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# Bassano and the orchestra of St Mark's

ELEANOR  
SELFRIDGE-FIELD

*Drawing from Habiti d'huomeni et donne Venetiane (Venice, 1610). The scene shows the Doge and Signoria arriving at San Giorgio Maggiore for a Christmas service. The instrumentalists are evidently piffari rather than orchestra, but because of the date there is some possibility that their conductor is Bassano himself (detail). The translation of the caption reads: The Most Serene Prince [the Doge] with the Lords [of Venice] on Christmas day attends the Vespers in the church of S. Giorgio Maggiore, and in the following day goes for the Mass to the mentioned church, received and accompanied in going out by the Abbot and the Chapter of those Most Reverend Monks. This famous church was designed by the most excellent Architect, Palladio, it is placed in the island facing St Mark's Square, and it is considered one of the most famous churches of Italy.*  
by Franco Forma, with privilege



Detail of the floor tiles in St Mark's

Giovanni Bassano, known today mainly for his ornamentation tutors and instrumental fantasias *a 3*, is a figure of critical importance to any consideration of Giovanni Gabrieli's music for instrumental ensembles. As the conductor of the orchestra at St Mark's, Venice, during Gabrieli's later years, it is Bassano who was principally responsible for the performance of that repertory. The course of his career provides useful evidence of his likely attitudes toward the performance of instrumental music.

## Career

The careers of Bassano and Gabrieli were chronologically parallel. Bassano came to St Mark's in 1576, and Gabrieli (who was acquainted with the Basilica's affairs through his eminent uncle, Andrea) officially entered its ranks in 1585. While Bassano had already established himself as a theorist in the later 1580s, both men distinguished themselves as composers in the 1590s, enjoyed the peak of their popularity in the first decade of the 17th century and died in its second decade. Both were associated with the confraternity of San Rocco — Gabrieli as its organist (1585-1612) and Bassano as the leader of one of the several *piffari* bands that performed there. (*Piffari* bands were marching bands that could include cornetts, trombones, natural trumpets, shawms, fifes and drums.)

The cornett was the most highly respected instrument of the time. The cornettist and theorist Girolamo Dalla Casa (*detto da Udine*), the first director of instrumental music at St Mark's, was hired by Zarlino in 1568 to provide instrumental concerts with his two brothers and an unknown number of other instrumentalists. (Giovanni Dalla Casa played the bass trombone; his brother Nicolò's instrument is not known). In his diminution manual, *Il vero modo di diminuir* (1584), Dalla Casa called the cornett 'the most excellent of all instruments'. To its credit, he said, it could play '*piano* and *forte*, and in all the modes', just like the human voice. Clearly, terraced dynamics were in use at St Mark's before the arrival of Gabrieli.

Bassano, who succeeded Dalla Casa as director of instrumental music (*maestro de' concerti*) in 1601, was also a cornettist. He may have played with the fledgling orchestra in earlier years, but his main function had been to play as a member of the Doge's *piffari* on high feasts. His ties to Dalla Casa must have been strong. Bassano's first tutor, *Ricercate, passaggi, et cadentie* (1585/6) was, like Dalla Casa's two-volume work of 1584, dedicated to Count Mario Bevilacqua.

Had he not known a good deal about other wind instruments, Bassano would surely not have succeeded to the leadership of a *piffari* band. It is likely that he was the son of Santo Bassano, who is more likely than Giovanni to have been the inventor of the *bassanello*,<sup>1</sup> a sweet-toned variant of the crumhorn. Giovanni's son Santino was hired, probably to play bass trombone, at St Mark's in 1615. It is not unlikely that this family was related to the Venetian Bassanos who played and made wind instruments in England in the 16th and 17th centuries, but the relationship cannot have been too direct, owing to the fact that the English musicians had emigrated in the 1530s.

