

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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"...dovendosi sonare più pieno, che sij possibile..." style in Italian harpsichord basso continuo realisation

Giulia Nuti

The wealth of musical styles that characterises Italian music from about 1600 to 1730 is reflected in the practice of basso continuo performance. Many aspects of performance practice have been explored in modern times: tempi, vocal and instrumental ornamentation, bowing, pitch, instrumental construction, and other issues have all received much scholarly research. Style in basso continuo in the performance of Italian music, however, has remained surprisingly neglected until quite recently, and present-day performances still tend towards a uniformity that is not a true reflection of contemporary practice.

There are major difficulties to be overcome in remedying this neglect:

- the difficulty of gaining access to many of the Italian sources, few of which are available in English translations (and those that are translated are not always accurate);
- the tendency in previous research to focus on rules and *avvertimenti* in published books and treatises (of which there are very few), rather than to place greater emphasis on the manuscript sources and on the music itself in order to interpret and illuminate the printed treatises. It is important to emphasise the music itself, as the information that can be gained from treatises is mostly theoretical and must be evaluated in conjunction with musical sources. Some of the most valuable instructions are often found in the introductions to music books (Caccini's *Le Nuove Musiche*, for example) or in the music itself. All these provide more secure information as they show what composers instructed a performer to do, rather than consisting of advice from musicians who were not necessarily performers but theoreticians, or who did not necessarily reveal all the information needed to understand or evaluate their statements. 'Professional secrets' are an important reason why so many printed treatises are alike and so inadequately descriptive of performance; this applies to all treatises of the 17th century. Zacconi writes of Costanzo Porta addressing his students, saying:

Per mille Ducati, io non hauerei dato fuori i segreti ch'à dato questo frate.¹

Not for a thousand ducats would I have revealed the secrets given away by this friar [i.e. Zacconi].

- the intrinsically improvisatory nature of basso continuo which makes it a difficult subject to explain in words. Alessandro Scarlatti, in a manuscript source, writes:

Altre circostanze accidentali richieste dall'armonia dello stile di questo presente scrittore da lui trovate nel più nobil modo di sonare, non ponno darsi in scritto, mà à voce, colle varie maniere de' movimenti della mano nel sonare; al che si riserba.²

Other requirements for accidentals dictated by the harmony in the style of the present writer, which he finds to be the noblest manner of playing, simply cannot be given in writing, but only verbally, while demonstrating the various modes of hand movements in playing, to which we refer.

- the gap between the teaching of solo repertoire and the teaching of basso continuo which, in modern times, is very wide, so that the two are not taught side by side as they should be, one complementing the other. All the treatises recommend that they be studied alongside keyboard music. Gasparini clearly states this in the Introduction to his *Armonico Pratico*:

È ben vero, che per divenire vero, e pratico Organista è necessario far un particolar studio d'intavolatura, ed in specie sopra le Toccate, Fughe, Ricercari, &c. del Frescobaldi, o d'altri Uomini Eccellenti; avere Scuola da buoni, ed eruditi Maestri.³

It is true indeed that, to become a true and proficient organist it is necessary to undertake a special study of *intavolatura*, and in particular on the *toccate, fughe, ricercari*, etc. of Frescobaldi or other excellent men, and to be taught by good and erudite *maestri*.

Fullness of harmony

That fullness of harmony is a most important characteristic of Italian continuo playing is shown by the many passages found in the treatises encouraging a rich style of accompaniment. The following quotes demonstrate that this was the practice, and point to various ways this fullness can be achieved:

- by thickening the harmonies,
- by playing chords in the left hand as well as the right hand,
- by doubling dissonances,
- by doubling bass notes,
- and by adding ornamentation.

"Che il suonare sia pieno di consonanze armoniose..."⁴

"Playing should be full of harmonious consonances..."

"Queste false più saranno piene, e raddoppiate faranno migliore effetto..."⁵

"These dissonances, the fuller they are, and doubled, the better the effect will be..."

"... S'impari à far tutti li accompagnamenti, e servirsene all'occasioni douendosi sonare più pieno, che sij possibile..."⁶

"... It must be learnt how to play all the accompaniments, to then use them on the occasions when one must play as full as possible..."

"...e quanti più tasti, si toccano tanta più armonia ne seguirà..."⁷

"the more keys you touch, the more harmony will follow..."

"Li numeri per ordinario servono per la mano destra, mà è ben vero, che si possono raddoppiare anche con la mano sinistra, e quanto più tasti si toccano più si fa maggior Armonia..."⁸

"Ordinarily the numbers serve for the right hand, but it is true that you can also double these with the left hand, and the more keys you touch the greater the harmony..."

"... procurare di sonare con più bassi, che si puole, per far più armonia..."⁹

"... be sure to play with as many basses as possible, to make more harmony..."

