Giovanni Battista Bovicelli

An Approach to Bovicelli

Based on a PowerPoint presentation for a diminution course for the Egidier Musikwerkstatt in 2017 in Nuremberg, supplemented for the 1st Bovicelli Competition organised by Schloss Weißenbrunn Stiftung in April 2020

By Pia Praetorius

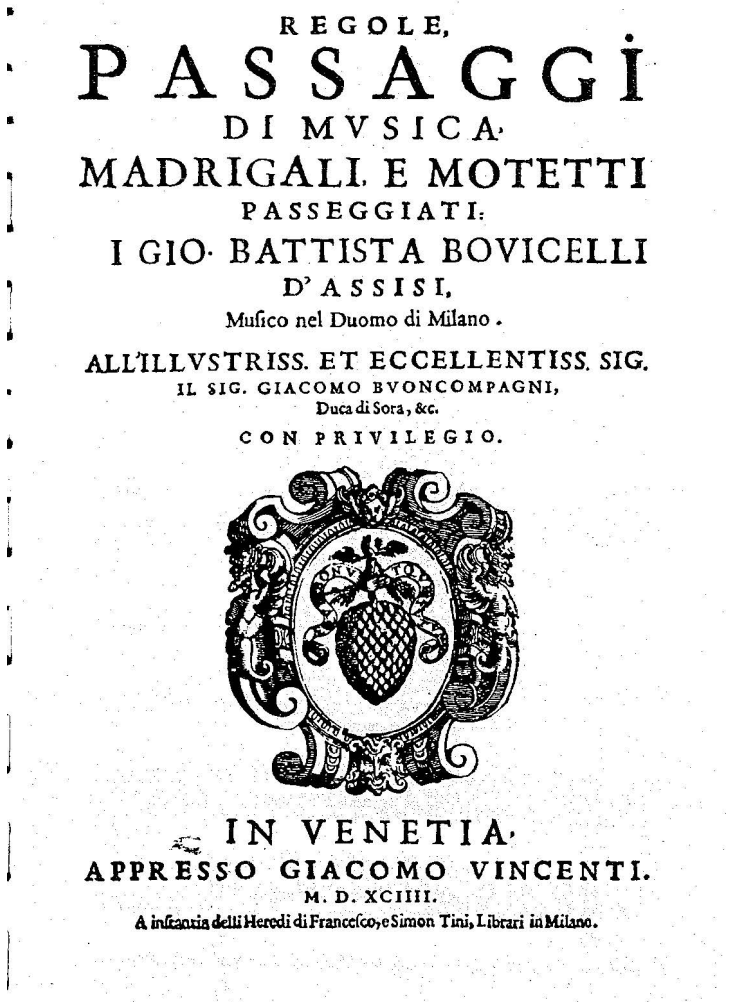
Translated by Ulrike Seeberger

Giovanni Battista Bovicelli

- Born in Assisi
- 1569- 1575 sopranist and tenor at the chapel of Santa Casa in Loreto
- 1578 – 1581 tenor in the Cappella Giulia at St Peter's in Rome
- During this time, he also worked for Cardinal Guglielmo Sirleto who recommended Bovicelli to the Archbishop of Milan, Carlo Borromeo, as well as for Giacomo Boncompagni, to whom he dedicated his treatise on diminution.
- In 1584, Bovicelli, by then employed as a singer at Milan Cathedral, wrote in a letter to Guglielmo Sirleto wrote that he had been invited to Mantua by Duke Guglielmo Gonzaga and had been promised a higher salary there.
- Damiano Scarabelli, deputy director of music at Milan Cathedral, in the dedication of his Liber primus motectorum (Venice, 1592) praises the Cathedral singers' skills in diminution (»con artificiosi passaggi, e soavi accenti«), explicitly mentioning Bovicelli.
- 1622 – 1627 he was back in Assisi and in employment at the Cathedral of San Rufino.

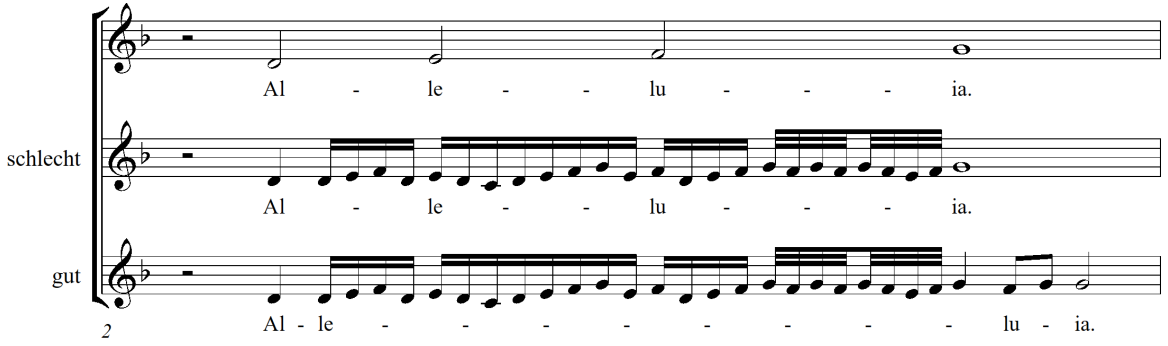
Regole, passaggi di musica, madrigali e motetti passeggiati

- Venice, 1594
- In the preface, he mentions critics who consider that some of his passaggi are too difficult for the human voice. He replies that those gifted by nature [with a good disposition of voice] would be able to sing even more difficult passaggi.
- His treatise comprises four parts:
  - Part 1: Advice about the words
  - Part 2: Advice about the notes
  - Part 3: Diminutions of intervals and cadences
  - Part 4: Diminutions of motets and madrigals by Palestrina, de Rore, Victoria and Merulo, a Magnificat by Gabussi, Falsi bordoni by Giovannelli and two of his own works

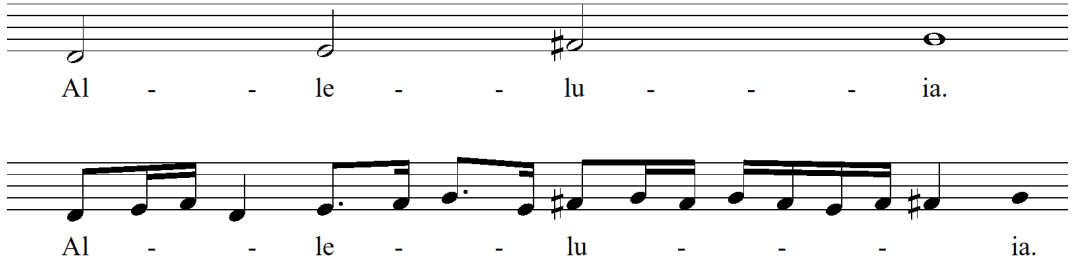

REGOLE,
PASSAGGI
DI MVSICA,
MADRIGALI, E MOTETTI
PASSEGGIATI:
I GIO. BATTISTA BOVICELLI
D'ASSISI,
Musico nel Duomo di Milano.
ALL'ILLVSTRISS. ET ECCELLENTISS. SIG.
IL SIG. GIACOMO BVONCOMPAGNI,
Duca di Sora, &c.
CON PRIVILEGIO.
IN VENETIA,
APPRESSO GIACOMO VINCENTI.
M. D. XCIIII.
A instantia delli Heredi di Francesco, e Simon Tini, Librari in Milano.

Part 1 Advice about the Words

- In passaggi, pay attention not only to the notes, but also to the text.
- No change of syllable in fast passages of equal note values or tremoli etc.
- When notes are repeated, the syllable should change.
- In passages with different lengths of notes, the syllables may be changed at the singer's discretion, as long as syllable lengths and stresses are taken into account (long note = stressed/long syllable)
- lengths are important because most theory about poetry at this time discussed lengths rather than stresses (because it was based on Latin models)

