

**An investigation of the creation of
drama in recitative through
comparative analysis: *La Serva
Padrona* set by Pergolesi (1733) and
Paisiello (1781).**

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The Australian National University.**

**I, Lawrence John Mays, certify that this thesis is
entirely my own original work**

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Abstract

The subtlety of eighteenth-century opera recitative, especially *recitativo semplice*, may escape most twenty-first century listeners and performers. Composers in late seventeenth-century Italy conceived of recitative as a music style that was flexible enough to accommodate the quick changes in characters' emotions and intents that the text of a continuously unfolding drama required. Essential elements of the style included preservation of the natural rhythm of speech and the free use of dissonance to heighten the impact of words. Although it underwent a number of changes in the following two centuries, recitative remained a significant vehicle for the dramatic action of character exposition, emotion, intent and physical interaction in opera. Composers developed an armamentarium of well-understood compositional devices for setting recitative text to music. We are remote from the period when recitative was a fresh, innovative and imaginative vehicle for the communication of drama through a synergetic combination of words and music. We cannot know definitively how recitative sounded or was performed, and we are in a vastly different social and cultural milieu. Moreover, we have heard several subsequent genres that involve a combination of music and words, as well as very different harmonic and melodic vocabularies. We need to make an informed search for subtle dramatic values in recitative in order to fully understand its potential. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was relatively common for more than one composer to set a libretto into an operatic work. This raises the question of whether, by a differential application of the compositional devices forming the musical language of recitative, composers could imply different dramatic parameters from the same text. In this study the recitatives in two settings of Gennaro Antonio Federico's short comic libretto: *La Serva Padrona* are chosen for

comparison. The settings are by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1733) and Giovanni Paisiello (1781). A central tenet of the study is that it is valid to examine the creation of drama which is immanent in the written music as a separate issue from how drama is created in performance. The study provides a detailed taxonomy of compositional devices used for setting recitative, derived from eclectic sources in relevant literature. These come under the broad headings of rhythmic, melodic, harmonic and key-related devices. The application of compositional devices in several excerpts of recitative from the two works is analysed and compared. The analysis strongly suggests that the composers have implied different characters, with contrasting emotions and intents, through their settings of the recitative texts. A different relationship between the two principal characters is also implied. The methodology developed for this study may be of interest to those wishing to better appreciate the musical language and dramatic function of recitative in eighteenth-century opera. It may be a useful addition to the available information on performance practice and may help persons who listen to these works, or who are involved in their performance, to understand the composers' interpretations of characters and of their actions more fully.

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