

Some notes on madrigal singing

Madrigal singing, like every other human activity, has become sadly cluttered with jargon, and some of the terminology can be very confusing to the occasional performer. The following explanations may be helpful.

A (top)	A mythical region whose existence is staunchly maintained by several eminent authorities, but which has never been located in practice.
accidental	A sign to remind the singer that he or she should produce a note other than that which is written on the page. Where no accidental is present, the composer presumably considered the requirement so obvious that no reminder was necessary.
Amaryllis	A young lady of attractive appearance and accommodating disposition, frequently courted by several poets at once.
<i>bel canto</i>	A style of singing well suited to the performance of madrigals.
<i>can belto</i>	A style of singing less well suited to the performance of madrigals.
<i>cantus firmus</i>	A publisher of vocal music.
<i>cantus infirmus</i>	A simple theme round which the composer weaves complicated and decorative polyphony. Being apparently straightforward, this line is normally given to the least accomplished of the singers taking part, and in practice it may be distinctly wobbly.
close harmony	A style of singing frequently employed in modern popular music but not normally appropriate to madrigals (see “hairpin”).
composer	A sad and lonely person given to writing out impractical and unrealistic musical conceptions at inordinate length. See also “decomposer”.
conductor	A self-important and irrelevant person given to performing narcissistic dance-like movements with his arms to no obvious purpose.
decomposer	An editor.
false relation	An untrustworthy person frequently encountered in pantomime but fortunately rare in madrigals.
<i>ff</i>	Fairly feeble. See also “ <i>pp</i> ”.
Flora	A substitute for butter.
hairpin	A weapon of defence kept by prudent lady singers for use when they find that the harmony being attempted is closer than they would have liked.
owl	The noise made by a frustrated computer user when attempting with shrill command to control his mouse.
<i>pp</i>	Pretty powerful. In practice, the difference between <i>pp</i> and <i>ff</i> (q.v.) is usually too small to be detected and both indications are normally ignored, but some singers maintain that there is a theoretical distinction. A few eccentrics even insist on singing <i>ff</i> louder than <i>pp</i> , but the chance of encountering one of these wreckers in practice is fortunately negligible.
shady grove	An illicitly plagiarized dictionary of music and musicians, apparently widely and effectively used as a weapon in the seduction of the more intellectual young ladies of the period.
singing at sight	The action of the poet on catching his first glimpse of Amaryllis (q.v.).
Spam in omnium	The result of trying to download “Spem in alium” from the Internet.
stave	A large piece of wood with which the singer would like to assault the conductor (q.v.).
Vesta	One of those matchless beauties.
words	Short rows of non-musical hieroglyphics, apparently found in the original printed editions of certain madrigals and slavishly reproduced by some modern editors. Their purpose, if any, is unknown.

No originality is claimed, and in particular my thanks are due to David Ireson for “fairly feeble” and “pretty powerful”. Contributions towards a possible second edition will be welcomed (send to johnbeasley@mail.com).