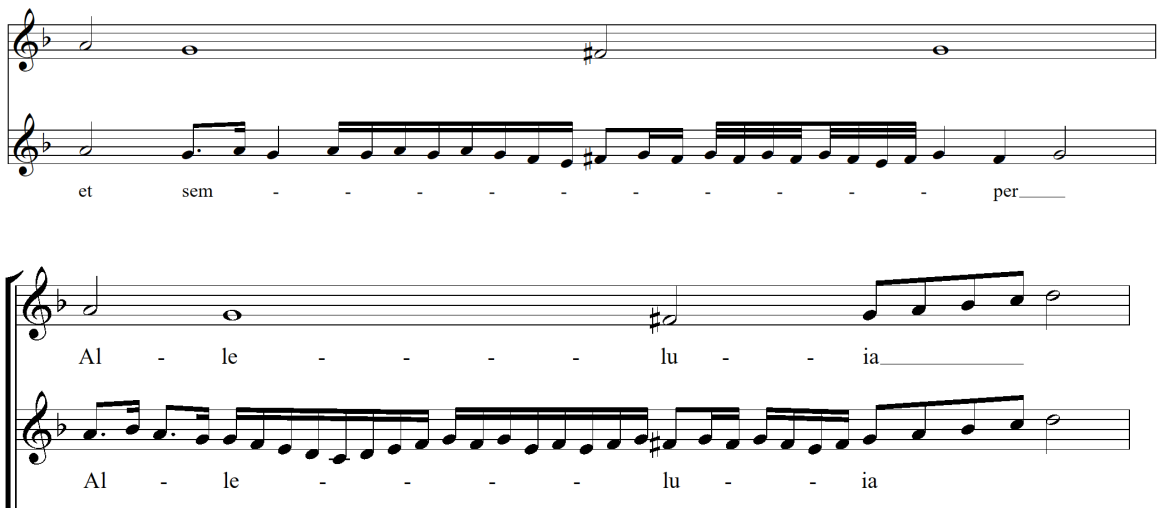


Textverteilung bei rhythmischen Passaggi



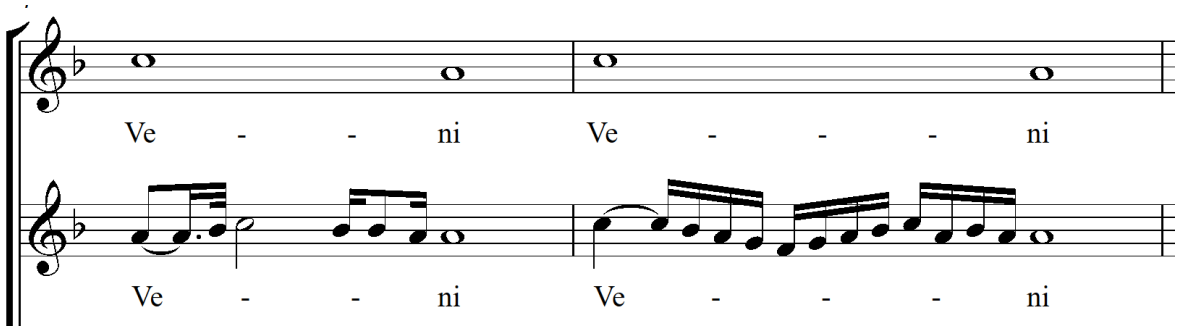
About the Words

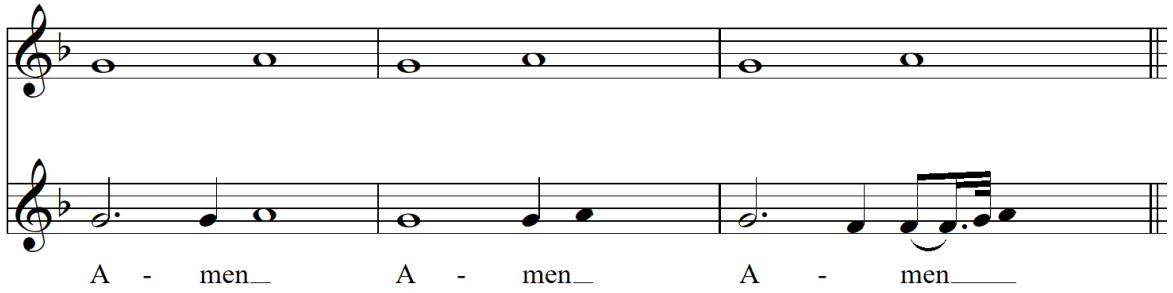
- If at all possible, in passaggi of many notes, especially those with groppetti at the end, which are always concluded with sixteenth notes/semiquavers or thirty-second notes/semidemiquavers, no new syllable should be performed on the following long note, but rather on a less stressed note.
- If it is unavoidable that a new syllable follows after a groppo, the voice should cushion this in a gentle manner, thus tempering the harshness of the conclusion.
- Bovicelli puts it differently, saying that longer note values should be used to slow down



About the Words

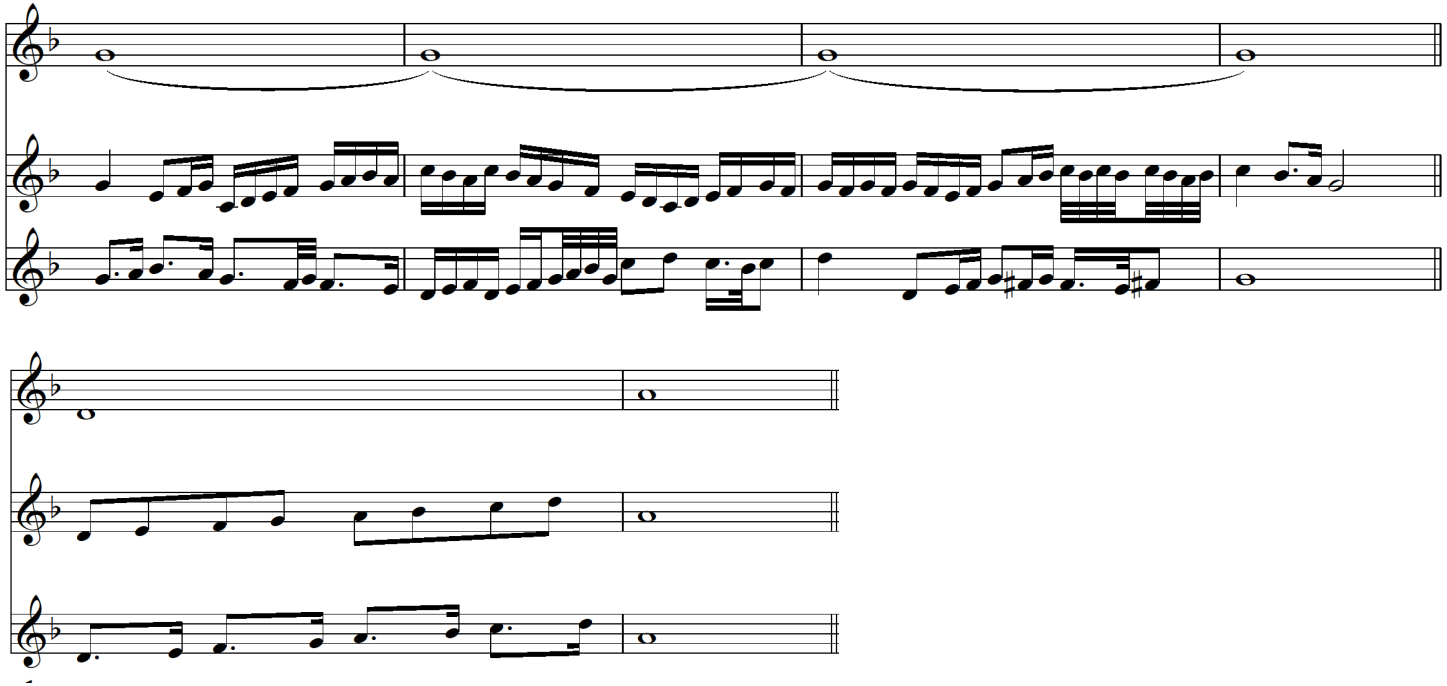
- No new syllable should be introduced in tremoli, except – and this is also valid for all other passaggi – when there is a repetition of notes at the end.
- Best vowels for passaggi are A, E, O
- I and U not so convincing
- (With the exception of Zacconi, all other theoreticians also seem to share this opinion, although Bovicelli himself also presents examples of diminutions on I and U).
- Close attention must be paid to the placement of a syllable. This may result in music having completely different effects. A final syllable should always be delicate.
- Finally, the greatest fault lies with those who never make an end on the word but always keep repeating the two or three first syllables, saying for example “Benedi-Benedictus”: this is reminiscent of people who have ruined their teeth and keep on chewing the same mouthful in order to swallow it.





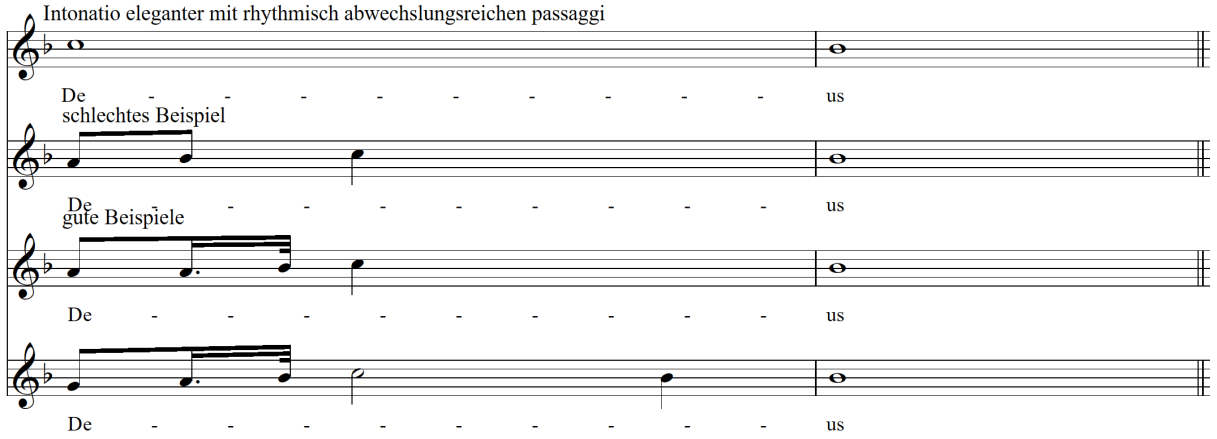
Part 2: Advice about the Notes

- The most important thing first: when using passaggi or accenti, particularly with long notes, you must always pay attention to the movement and harmonies of the other parts.
- Variations, especially of rhythm, enhance liveliness, giving different effects to the same sequence of notes.
- Long, uniform passaggi tire listeners' ears.



About the Notes: Intonatio

- In order to make your voice sound elegant and graceful, both at the beginning and in other parts of the piece, you would usually begin a third or fourth below the first note (= intonatio, but paying attention to the other parts).
- In this case, the notes should not be of equal length, but the first should be longer, the second shorter/faster. This is more graceful and has a livelier effect.
- In general, singing is more elegant, if there are variations in rhythm.



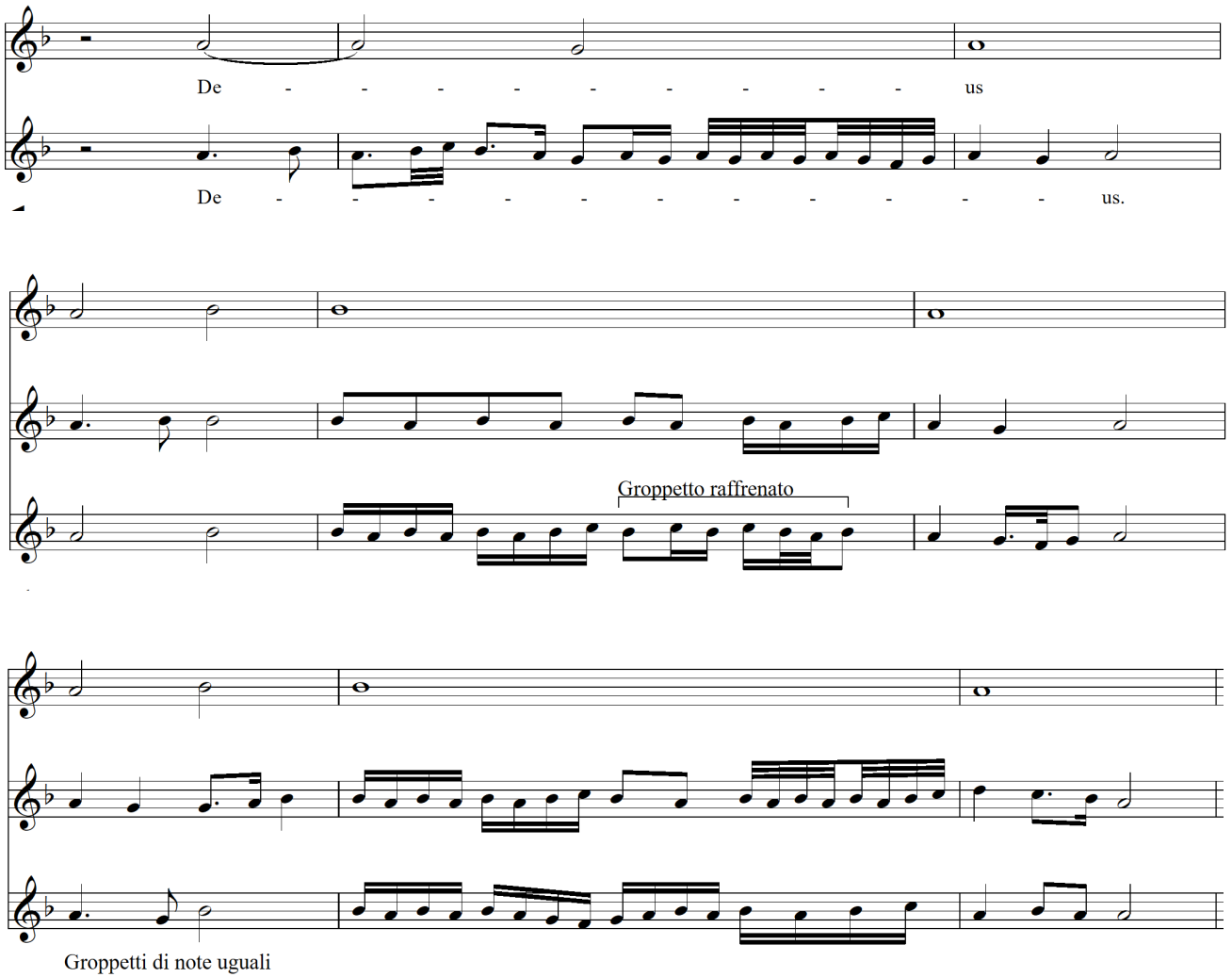
About the Notes: Groppetto

2 types:

1. with uniform rhythm

2. with slowed-down, calmer movement at the end = groppetto raffrenato

- The second type is better suited in most cases, since it sounds more graceful and is more suitable before the final syllable. It means that you don’t hasten the end. All in all, it is important to avoid a restless ending.
- Sometimes, you might also use the more uniform variation, if the text permits this.

