</sup>-century dance-books also discuss *contratempo* – dividing up the slow beat of the musical tactus into many fast steps. Negri's *Battaglia* is a choreographed imitation of battle, reminding us of the connections between dancers' and swordfighters' footwork.

The title of Schmelzer's dance-suite translates as ‘The Fencing School’. A *Fechtschule*, however, was not an institution, but an event, offering specialised training, displays of skill, and a competitive tournament. This idea of the *Fechtschule* is the inspiration for this evening's event, bringing together many different 17<sup>th</sup>-century visions of the Art of the Sword.

Andrew Lawrence-King

# Combattimento

Friday 25<sup>th</sup> May 2030

De' Specchi            *Toccata*

Schmelzer            *Die Fechtschule*      Aria I & II, Courante, Sarabande, Die Fechtschule, Bader

*The Duel of Honour as Performance Art in the Early 17<sup>th</sup> Century*    Dr Tobias Capwell

Negri                    *La Battaglia*

Ortiz                    *Recercada*

Monteverdi            *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*

**You are welcome to stay for a Post-Performance discussion, chaired by Prof John Sloboda**

## *The Guildhall Lute(s) and Voice(s)*

Alessandro Fisher – Tasso

Eduard Mas – Tancredi

Alba Bosch - Clorinda

Rafael Font – violin

Henry Tong – violin

Elitsa Bogdanova – viola

Donald Bennet – cello, lirone

Henry Drummond - gamba

Mie Ito - harp

Kaisa Pulkkinen - harp

Alex McCartney - theorbo

Joseph Chesshyre – harpsichord, organ

Katarzyna Kowalik – organ, harpsichord

*with* Matthew Sandy, Adam O'Shea, Miranda Heldt

## *Dancer(s)*

James Holden, Olwen Foulkes (Royal Academy of Music)

## *Renaissance Footnote(s)*

Robert Huggett

Alison Williams

Jane Huggett

Mark Craske

Trevor Williams

Kate Harding

## *I Maestri*

David Rawlings (London Longsword Academy)

Steven Player

Dr Tobias Capwell (The Wallace Collection)

Guy Windsor (School of European Swordsmanship)

Katerina Antonenko

Andrew Lawrence-King

Swordmaster

Dancing-master

Curator

Sword Consultant

Assistant Director

Artistic Director

# Combattimento

Friday 25<sup>th</sup> May 1830

De' Specchi      *Toccata*

Schmelzer      *Die Fechtschule*      Aria I & II, Courante, Sarabande, Die Fechtschule, Bader

*The Duel of Honour as Performance Art in the Early 17<sup>th</sup> Century*      Dr Tobias Capwell

Negri      *La Battaglia*

Ortiz      *Recercada*

Monteverdi      *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*

## *The Guildhall Lutes and Voices*

Matthew Sandy – Tasso  
Adam O'Shea – Tancredi  
Miranda Heldt - Clorinda

Rafael Font – violin

Henry Tong – violin

Elitsa Bogdanova – viola

Donald Bennet – cello, lirone

Henry Drummond - gamba

Mie Ito - harp

Kaisa Pulkkinen - harp

Alex McCartney - theorbo

Joseph Chesshyre – harpsichord, organ

Katarzyna Kowalik – organ, harpsichord

*with* Alessandro Fisher, Eduard Mas, Alba Bosch

## *Dancers*

James Holden, Olwen Foulkes (Royal Academy of Music)

## *Renaissance Footnotes*

Robert Huggett

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## *I Maestri*

David Rawlings (London Longsword Academy)

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Dr Tobias Capwell (The Wallace Collection)

Guy Windsor (School of European Swordsmanship)

Katerina Antonenko

Andrew Lawrence-King

Swordmaster

Dancing-master

Curator

Sword Consultant

Assistant Director

Artistic Director

# Combattimento

Friday 25<sup>th</sup> May 1300

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| De' Specchi | <i>Toccata</i>                              |
| Ortiz       | <i>Recercada</i>                            |
| Monteverdi  | <i>Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda</i> |

## *The Guildhall Lutes and Voices*

Alessandro Fisher – Tasso  
Eduard Mas – Tancredi  
Alba Bosch - Clorinda

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Rafael Font – violin          | Mie Ito - harp                         |
| Henry Tong – violin           | Kaisa Pulkkinen - harp                 |
| Elitsa Bogdanova – viola      | Alex McCartney - theorbo               |
| Donald Bennet – cello, lirone | Joseph Chesshyre – harpsichord, organ  |
| Henry Drummond - gamba        | Katarzyna Kowalik – organ, harpsichord |

*with* Matthew Sandy, Adam O'Shea, Miranda Heldt

## *I Maestri*

|  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| David Rawlings (London Longsword Academy)      | Swordmaster        |
| Steven Player                                  | Dancing-master     |
| Dr Tobias Capwell (The Wallace Collection)     | Curator            |
| Guy Windsor (School of European Swordsmanship) | Sword Consultant   |
| Katerina Antonenko                             | Assistant Director |
| Andrew Lawrence-King                           | Artistic Director  |

# Combattimento

Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> May 1300

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| De' Specchi | <i>Toccata</i>                              |
| Ortiz       | <i>Recercada</i>                            |
| Monteverdi  | <i>Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda</i> |

## *The Guildhall Lutes and Voices*

Matthew Sandy – Tasso  
Adam O'Shea – Tancredi  
Miranda Heldt - Clorinda

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Rafael Font – violin          | Mie Ito - harp                         |
| Henry Tong – violin           | Kaisa Pulkkinen - harp                 |
| Elitsa Bogdanova – viola      | Alex McCartney - theorbo               |
| Donald Bennet – cello, lirone | Joseph Chesshyre – harpsichord, organ  |
| Henry Drummond - gamba        | Katarzyna Kowalik – organ, harpsichord |

*with* Alessandro Fisher, Eduard Mas, Alba Bosch

## *I Maestri*

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|--|--------------------|
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| Katerina Antonenko                             | Assistant Director |
| Andrew Lawrence-King                           | Artistic Director  |