## Attitude toward instrumental music

Around 1600 there were really two strains of instrumental ensemble music — the orthodox (predominantly contrapuntal) and the modern (pre-



*Ser.<sup>mo</sup> Prencipe con la Signoria: il giorno di Natale ascolta Vespro in S. Giorgio Maggiore et il di seguente uà alla Messa  
 in detta Chiesa in contrato et accompagnato al ritorno, dall' Abbate et Cap.<sup>o</sup> de quelli RR Monaci Questo celebre Temp.  
 fu ordinato dal Palladio Architetto Eccel.<sup>mo</sup> etc posto in isola a dir impeto della Piazza di S. Marco, et tenuto uno de' famosi tempi di  
 franco forma con privilegio*

dominantly homophonic). Ensemble canzonas, which form the bulk of Gabrieli's instrumental *oeuvre*, represent the orthodox school, in which nearly all the composers were trained as organists. That so few ensemble canzonas of the era give specific indications about instrumentation is not surprising: they were written by persons who were usually not particularly conversant with the technique of any one instrument, and who were probably prepared to perform the canzona at the keyboard.

Somewhat removed from the strictures and literal-mindedness of organists were the ensemble instrumentalists. These included not only the *piffari* musicians who played ceremonial music but also salon musicians who performed alone or in small groups for audiences of highly cultivated tastes. The music they performed was meant to be listened to, and not merely heard. The tutors of Dalla Casa and Bassano relate to the situation of the ensemble instrumentalist. Their emphasis on the *technique of playing* as opposed to the *technique of composing* foreshadows the distinction between the sonata and the canzona.

Understanding this distinction increases our appreciation of both Bassano and Gabrieli, who were far more catholic in their talents and tastes than most of their peers. For a canzona composer trained as an organist, Gabrieli's interest in the properties and capabilities of individual instruments was unusually great. His respect for the ensemble instrumentalist was demonstrated both by his assignment of specific instruments to specific parts and by his introduction of Bassano-like diminutions in treble parts. Yet the only instrumental work by Gabrieli that is altogether 'modern' in maintaining treble-bass polarity is the 'Sonata con tre violini' of 1615.

Bassano, improbably for a musician whose earliest recognition resulted from the publication of a tutor concerned with improvisation and ornamentation, was a recognized authority on counterpoint. In 1595 he was appointed *maestro di canto* at the ducal seminary of St Mark's, which served boys between the ages of ten and eighteen. The *maestro di canto* taught solfeggio, counterpoint, and cantus firmus four days a week.<sup>2</sup> Zarlino, engaged principally as *maestro di cappella* at St Mark's Basilica, had assumed these duties from the seminary's inception in 1580 until his death in 1590. It cannot have been every cornettist in Venice who could have succeeded such a revered master, for Zarlino had been an enormously intimidating presence in Venetian musical life. Bassano's twenty *Fantasiae*<sup>3</sup> (1585) are also lasting testimony to his contrapuntal expertise, a skill he could well have developed under Zarlino's tutelage.

An element of moderation in Bassano's choice of instruments at St Mark's could have been generated by his apparently deep respect for ecclesiastical authority. In contrast to so many Venetians of his time who were religiously conservative but politically anti-papist, he dedicated two volumes of his works — the capriccios for instrumental ensemble (1588) and the motets, madrigals and chansons '*diminuiti per sonar . . . et anco per cantar*' (1591/2) — to papal nuncios. His own First Book of Motets of 1598 was dedicated to the procurators of St Mark's. He was also a Palestrina enthusiast in an age when not all Venetian musicians looked to Rome for enlightenment (one of Monteverdi's first actions at St Mark's was to order works by Palestrina that were not available at the Basilica<sup>4</sup>).

Because Bassano seems to have had some knowledge of the organ, it is doubtful that he would have failed to arrange organ accompaniment for



Gabrieli's (or anyone else's) ensemble pieces. In 1588 he was one of five musicians who judged the merits of the prospective St Mark's organist Giuseppe Guami. Bassano endorsed the abilities of Antonio Romanin,<sup>5</sup> organist to Prince Sigismund Bathody of Transilvania, in the dedication (to the Prince) of his Second Book of Motets (1599). Also in 1599 Bassano sent to press a *Basso per l'organo* for the larger works (a 7, 8 and 12) included in his First Book of Motets. Only a half dozen or so printed continuo part-books preceded this one; some were for works by his St Mark's colleague Giovanni Croce. Bassano must therefore be reckoned among the earliest to promote the use of a basso continuo.