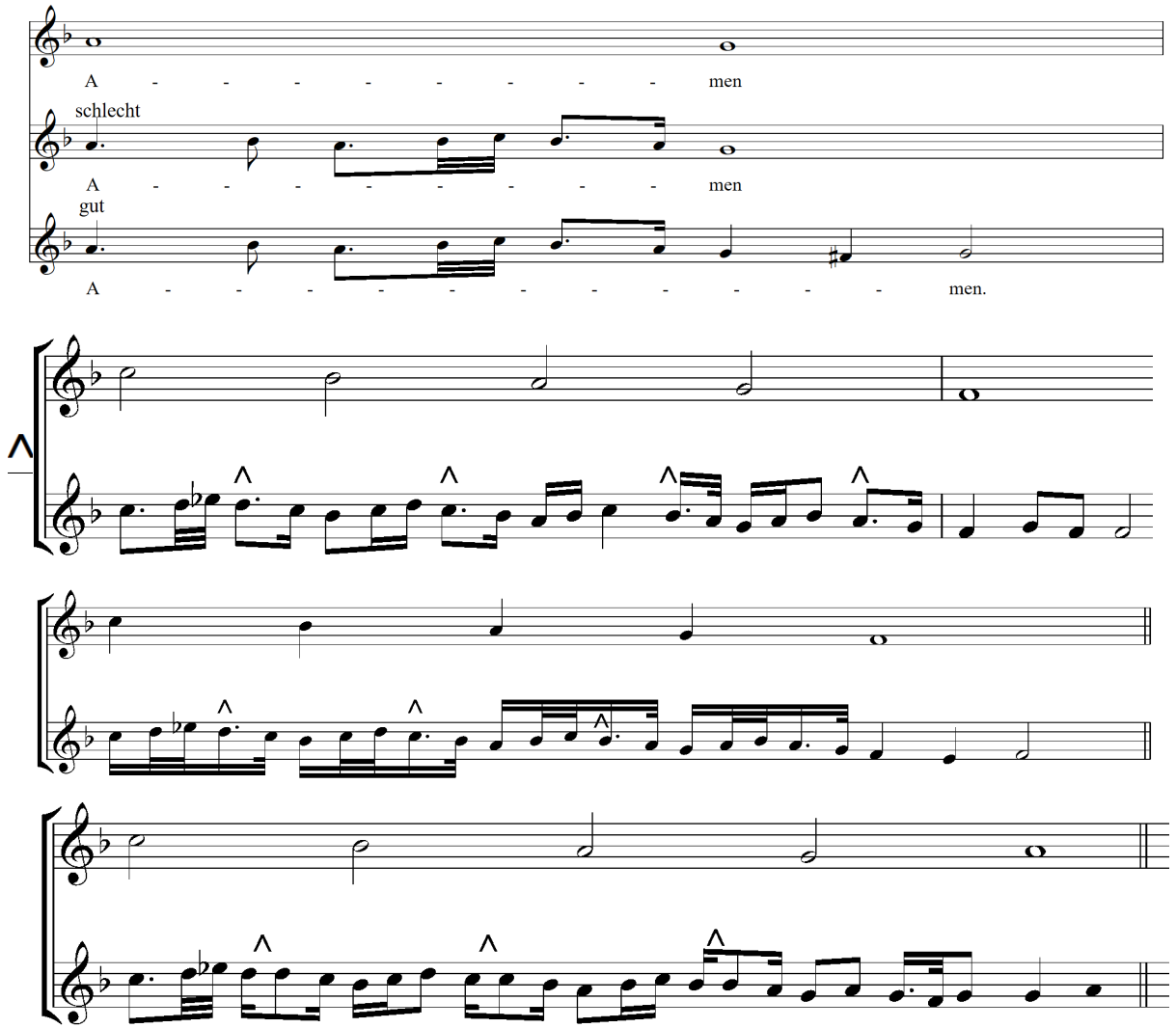


About the Notes

- One of Bovicelli's main concerns is to slow down speed at the end of a phrase and bring it to a good, i.e. not an abrupt end.
- It is not only groppetti, but also passaggi which should not have an abrupt end. As in riding, you should not stop suddenly, but rein in little by little.

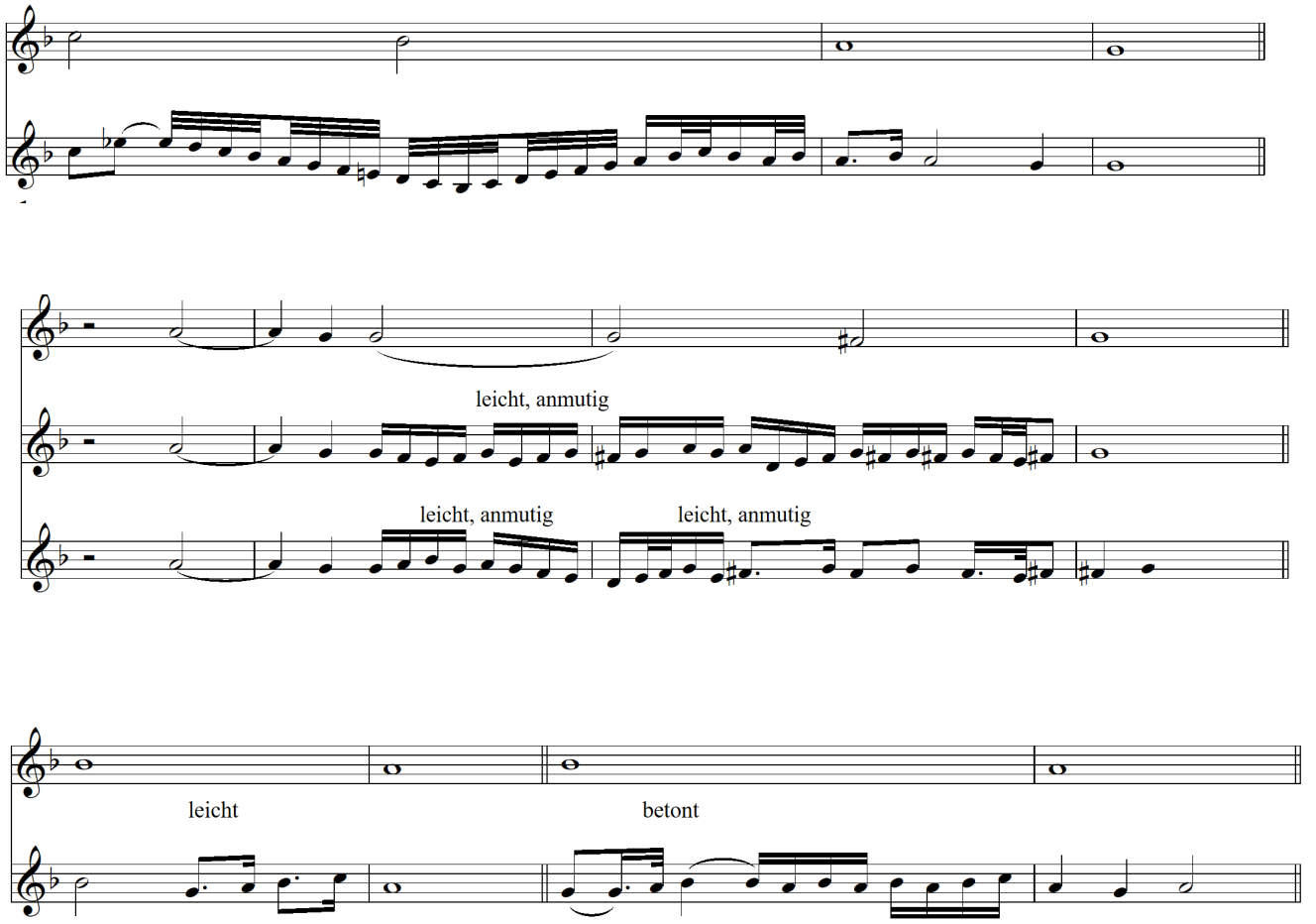
Accenti

- Different, depending on whether they are on a half note/minim or quarter note/crotchet
- Greater possibility for rhythmic variations on minims, a formal tremolo is possible on the designated note
- Accenti on crotchets are rather less differentiated, because they are very fast. Tremolo is possible on the [designated] notes marked with ^, however not a formal tremolo, since it would be too fast.
- The lower line shows the execution of the tremolo. The ^sign is placed between the two notes. Tremolo= trembling of the voice on one and the same note.



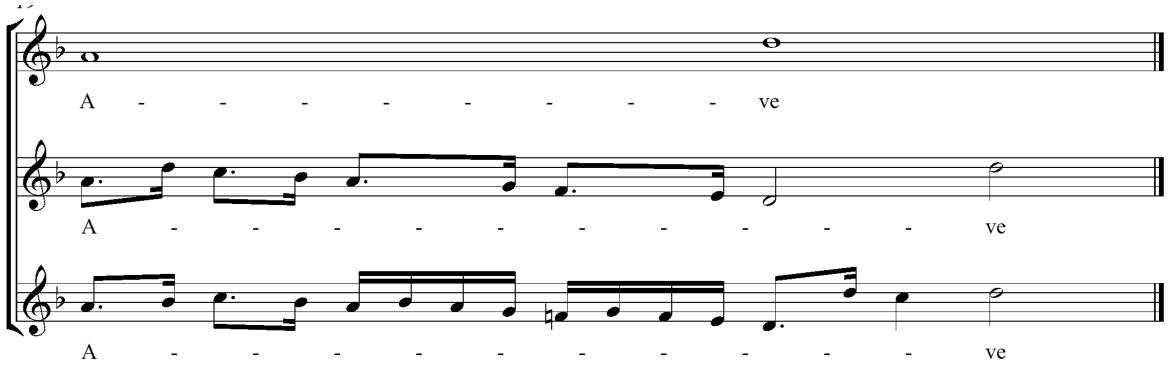
About the Notes

- Fast runs come across as more inspired, if the beginning is held back a bit.
- Runs are to be articulated note by note in such a manner that the difference is heard/felt in the voice.
- Whenever there are leaps of a third in the middle of a run, they are to be sung more gracefully and lightly.
- Groups with dotted notes may be articulated in various different manners:
- If there is a long and heavy note at the beginning, the dotted notes following are sung lightly.
- If two notes of equal weight are connected as dotted notes, the second note may be given a certain emphasis, producing a more lively, inspired effect.