"Per rin vigorir l'Armonia si prevalga occorrendo delle Acciacature (e queste sono ottime per li Cembali) ... e per rinforire l'Accompagnamento s'adoprina gli Arpeggi, Contrattempi, Trilli, Appoggiature, Mordenti,

ed altri ornamenti di buon gusto, e maniera..."¹⁰

"To enliven the harmony, *acciaccature* should be used (and these are perfect for harpsichordists) ... and to decorate [lit. flower] the accompaniments one should use *arpeggi*, cross-rhythms, trills, *appoggiature*, mordents and other ornaments of good taste and manner."

These indications are not, however, invitations to play in a randomly loud and powerful style. As an example of how the harpsichord was used for loud and obtrusive effects, and of how *arpeggi* were also intended to be used with discretion, I quote Act II scene 3 from Vivaldi's opera *Giustino* (Example 1). Arianna, the emperor's wife, has been chained to a rock by Vitaliano, the enemy, as she refuses to succumb to him; a sea-monster approaches - she cries for help. Vivaldi uses harpsichords to represent the sea-monster, specifying they should play "in arpeggio continuo".

Clearly Vivaldi considered the effect of continuous arpeggiation so special that he reserved it for characterising a sea monster - he did not consider it the standard practice that it seems to have evolved into in continuo playing today.

Rules of accompaniment

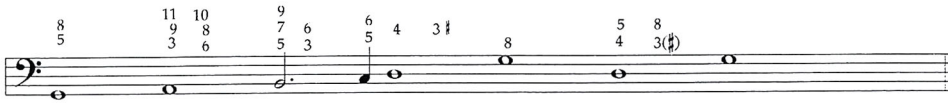
There are very precise sets of rules governing which type of chord to play at different points within the bar; and, furthermore, much can also be learnt about the harmonization and implied figuring of the bass line.

These *regole d'accompagnamento* refer very specifically to a chordal accompaniment; they are not general rules for the accompaniment of the voice or instrument, rather they are general rules for the accompaniment of the bass line. Already a very different approach to basso continuo is apparent; an approach where the primary skill

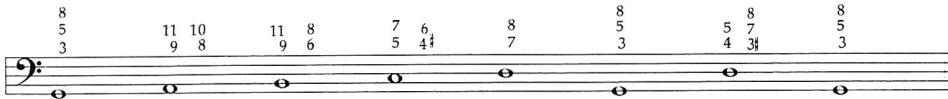
Example 1

The musical score for Example 1 consists of two systems. The first system shows Arianna's vocal line in the treble clef and the harpsichord accompaniment in the bass clef. The harpsichord part is labeled 'Cembali soli' and 'Arpeggio'. The second system continues the vocal line and harpsichord accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'Nu - mi cheil ciel reg - ge - te con des - tra on - ni - po - ten - te'. The harpsichord part features continuous arpeggiation in the right hand and a figured bass line in the left hand.

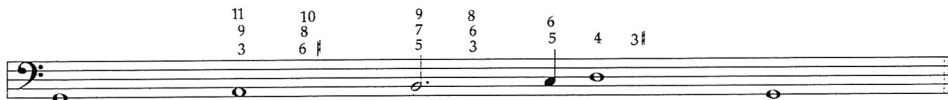
Example 2c

Passar da una nota all'altra

Example 2d

Example 2e, Anon., Bologna P.140, *Regole per sonare il cembalo sopra la parte del basso continuo*, ca. 1700*Delle legature e risoluzioni*

Example 2f



Example 2g

Example 2h, Geminiano Sangiovanni, *Primi ammaestramenti della musica figurata*, Modena 1714*Esempio di Note di grado in sù, & in giù con False risolte in Arpeggio continuo*

For more detailed instructions, I refer the reader to the work of Sangiovanni and Gasparini.

Written rules are also interesting to consider, because they show that even when figures are given, these are not complete. Scarlatti writes:

8. È da notare per bella maniera di sonare (e questo è secondo lo stile di chi scrive in questo libro) tutte le volte che accade la consonanza di sesta maggiore, si aggiunge la 4.a sopra la 3.a di detta consonanza, perchè fa bel sentire ...

It should be noticed that for a beautiful manner of playing (according to the present writer's style) every time the major sixth consonance occurs one should add the fourth over the third of such consonance, because it is beautiful to hear ...

9. Da notarsi, che similmente per modo grato di sonare, tutte le volte che si fanno cadenze, ò pure movimento del basso di 4.a in sù, o 5.a in giù, alla 3.a maggiore della nota del basso, che è per mettersi in detta maniera, vi si aggiunge la 7.a minore, perchè fa buon sentire.¹³

It should be noticed that, again in order to obtain a pleasing manner of playing, every time we do a cadence, or the bass moves up a fourth, or down a fifth, one adds the minor seventh to the major third of the bass note, because it is good to hear.