Further, the performing situation was designed for collaboration between organist and ensemble. On high feasts, the only occasions on which ensemble pieces were performed, Gabrieli played the second organ. This was in the loft by the lectern. Bassano conducted the instruments from the same loft. In works for two orchestras some of the instrumentalists were stationed in the facing loft, where the first organist played. Bassano had some responsibility for conducting the second choir in polychoral works, and this implies that the *vice maestro di cappella*, who conducted in the opposing loft, had some responsibility for the second orchestra. Canzonas which contrast a high-pitched first orchestra with a lower-pitched second orchestra also fit easily into the picture, for one organ was smaller and sweeter in tone than the other. Works for three or four choirs (or orchestras) made use of anterior galleries and were customarily performed on Christmas and Easter. Positive organs were brought in to accompany the additional groups.

## The orchestra

The St Mark's orchestra in the 1590s was on the whole an *ad hoc* group, or more accurately a succession of *ad hoc* groups added to a basic core of brasses. Its history is sketchy, but what little we know accords reasonably well with the requirements of the canzonas and sonatas in Gabrieli's *Sacrae Symphoniae* (1597). Six to twelve instrumentalists were on hand for special feasts. Most of these free-lance musicians were trombonists. One, Ventura Marchetti, played *violone* (probably a double-bass size instrument, since that is what some of his progeny played). Nicolò da Mosto played bassoon as well as trombone. The fact that the hire of free-lance instrumentalists became more frequent in the 1590s could be related either to Gabrieli's presence or to Zarlino's decease. Dalla Casa continued as *maestro de' concerti*.

The orchestra took a stride forward with Bassano's accession to the position of *maestro de' concerti* in 1601. Fourteen instrumentalists (in addition to the six regular *piffari* and Bassano himself) were paid for performing on Christmas 1602. Of these, six played trombone (da Mosto doubling as a bassoonist), three played cornett, two violin and one *violone*. Gabrieli's avoidance of the term *violone* coupled with its consistent availability at St Mark's could mean that its use was so customary as to require no comment.

In 1614, two years after the death of Gabrieli and one after the installation of Monteverdi as *maestro di cappella*, an official roster of the orchestra was drawn up for the first time. This was more a housekeeping chore than the evidence of a revolution. The specific responsibilities and payments given in the charter are precisely what they had previously been

in custom — appearance at 26 feasts a year and an annual salary of 15 ducats.<sup>6</sup> There were sixteen instrumentalists apart from Bassano and the two organists. One cannot determine the identity of all sixteen instruments. There were at least three violins, three trombones and a *violone contrabasso*. (This instrument may well have resembled the three-stringed instrument hanging over a stairwell in the Victoria and Albert Museum instrument collection, and have belonged to that class of ‘violdegambae of an extraordinary greatness’ cited by the famous English traveller Coryat as one of the musical attractions at San Rocco.) The versatile Giovanni Sansoni played bassoon, cornett and trombone; he moved to Vienna in 1619. The two Chileses almost certainly played brass instruments. Giovanni Rovetta, by the testimony of his own Op. 1, played various instruments but the violin should have been prominent among them.

It is possible that this orchestra of sixteen was divided into corresponding groups of eight who played on alternate feasts (excluding the most major feasts, when all would have played). Such a system was used later in the century at St Mark’s, when the size of the orchestra had doubled, and had been in use in the English royal music in the 16th century. The large number of polychoral canzonas that were written for eight instruments, in contrast to the smaller number for more than eight, lends credence to the possibility.