About the Notes

- When there are many leaps following each other, they should be executed gracefully and lightly, with the top note being sung delicately, without force
- Passaggi should be used to correspond to the content of the text.
- Do not embellish sad words with passaggi, but accompany them with accenti and a mournful voice.
- For cheerful words use passaggi and give them vivacity by varying rhythms.
- No rule without exception: in some cases it is permitted to add passaggi to sad words, if the music requires this.



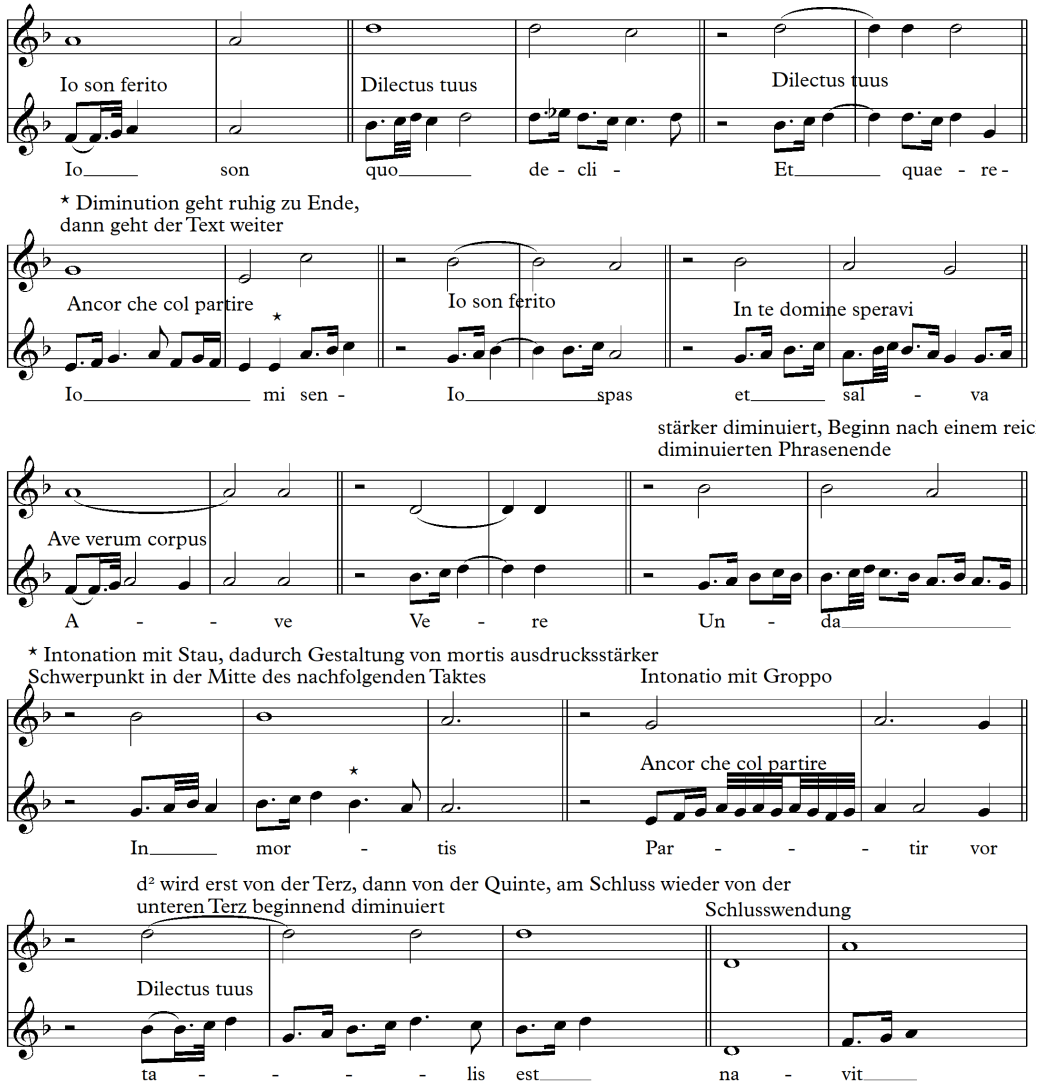
About the Notes

- Stay in time, no arbitrary lengthening of notes when singing passaggi.
- Exception: the penultimate note in a final cadence, for the penultimate note is embellished with the most complex ornament.
- Do not breathe in the middle of a passaggio, if the notes have the same length.
- Do not breathe after every few notes.
- Do not use any passaggi in the first bars.
- Use diminutions/embellishments for emphasis, not all the time.

Examples from Part 4 with diminutions of motets, madrigals and falsi bordoni

Intonatio

- Bovicelli frequently uses intonatio.
- In all examples, the first note is longer than the second, often dotted = more inspired, lively beginning.
- In all examples, the beginning is a third lower than the initial note. A fourth below is also possible.
- Often used when notes are repeated at the beginning; it enlivens uniformity, gives a direction to the part.
- Dotted figure comprising a third from below, also used for endings.

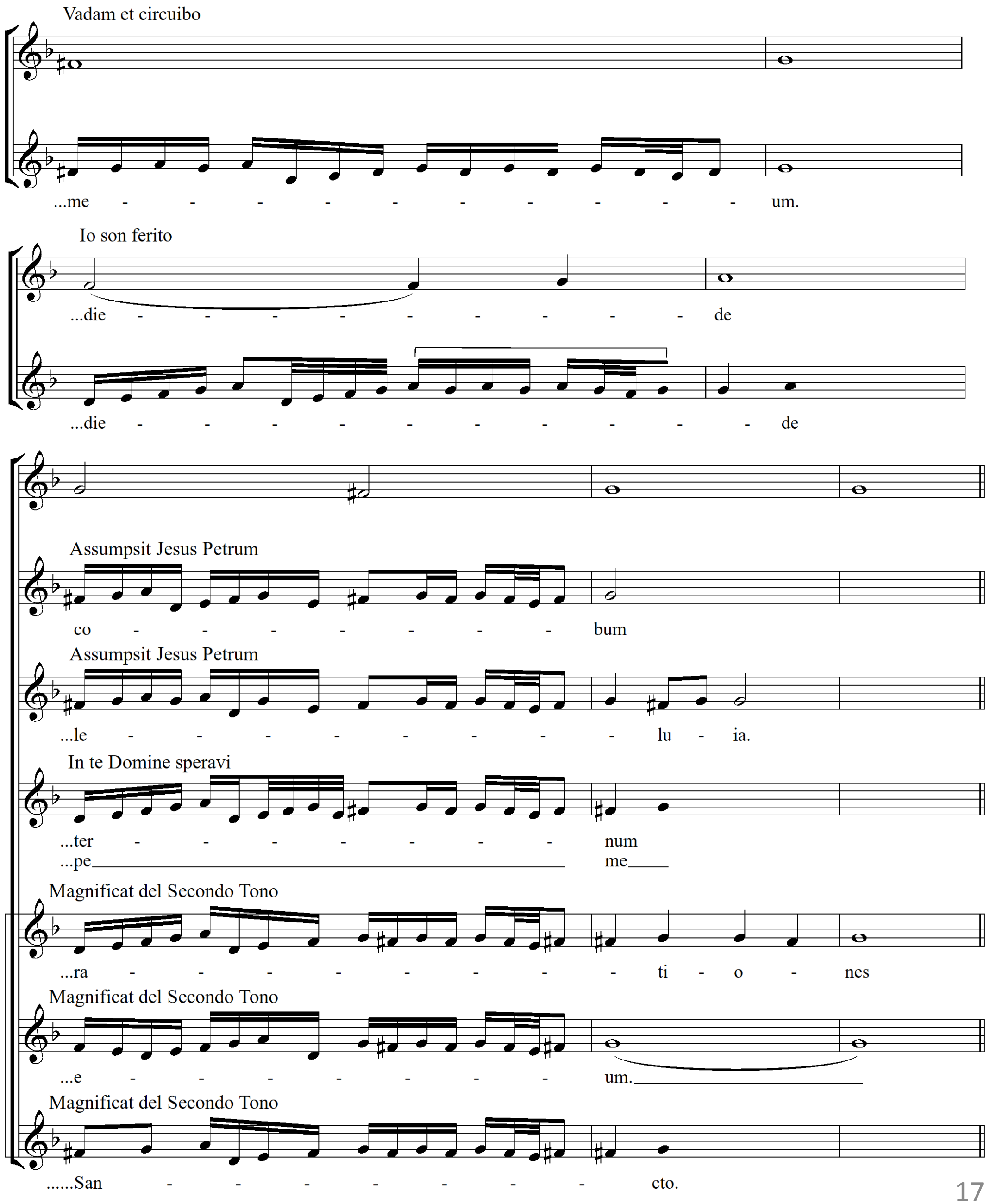


Cadences

- Groppo or groppetto, as Bovicelli writes, on the paenultima (i.e., the penultimate note of the cadence), is the form of embellishment he prefers in his examples.
- He uses both a uniform groppo and a groppo (groppetto) raffrenato, the latter significantly more frequently.

