

Silent Speech: Ganassi's Vision of the Human Voice

Original works by Tromboncino, Gombert, Cara, Willaert, and others with diminutions in the style of Silvestro Ganassi

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If music has always been a sounding of the human voice, then the 16th-century art of diminution is one of its most eloquent paradoxes: a silent voice, hidden within the written line, waiting for the performer to bring it to life. Few embodied this idea more vividly than Silvestro Ganassi, whose *La Fontegara* (Venice, 1535) offers not only technical instruction to the recorder player, but a vision of music in which the instrument itself aspires to speak. For Ganassi, the recorder was not merely a tool for executing notes—it was capable of expressing everything the human voice could, shaped by the breath, the fingers, and the imagination of the player. Like a skilled painter rendering all of nature in colour, the musician was called upon to give voice to inert materials. Diminutions, in this view, were not just flourishes—they were acts of speech, as we find them in many of Ganassi's examples: expressive inflections that brought the line to life, made it speak, breathe, and persuade.

This programme explores that expressive tradition, placing Ganassi's legacy at the heart of a wider musical world shaped by vocal polyphony, improvisation, and artistic dialogue. Centred on the vibrant culture of 16th-century Venice, it presents a selection of works—originally vocal—that reflect a time when musical expression was increasingly understood as a kind of human utterance, whether sung or played.

The *frottola* we have chosen, one of the most popular secular forms of early 16th-century Italy, exemplifies this blending of simplicity and expression. Though often modest in texture, these songs—by composers such as Bartolomeo Tromboncino and Marchetto Cara—were vehicles for lyrical immediacy and rhythmic clarity, ideal for decoration through diminution. In the hands of instrumentalists, such pieces became living stories, open to improvisation and re-voicing. Ganassi's treatise reflects exactly this practice: providing countless examples of how a line might be elaborated, transformed, and made to speak anew with every performance.

At the same time, the polyphonic sophistication of Franco-Flemish composers such as Nicolas Gombert and Adrian Willaert brings a contrasting richness of texture and intellectual weight to the programme. These composers were not just admired by Ganassi—they were strategically invoked by him. In his later treatise, *Regola Rubertina*, Ganassi names GOMBERT and Willaert with emphatic prominence, aligning himself with the most revered figures of his day. His reference to Gombert suggests not only admiration, but also a desire to embed his own work within the authority and prestige of the *maestri di cappella*. These composers represent the very musical ideals he aspired to: expressive complexity, rhetorical nuance, and the elevation of music to a form of reasoned, persuasive speech.

Their dense polyphonic textures also offer fertile ground for instrumental re-voicing. When decorated with diminutions in the style of Ganassi, their lines become conversational, almost tactile—each voice moving with a distinct timbre, a separate breath. Through Ganassi's lens, even the most elaborate counterpoint is understood as dialogue: the human voice, made audible not by a singer, but through the eloquence of an instrument.

This programme encourages us to recognise instrumental music as fully capable of expressing the subtlety and nuance of human speech. As Ganassi envisioned, just as a skilled painter imitates all of nature's colours, so too can the recorder imitate the utterances of the human voice—transforming music into a true speech of human expression. This art, though born in the sixteenth century with diminutions modelled after Ganassi's examples, is capable of continuing to speak today: as musicians now, we are shaped by our own voices, instincts, and experiences, and carry this practice forward—not as a relic, but as a living language.

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