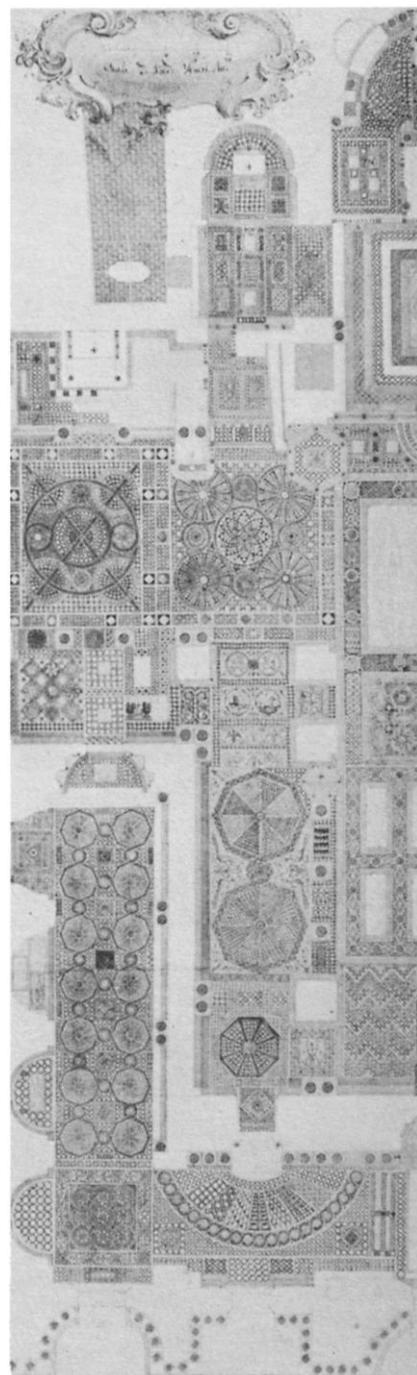
It is slightly curious that at the time this orchestra was chartered, Bassano yielded his position of leadership as a *piffaro*. But his successor was also a Bassano — Antonio<sup>7</sup> — and may have been another son. Giovanni continued as *maestro di canto* at the seminary and as *maestro de’ concerti* at St Mark’s until his death in 1617.

He was succeeded in the latter capacity by a violinist, Francesco Bonfante (c. 1576-c. 1661), who had been active in the orchestra since at least 1602. Bonfante’s appointment indicates the ascendancy of his instrument as well as the concomitant decline of the cornett. The orchestra remained static at sixteen throughout his tenure, although there were gradual changes in its composition. Violins and trombones were hired in more or less equal numbers up to 1630, when a plague ravaged Venice. After the plague few trombonists were hired. Their place was taken by violists and cellists. Gabrieli’s ensemble works were by then out of fashion, although his organ works still enjoyed currency north of the Alps.

Circumstances would suggest that while a man who had devoted most of his life to wind and brass instruments would not have happily yielded the playing of treble parts to the violin, Bassano was moved in his last years to do this by Monteverdi. One presumes Monteverdi’s influence to have been at work in the introduction of a solo violin, separate from the orchestra, into the Basilica for Christmas and Easter services. The practice was in effect by 1614. The violinist selected for this purpose (his particular duty may have been to play during Communion) was Giacomo Rovetta, father of the later *maestro di cappella* and composer Giovanni.

## Indications for performance

While no printed basso continuo was provided for the *Sacrae Symphoniae*, and while the continuos appearing in the Raverii anthology of *Canzoni per sonare* (1608) and Gabrieli’s posthumous *Canzoni e sonate* (1615) were provided by editors, it cannot be doubted that organ accompaniment would



Plan of the floor tiling in St Mark's

have been used when such works were performed at St Mark's. The Canzona No. 12 of 1597, an arrangement of Canzona No. 11, offers one case of its being essential. A *Basso per l'organo* is present in the ms version of this work,<sup>8</sup> and some sort of continuo is provided for the other instrumental works by Gabrieli that survive in Kassel mss.<sup>9</sup> One must also bear in mind that composers of that time rarely wrote music in which they expected to have no personal involvement.