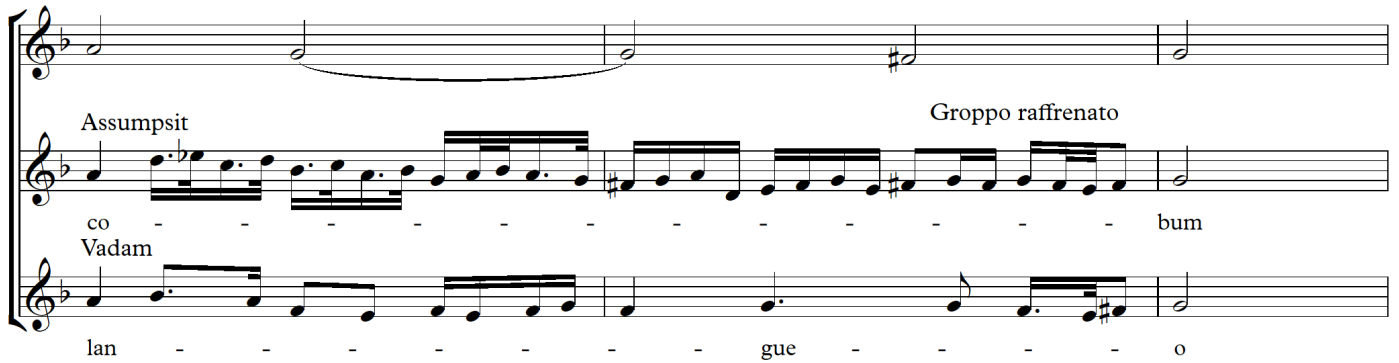
Groppetto raffrenato

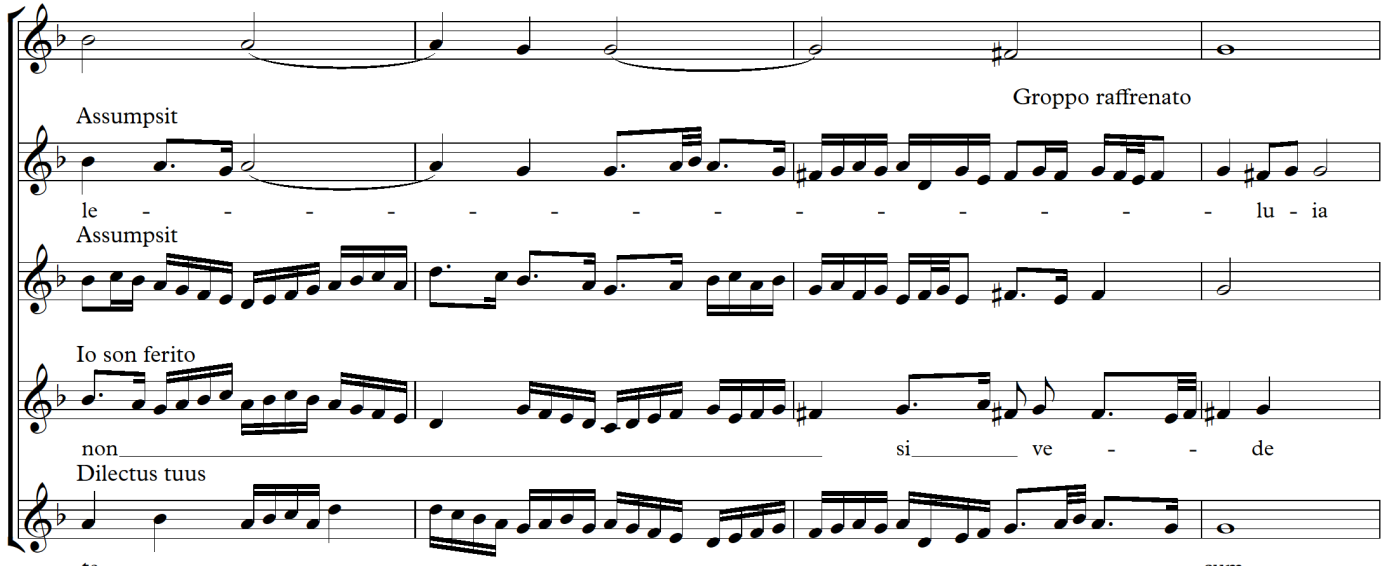
- In the works of other theoreticians, the groppetto is also called groppo or gruppo.
- The groppetto raffrenato, a kind of compressed, slowed-down groppo, is an expression specific to Bovicelli, and he attaches great importance to it. In his written out diminutions he very frequently uses this embellishment.
- Similar to the diminished end note, he is concerned with deceleration and an elegant fading out and calming of the diminution. Again and again, he uses the image of the horse which has to decelerate before coming to a standstill.



Cadences

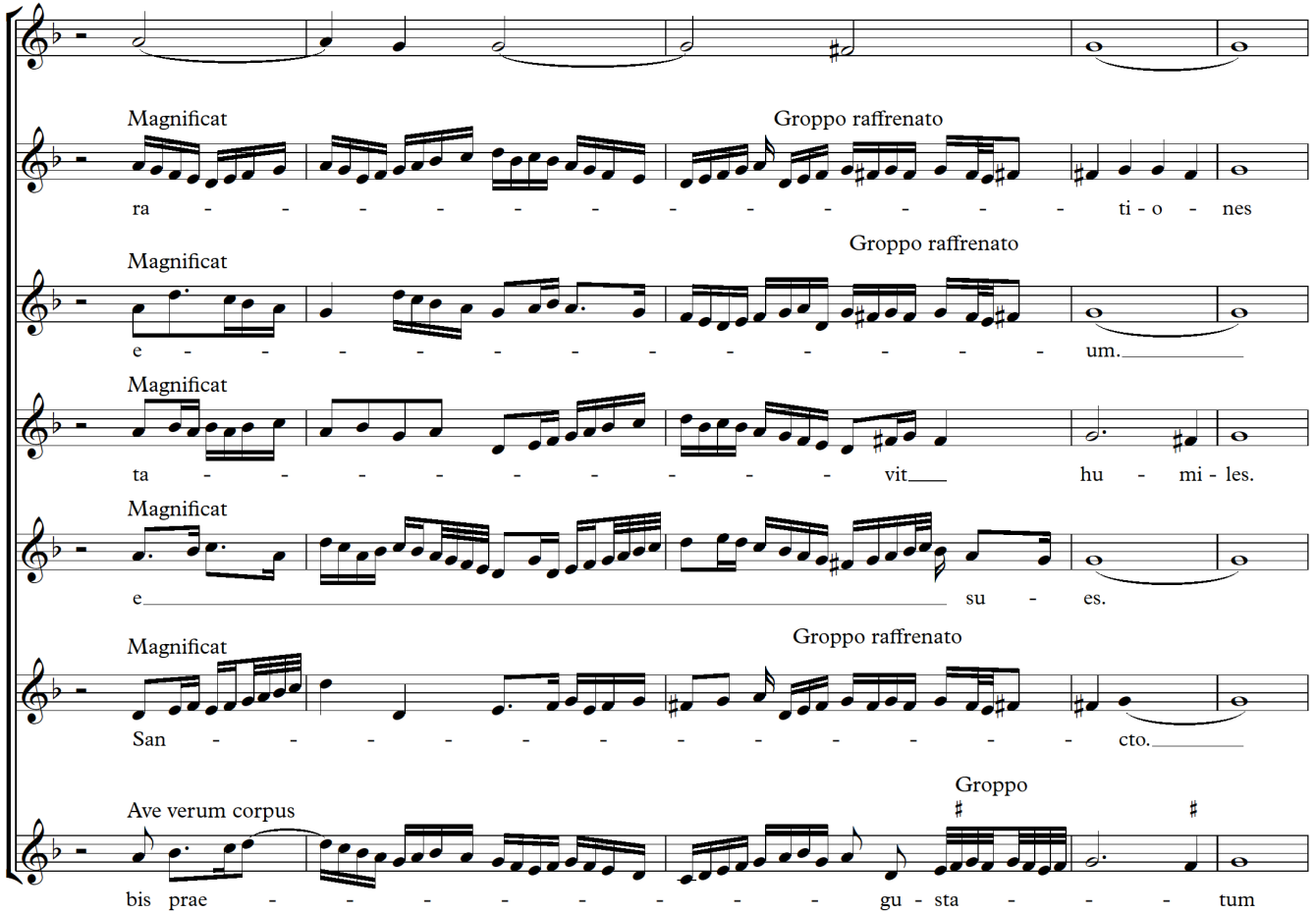
- Cadences are a preferred place for embellishments.
- It is recommended to explore the work which is to be embellished for existing cadences first, and to concentrate on those to start with.





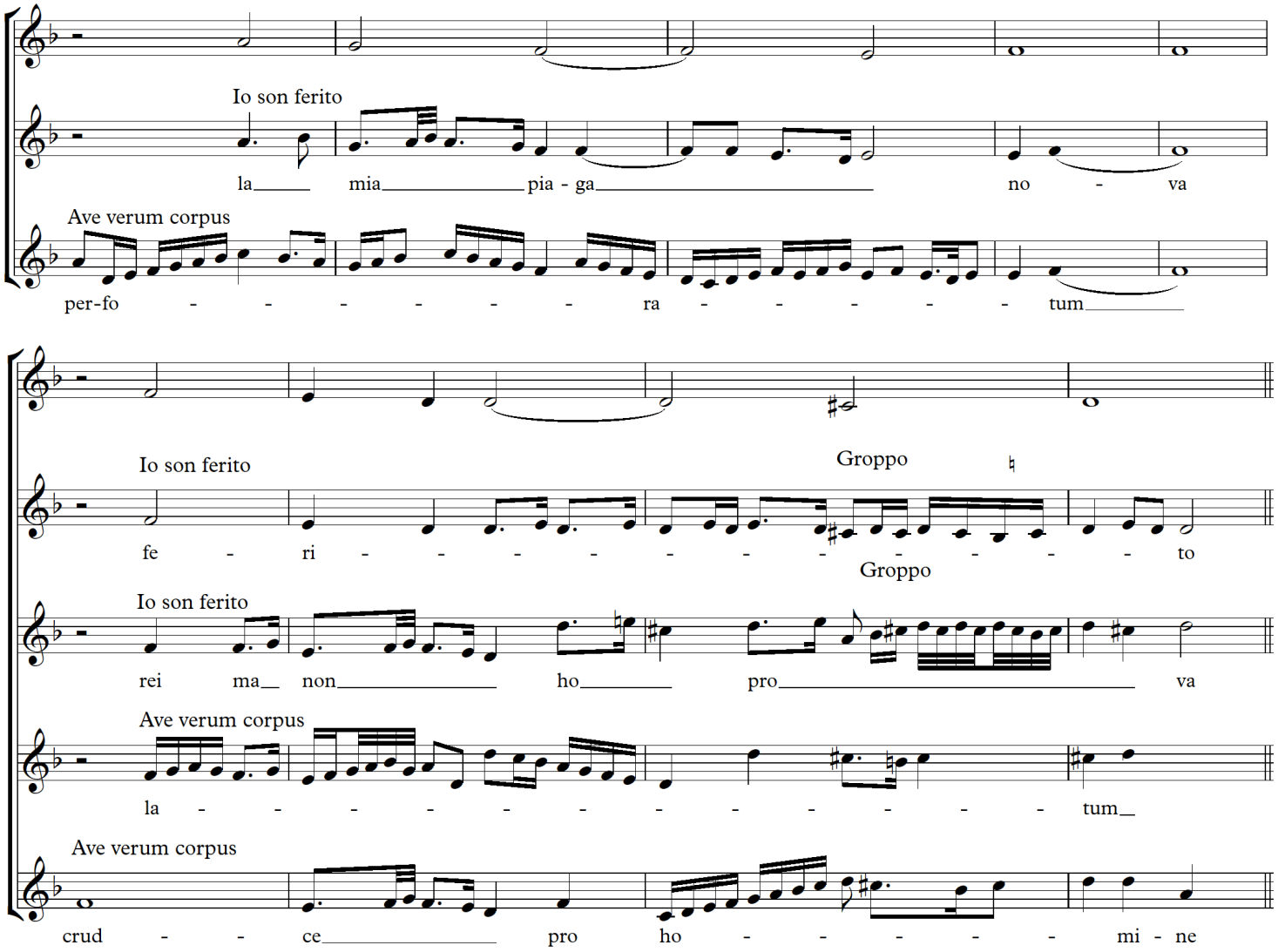
Kadenzen

- In his examples, each of the cadences is embellished differently.
- The final notes are most often also embellished.
- Whenever the final note is not embellished/diminished, he has already slowed down the penultimate note, usually with a groppo raffrenato.



