

L'Accent

The *accent* is not as common an ornament as the *port de voix* and *tremblement*, but the ornament itself contains a unique expressive element. Bacilly defined the *accent* (or *aspiration*) as “a certain particular tone which is touched very lightly with the throat”.³⁷ However, some people in his time called this ornament the *plainte*. The name *plainte* implies that the ornament is to be applied in plaintive and lamenting *airs*.

Bacilly disagreed with this, as he thought that the *accent* could be used in more places. Montéclair seemed to go for the *plaintive* nature, as he defined the *accent* as a yearning or a painful raising of the voice. He pointed out that this ornament is practiced more often in plaintive *airs* than in love songs, and it is never practiced when expressing happiness or anger. The *accent* seems to have a doleful emotion embedded within.

How to execute the accent?

The *accent* is executed by singing a note immediately above the ornamented note, but should be approached with delicacy and subtlety, as the *accent* should only be heard a little. One small point I discovered while comparing the two treatises is that Bacilly held that the ornament is produced by the throat, as mentioned in the above quote, but Montéclair believed it to be formed in the chest by a kind of sob.

It is generated in the chest by a kind of sob, at the end of a long note, or a strong note (O) so that the note immediately above the note with the *accent* is heard a little. (Montéclair 1736)³⁸

One thing to note here is that the word ‘sob’ was translated from the French word *sanglot* (see Figure 15), which is another type of ornament listed in Montéclair’s treatise that can be used in expressing the greatest sadness. (See Table 2 for details)

³⁷ Bacilly 1668, p. 95.

³⁸ Montéclair 1736, p. 80. Translated by Aufray, Gilles as *Les Agréments – French baroque ornamentation*, Peacock Press, 2008, p. 7.

Accent.

L'Accent est une aspiration ou elevation douloureuse de la voix, qui se pratique plus souvent dans les airs plaintifs que dans les airs tendres; il ne se fait jamais dans les airs gais, ni dans ceux qui expriment la Colere.

Il se forme dans la poitrine, par une espece de sanglot, à l'extrémité d'une note de longue durée, ou forte, O, en faisant un peu sentir le degré immédiat au dessus de la note accentuée P.

L'Accent se marque quelquefois, par une petite note, ou par ce signe, ' ,



Figure 15: The description of *L'accent* (Montéclair 1736, p. 80)

When should the accent be practiced?

The *accent* was not meant to be performed in a lot of places. Bacilly was very explicit about when to practice the *accent*. There are two conditions:

1. If the syllable is long, and
2. If the note is followed by another note which is at the same pitch, or one or two steps lower.

Here is an example given by Bacilly, where an *accent* can be used on the last syllable of 'rangeoit', and it must be touched so lightly and delicately that it is almost imperceptible. It was not specified which note it was, as there are nine notes written by Lambert on the last syllable of the word 'rangeoit'. It is very possible that it is the final *mi* before the last *ut*.³⁹



Figure 16: Example of *l'accent* (Bacilly 1668, p. 96)



Figure 17: Example of *l'accent* (Lambert 1668, p.50)

³⁹ I am using the French solemnisation here as French authors would have done then.

Montéclair proposed also two conditions for practicing the *accent*:

1. At the end of a long note, or
2. After a strong note.

From the examples given by Montéclair, it seems that there was no restriction on whether the following note had to be at the same pitch, or one or two steps lower, as advised by Bacilly. In the last example (see Figure 15), an *accent* is practiced on the word *hélas*, on an *F* followed by a *B*.

Bacilly clearly specified that the *accent* was not meant to be performed everywhere, as it was not a regular *agrément*, and it was found quite rarely in *airs* actually, because it slowed down and hindered the progress of an *air*. Below I sum up several points where Bacilly advised not to practice the *accent*.

The *accent* should not be practiced:

1. In short syllable. Never.
2. At the ends of last notes.
3. On *port de voix*.

Sometimes, when a composer had expressively written out the *accent*, Bacilly said, then singers had two ways in performing it. (See Figure 17)

1. Sing a light *accent* that is shorter than the notated music.
2. Repeat the note to perform a *plainte* that use up the complete note value.

Lambert 1668, p. 12.

The figure shows a musical score for two staves (treble and bass clef) in common time. The lyrics are 'O Dieux' repeated twice. The first measure is labeled '(accent)' and shows a single note with a short accent mark. The second measure is labeled '(plainte)' and shows a note followed by a repeat of the same note to fill the measure. The lyrics 'O Dieux' are written below the notes, and the number '3' is written below the first note in each measure.

Figure 18: Example of *accent* and *plainte* (Bacilly 1668, p. 97)

Nonetheless, the *accent* was seen to be the customary approach that was more widely accepted. The *accent* was never considered a bad interpretation, but the *plainte* was a controversial choice.

Is there any sign representing the accent?

In Bacilly's point of view, the *accent* cannot be effectively notated, just as the *port de voix* and the *tremblement*. He held that since the note should be sung lightly, a written-out *accent* could encourage singers to give the same force to the *accent* as to other notes if it was written out.

Concerning these examples of *accents*, they can never be effectively written down in notation since even though they involve a certain note, this note must not be emphasized, but only touched upon, thus it is much better to leave the entire matter up to the discretion of the performers who know where the *accent* should be used which are places involving long syllables and two note (either both at the same pitch or in a descending pattern) which can be connected. (Bacilly 1668)⁴⁰

However, in Montéclair's time, composers seemed to have established a way of notating the *accent* in scores. (See Figure 15)

Conclusion

The *accent* is an ornament that can be used only on long syllables and it is not appropriate to use it frequently, but it is an interesting ornament to learn because it innately contains the expression of sorrow and lamentation.

⁴⁰ Bacilly 1668, p. 97.