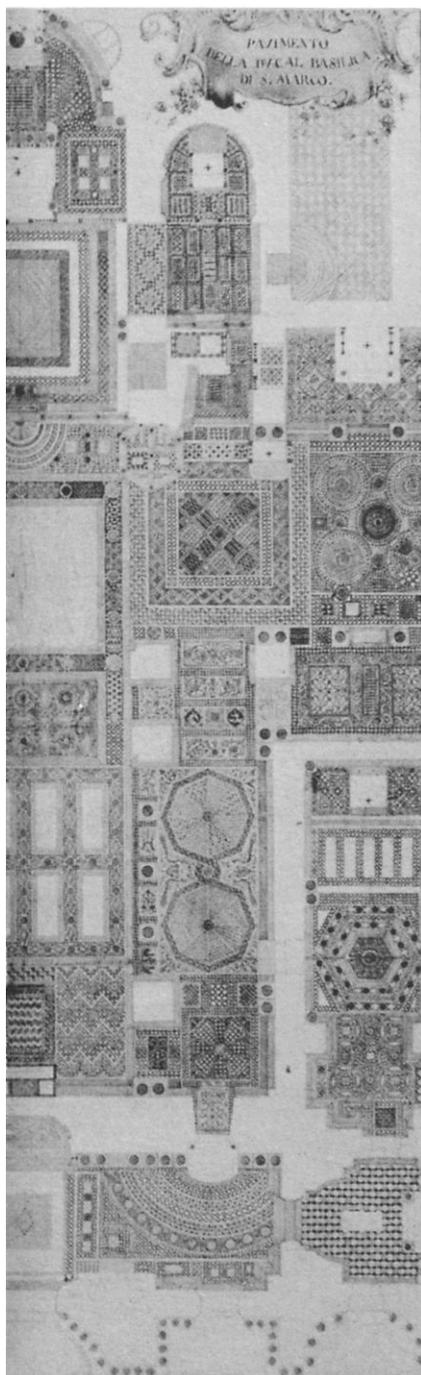
A great many of the unresolved issues in the performance of Gabrieli's music concern the continuo. As to the use of multiple organs, the rule of thumb was one organ to each chorus or orchestra. There are no accounts of more than four organs (nor for that matter of more than four choirs) ever having been used at St Mark's. Larger numbers are reported to have been used at San Rocco and also at the church of San Salvador, but in neither case is it established that all played simultaneously. Such reports invariably relate to occasions on which many guest ensembles were present. It is likely that each group brought its own accompanist, and each accompanist his own instrument.

Gabrieli's canzonas and sonatas were sacred works intended for liturgical use. Since Bassano was conscientious in distinguishing between sacred and secular practice, there is no basis on which to associate the theorbo or other members of the lute family with the accompaniment of Gabrieli's music. The theorbo was used in the accompaniment of solo vocal works or solo passages in longer vocal works (witness the advice of Agazzari and the limited use in Act V of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*). Bassano suggested the use of the lute in his *Madrigali e canzonette* (1602) but not in his church works. From 1614 there were a few singers at St Mark's who doubled as theorbists, presumably to accompany themselves. The earliest theorbist at the Basilica who was not also a singer was not hired until 1658. There is no reference in St Mark's documents to the lute or chitarrone.

While there is no evidence for the use of a cello<sup>10</sup> in the accompaniment, neither is there any for the bass viol. All indications are that when a string bass was used in accompaniment, it was a double-bass size instrument. The extra 'weight' of low tones is really needed to support the large number of trombones required in some of the works. When more than one organ is used, an equivalent number of string basses would be appropriate.

The *Basso per l'organo* of Gabrieli's *Canzoni e sonate* is not so elusive as previously suggested in a discussion of modern editions of this work.<sup>11</sup> There are copies in Augsburg and Prague, and this author has a microfilm of the complete opus made from a copy in the Landesbibliothek in Kassel. The film previously belonged to Dr Egon Kenton, who had obtained it from the Deutsches Musikgeschichtliches Archiv, also in Kassel.

The treatment of the continuo in the Sanvoisin edition of Gabrieli's *Canzoni e sonate*<sup>12</sup> is unnecessarily misleading. Using Canzona No. 4 a 6 as an example, the bass line of the continuo realization is merely a duplication of the *Basso* part, and instead of giving us a duplication of the *Sesto* when the *Basso* is silent, as the original does in the continuo part, the editor has given us the rests of the *Basso* part.<sup>13</sup> Even so, an organist who reads and improvises adequately — and who is aware of this shortcoming — can salvage something to make for a credible performance from this edition.





Costume of the Doge in the 17th century,  
Bibliothèque de l'Opéra (Editions du Seuil)

Recorders were not used at St Mark's, although they were used at other Venetian churches. In view of the papal opposition to flutes of all sorts, one cannot imagine a person with Bassano's respect for ecclesiastical authority introducing them at the Basilica. The same can be said of shawms. The trumpet was not used inside St Mark's until the 1680s. The oboe replaced the cornett (obsolete instruments were never hastily discarded) in the 1690s.