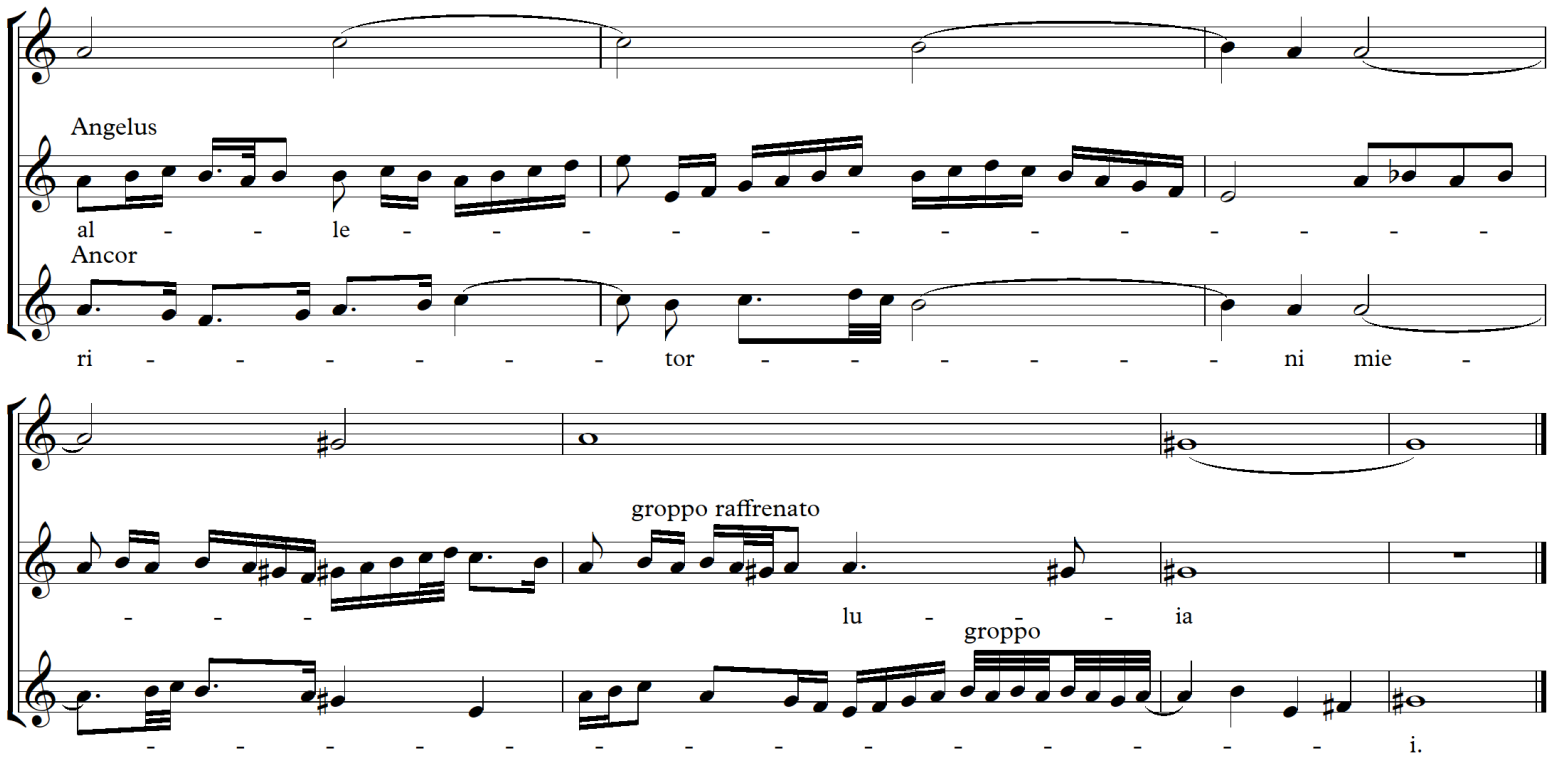
Cadences

- Further examples of final notes.
- In “Io son ferito”, in contrast to his opinion voiced in Part 1, stating that ”I” is not suitable for diminutions, he also uses “I” in extended diminutions, both in “fe-ri-to” and in ”par-ti-to”. There are other examples of this in the other diminutions. Although they are in the minority, they still show that there is an exception to every rule.



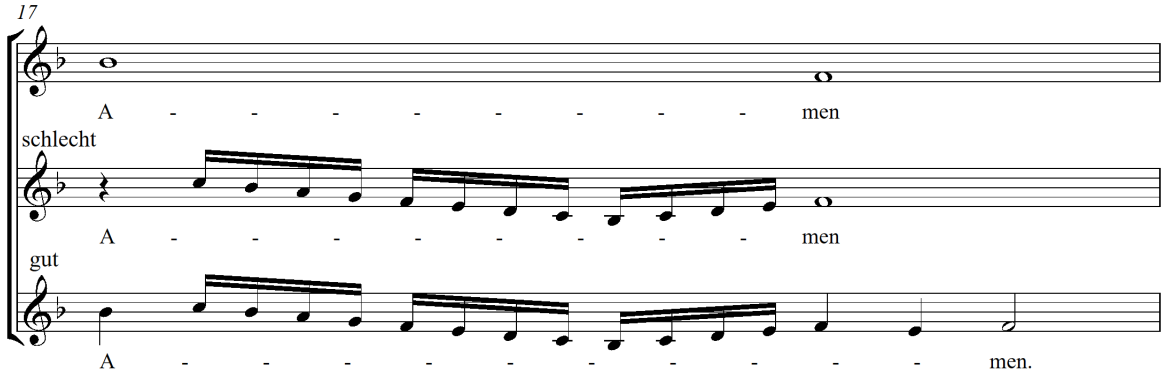
Cadences

- Further examples of final notes.



About the Notes

- One of Bovicelli's main concerns is to slow down speed at the end of a cadence and bringing it to a good, i.e. not an abrupt end. He uses two tools for this:
  - Forms of embellishment such as the groppetto raffrenato on the penultimate syllable.
  - Diminution of the final syllable.
- It is not only groppetti, but also passaggi which should not end abruptly. As in riding, you should not come to a sudden halt, but rein in little by little.

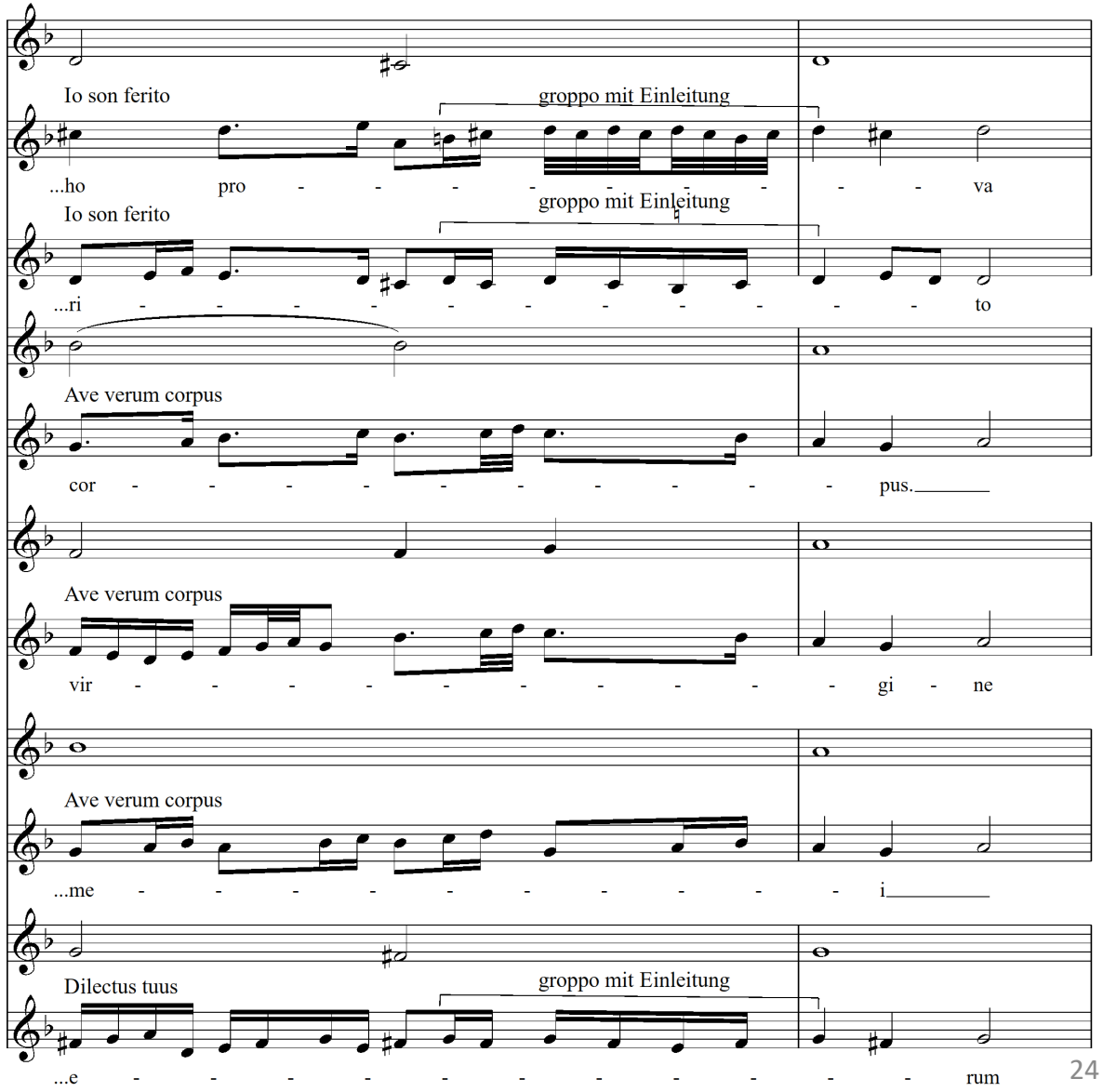


End notes of phrases and cadences

- Bovicelli very frequently diminishes final notes of phrases or cadences. This is his trademark, so to speak. Thus, the embellishment on the penultimate note may flow into the final note without having to come to an abrupt standstill. This helps singers to stay in time, and it gives the end a more graceful, natural effect.
- He often introduces dissonances in the delayed final notes. They are always in “black notation”, i.e. in very free timing.