There is no evidence for the use of viols at St Mark's in the time of Bassano and Gabrieli. Occasionally a *lira da braccio* or *da gamba* had been included in the processions of *piffari* bands in the 16th century, but canzonas and sonatas were not marching pieces. Viols turned up in some of the city's orphanage-conservatories later in the 17th century, when they may have been used to suggest special effects. But again, this does not attest to their suitability in the repertory of Gabrieli's time.

Since we know that the bassoon (*fagotto*) was used at least occasionally at St Mark's during Gabrieli's later years, there should be no hesitancy about using it in performance. It was a popular continuo instrument in Venice throughout the baroque era, becoming equally so as an ensemble instrument shortly after Gabrieli's death.

Where indicated, the cornett should be the preferred treble instrument. With the current great interest in early music and the increasing availability of appropriate instruments, one would prefer to encourage more wind players to become proficient at playing it than to suggest alternatives. This is particularly so for the works of 1597, when the violin was used little if at all at St Mark's. No instrument represents Gabrieli's particular era so well as the cornett, and its association with festivity and pageantry is totally different from the violin's association with agitated states of the soul. Those who aim to respect Gabrieli's intentions should be prepared to accept the cornett as 'the most excellent of all instruments'. *Eleanor Selfridge-Field's book Venetian Instrumental Music from Gabrieli to Vivaldi is reviewed on page 197.*

<sup>1</sup> In 1582 Santo Bassano received a government licence to make a new wind instrument. The earliest reports of the *bassanello* come from the late 1580s.

<sup>2</sup> Venetian State Archives, Procuratoria de Supra, Basilica di S. Marco, Atti, Registro 141, f. 79.

<sup>3</sup> Nos. 1, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15 and 18 in *Hortus Musicus* 16; Nos. 2, 4, 6, 7 in *Hortus Musicus* 64.

<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the Second and Fifth books of Masses (1567; 1590); Registro 141, f. 1v.

<sup>5</sup> In 1586 Romanin was unsuccessful in an effort to be appointed Andrea Gabrieli's successor at St Mark's.

<sup>6</sup> Details may be found in E. Selfridge-Field, *Venetian Instrumental Music from Gabrieli to Vivaldi*, Oxford and New York, 1975.

<sup>7</sup> Venetian State Archives, Procuratoria de Supra, Basilica di S. Marco, Cassier 8, entries of 2.i.1614/5; 12.i.1615/6; 2.vi.1617.

<sup>8</sup> Kassel, Landesbibliothek, Ms. 2<sup>o</sup> Mus. 59r.

<sup>9</sup> In the case of the 'Ricercar sopra Re fa mi don' there is a figured continuo for harpsichord. In the case of the echo canzona *a 12* printed as Kunze's No. 3, there is a *Basso generale*. The canzona *a 12* that is Kunze's No. 4 is now lost, as is the concerted 'Dulcis Iesu' *a 20*. It is regrettable that Kunze omitted these continuo parts in his edition (*Die Instrumentalmusik Giovanni Gabrielis*, 2 vols., Tutzing, 1963, ii, 1-35), although, as in all music of this period, they can be more or less correctly inferred by following the lowest part.

<sup>10</sup> The cello probably was known in Venice in the 1630s. The term *violonchino* is used in G. B. Fontana's ensemble sonatas published posthumously in 1641; the composer died in the plague of 1630-1. Carlo Fedeli, who played and composed for the instrument, made his first appearance at St Mark's in the late 1630s.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford Bartlett and Peter Holman, 'Giovanni Gabrieli: A Guide to the performance of his instrumental music', *Early Music*, Vol. 3, no. 1 (1975), 28.

<sup>12</sup> *Le Pupitre* 27 (Paris, 1971).

<sup>13</sup> In the Canzona No. 4 of 1615 the printer omitted Bars 12-16 of the continuo. They are appended in ms at the end of the work in my film copy, but Sanvoisin inadvertently produced the right result by following the *Basso*.