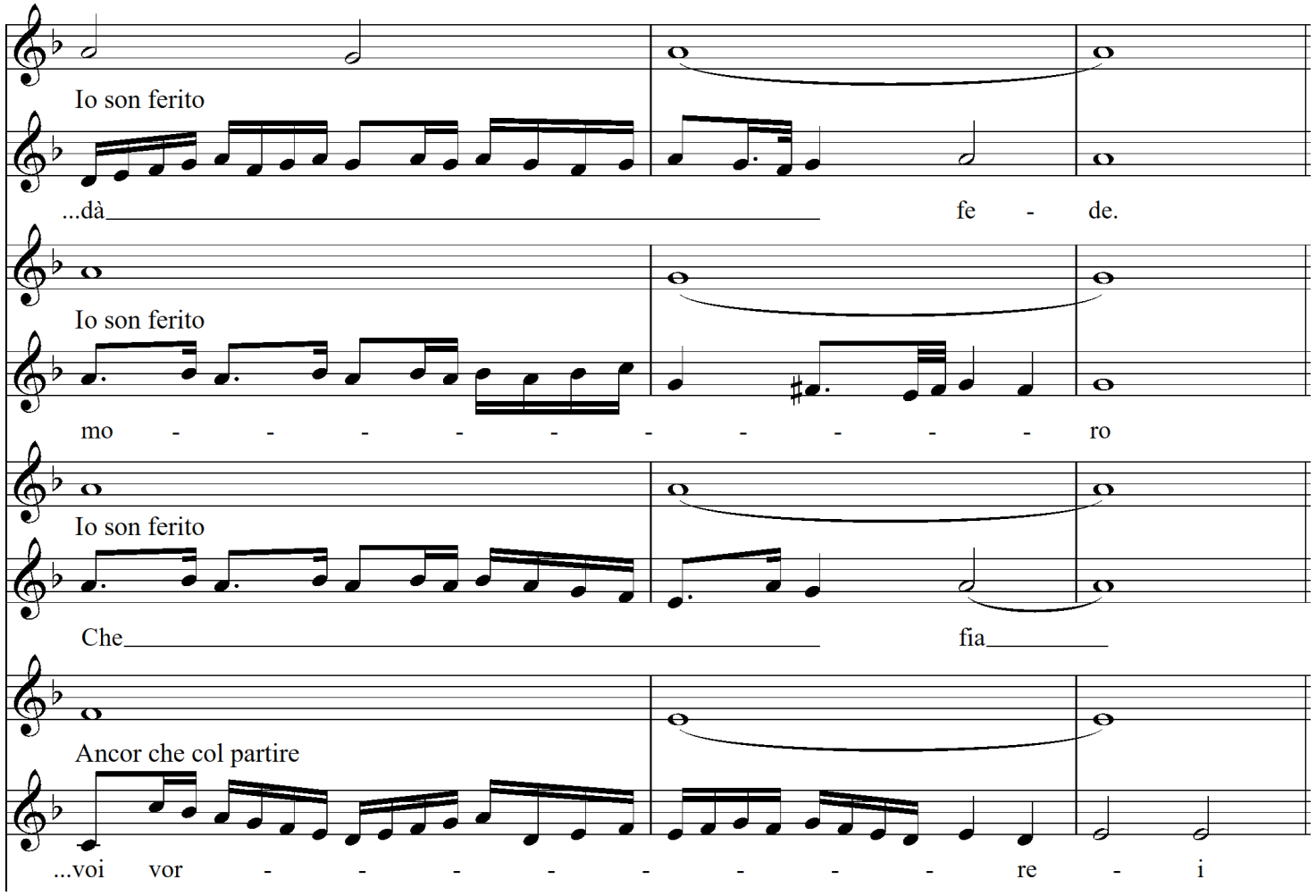
End notes, diminished/embellished through neighbour notes above or below

- End notes are often embellished/diminished through neighbour notes, most often to the note below, more rarely to that above.
- These neighbour notes appear remarkably often whenever he uses a groppo on the penultimate note.
- He then tends to lengthen the penultimate syllable and to put the final syllable later.



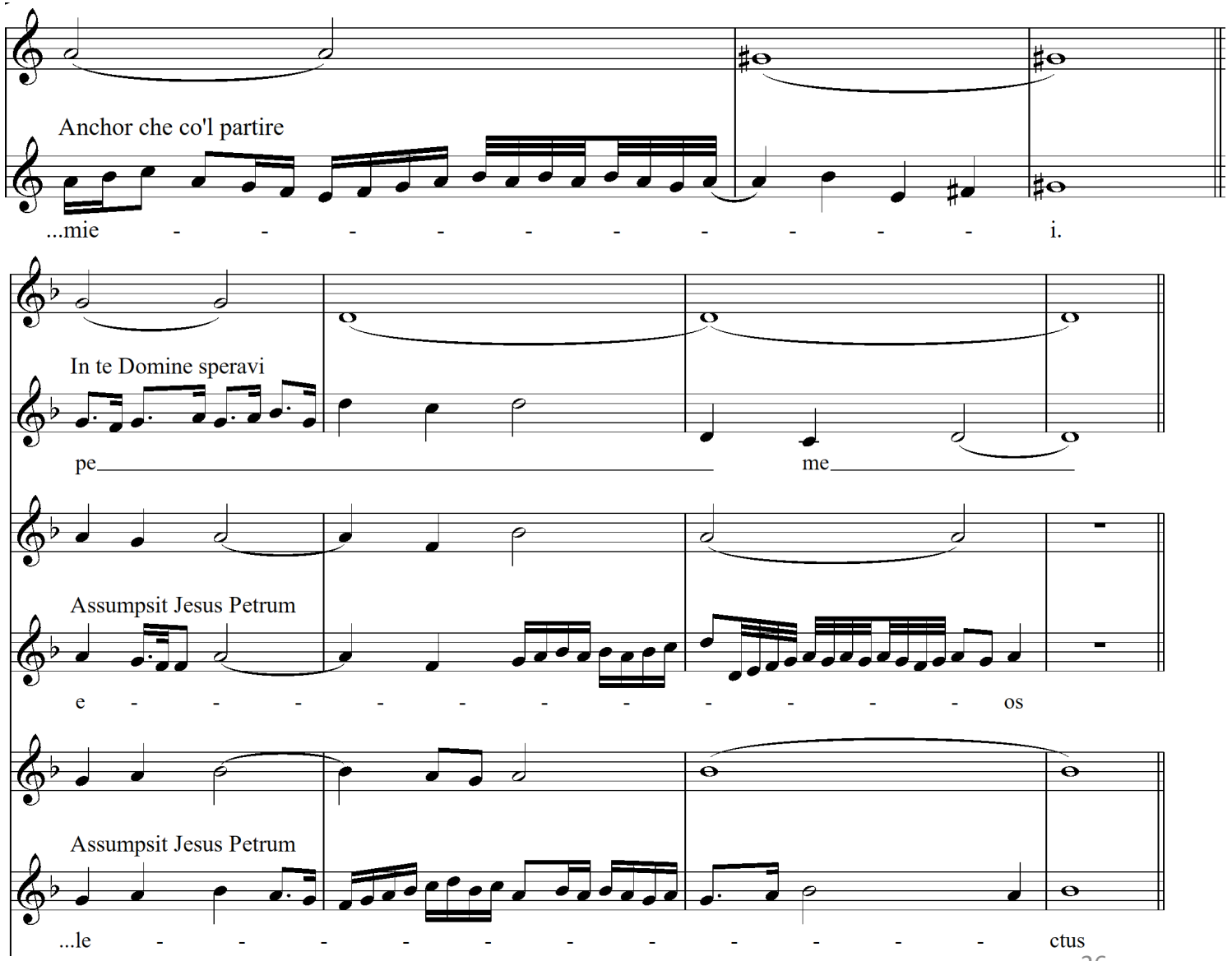
Diminution of long end notes of phrases and cadences

- He often diminishes long end notes, writing both plain and more complex passaggi.



Diminution of long end notes of phrases and cadences

- More examples of long end notes enlivened by passaggi
- He always calms down the passaggi towards the end, letting them run down with longer notes.

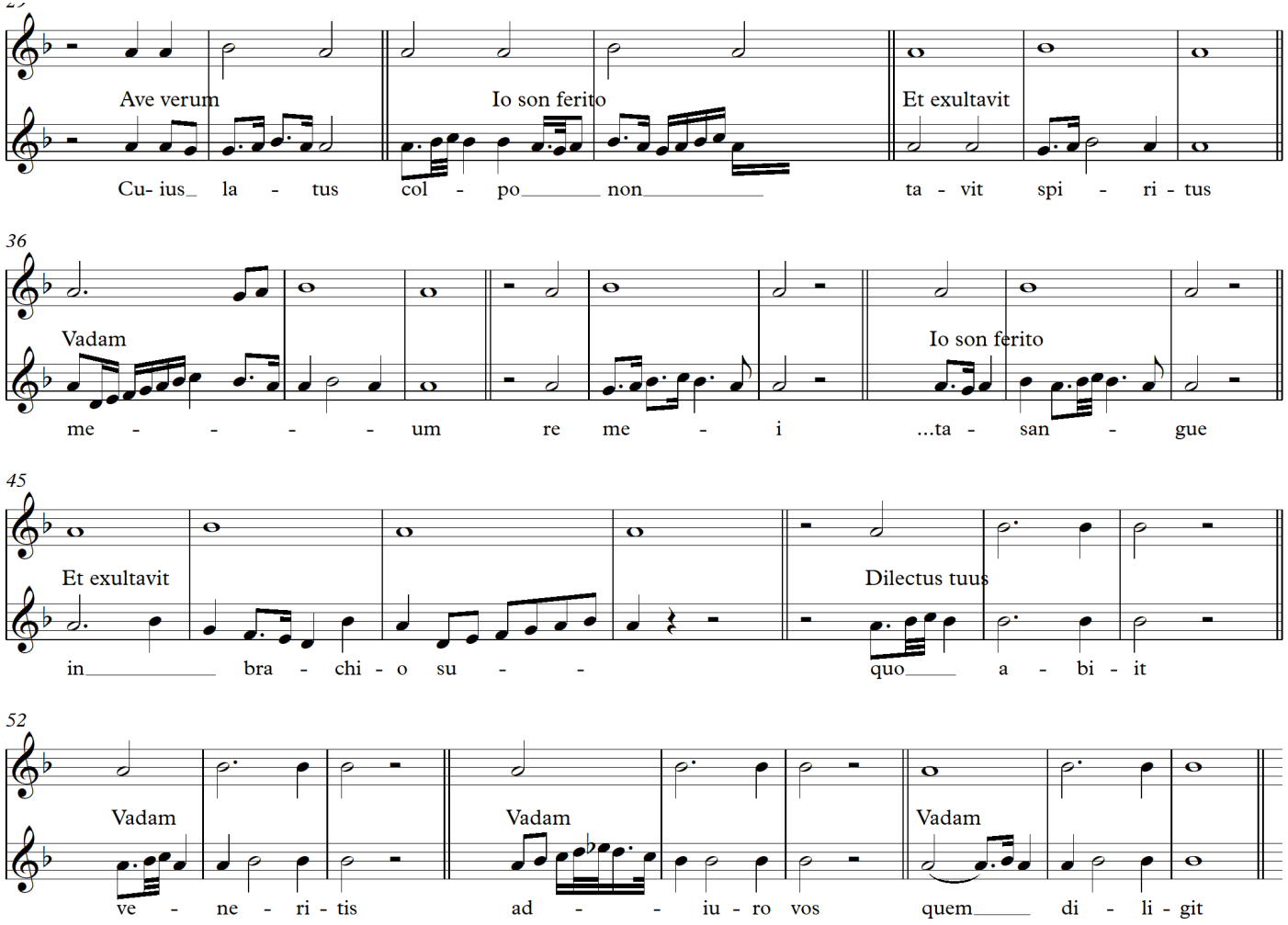


Elaborate diminutions of final notes

- Using the entire octave
- Again, a calming down towards the end

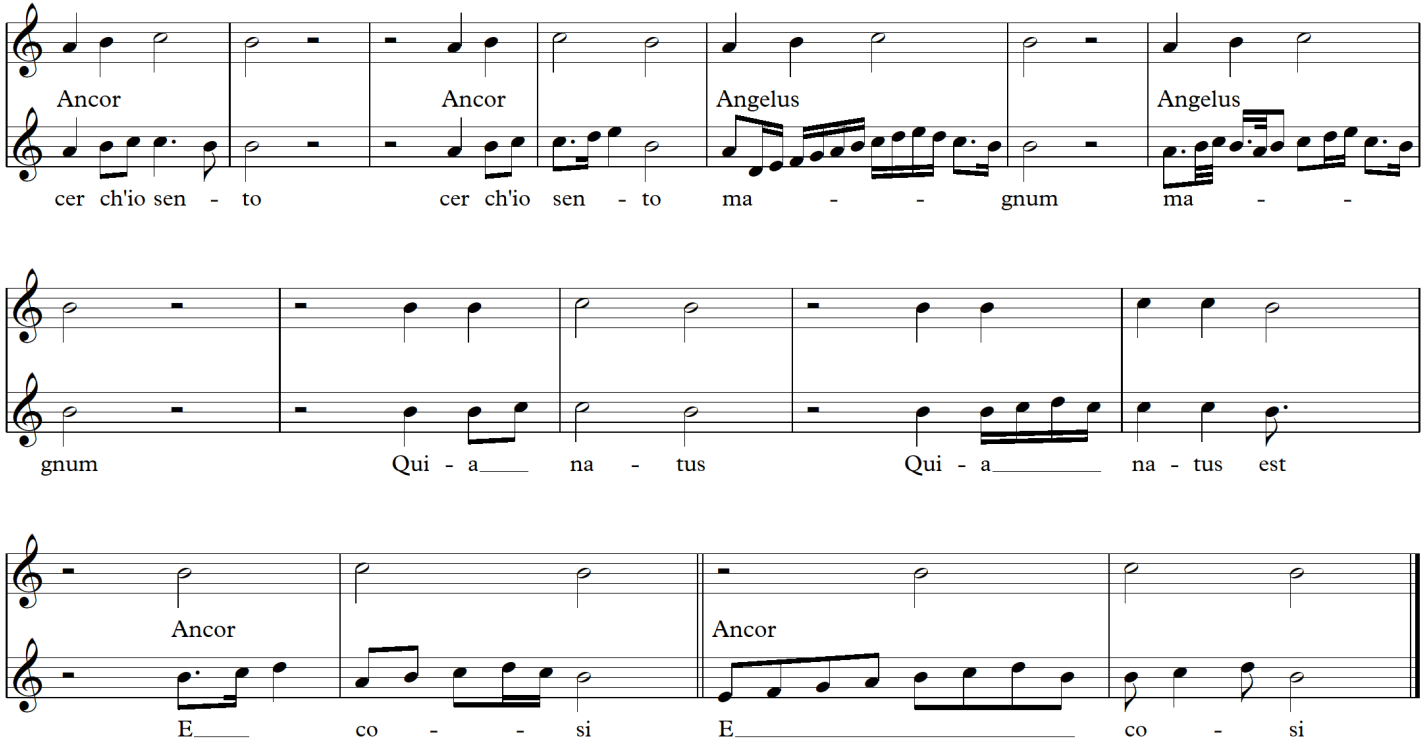
Semitone figures

- A sharpened semitone is often linked to a special expression or an emphasis.
- The examples show Bovicelli's creative imagination using this emphasis in a very differentiated manner.
- They are suitable for training purposes and for learning a vocabulary which may later be easily applied to suitable occasions.
- When practising, you should absolutely always alternate the embellished and the unembellished version in order to stay in the metre and to memorise the sequence of notes.
- Later on, it is helpful to conceal the diminished line – for passaggi sound best if they are not sung from music notation, but sound as if just invented, so to speak …

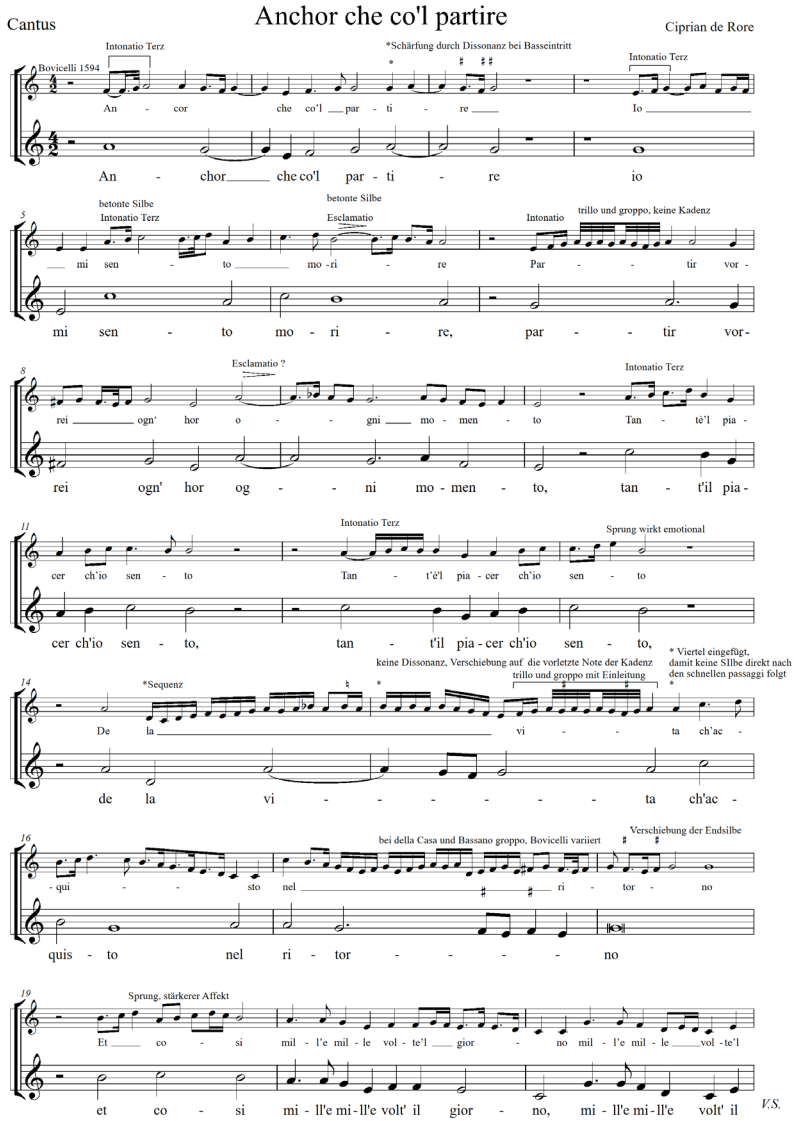


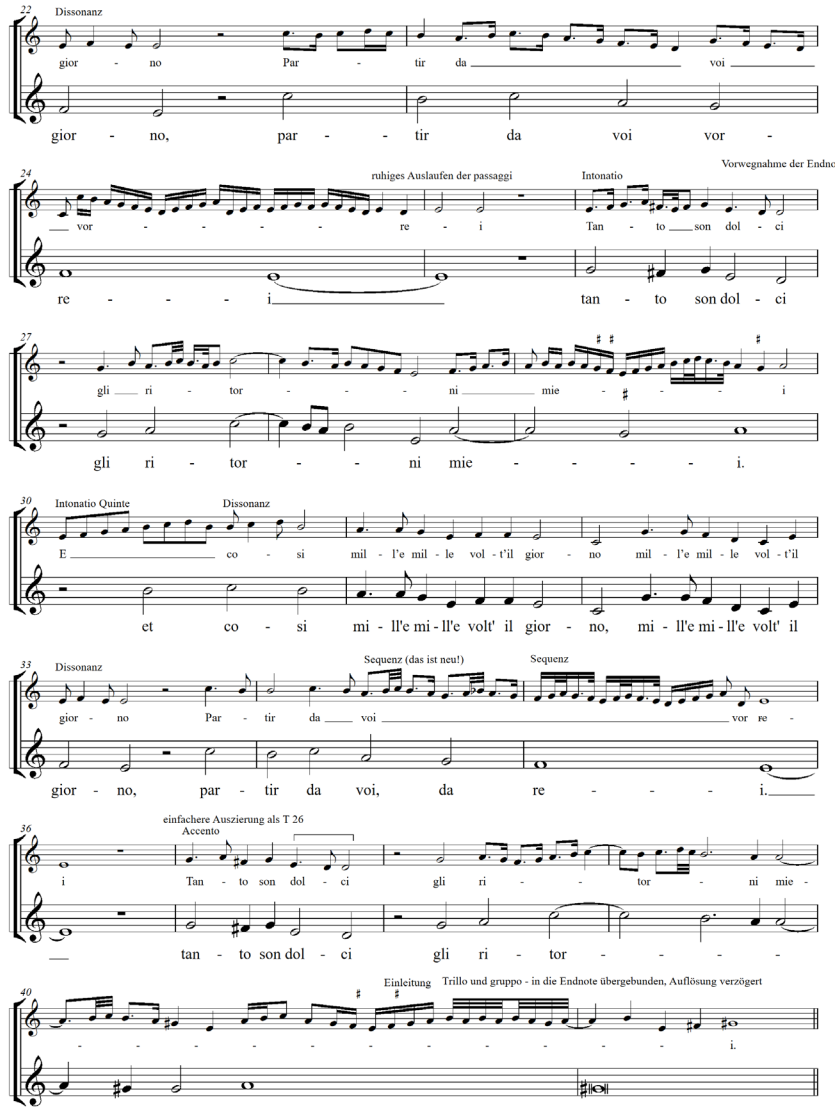
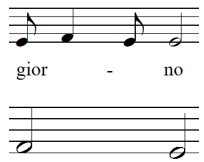
Semitone figures

- Further example of the semitone sequence B-C-B



Analysis of “Ancor che co‘l partire”





- Bovicelli style
- Often uses intonatio
- Very varied rhythms
- Tends to have passaggi slow down gradually on the final syllable
- Emphasised dissonance with lower second is a frequent embellishment