Paisiello¹⁴ adds that when the bass moves up by a third, one should always add the ninth; and the ninth is always accompanied by the tenth and the second. This tells us clearly that dissonances were encouraged wherever possible (as seen in the examples above) as an integral part of the harmony of the chord, and it is clear therefore that these implied rules must be known for a correct realisation of figures in Italian music.

An example of a realisation in this style is included in an aria found at the end of an anonymous Italian treatise.¹⁵ The treatise concentrates on the more obvious harmonic rules of realisation, yet it is also one of the most important sources as it includes a lavishly realised aria. The manuscript includes a preface to the aria explicitly stating that, *despite* the theoretical inclination of the treatise, the author has provided the aria specifically as an example of the *practice* of the time. The aria looks, at first sight, bizarre, but closer inspection shows it to be entirely in accordance with the styles described by the contemporaries of this treatise (Example 3).

It is unfortunate that this aria has been harshly dismissed¹⁶ when it is so obviously written with performance in mind, and confirms many characteristics of the style, such as acciaccaturas, variations to the bass-line, the general tessitura of the right hand being in the same range as that of the singer, and much more.

Acciaccaturas

The use of acciaccaturas to add to the full har-

Example 3

The musical score for Example 3 consists of two systems. The first system shows a vocal line (treble clef) and a bass line (bass clef). The vocal line has a melody with several acciaccaturas (grace notes) marked with a '6' above them. The bass line has a series of chords, some of which are accented with a '6' or '5b' above them. The lyrics are: 'Son un cer - to spi - ri - tel - lo che dò a tut - ti nell' a - mo - re -'. The second system shows a harpsichord/fortepiano accompaniment in 3/4 time, featuring a series of chords, some of which are accented with a '6' or '5b' above them.

monies is well documented in 18th-century continuo treatises. Although rarely exemplified in musical notation, because of the improvisatory character of this style of playing (another reason why this aria is so important), the frequent and detailed descriptions of these acciaccaturas show their use was widespread both in orchestral continuo playing and in the accompaniment of solo song.

Gasparini states that one must play full chords using all the fingers in the right hand, and he specifies that sometimes it is necessary to play two notes with one finger, particularly the thumb (Example 4):

Doverà poi lo Studioso Armonico insegnarsi di ritrovar tasteggiando queste, e simili acciaccature per altri Toni di ogni genere ... ed anche trovarne di altra sorte, come appunto io studiando ritrovai potersi fare in una falsa un'acciaccatura raddoppiata con toccar quattordici tasti in un colpo.¹⁷

The harmony scholar will then have to teach himself how to find again, feeling the keyboard, these and similar acciaccature for other tones of every kind ... and also to find new ones, precisely as I have discovered in my studies that in a dissonance a double acciaccatura is possible, touching fourteen keys at a stroke.

Per formar questa Acciaccatura bisogna con estremi d'ambe le mani toccar due tasti con un sol dito, cioè con l'Auricolare, e con il Pollice. Questo però serva più di bizzarria, che di esempio, o regola generale, potendosi qualche volta usare, ma distinguer tempo, luogo, e persone.¹⁸

To form this acciaccatura you have to touch two keys with the extremities of both hands: with one finger, i.e. with the little fingers and the thumbs. This however is given more as a bizarre case than

Example 4



as an example or a general rule, since it can be used occasionally but when the time, the place and the people are considered appropriate.

Such types of acciaccaturas are found in harpsichord music of the time, exemplified in Domenico Scarlatti's keyboard sonatas; his 'note clusters' require the technique that Gasparini describes and undoubtedly derive from this earlier continuo practice, showing that continuo and 'solo' harpsichord techniques greatly influenced each other.

While it is right to say that the continuo part should not overpower the solo line, by no means should it serve a secondary function in the music. This voluptuous style of playing became a part of the music, the music being written with this specific kind of sonority in mind; I would argue that certain stylistic information can only be gained by performing the music: it is up to the ensemble to play so as to stand up to and encompass this vigorous continuo playing.

Diminishing the bass line

It should be remembered that the harpsichordist would almost certainly have been the director of the ensemble, and in many instances could have been the composer. The freedom this gives would have allowed the rewriting of the bass where appropriate, either by playing fewer notes, but with fuller chords, or by diminishing the bass producing a more percussive sound; these changes would not generally have been written down in the music. Yet the practice of diminishing bass lines was simply another, quite common, aspect of continuo playing.

Chapter XVI of Roma R. 1, 'Che sia diminutione' explains the principles of performing divisions:

Diminutione è quando per essemplio ad'una nota che voglia mezza battuta si voglia fare qualche abbellimento per il quale si diminuisce il valore di detta nota, e si fanno figure minori consistenti nel valore di detta nota, e si posso[no] fare tanto ascendendo quanto descendendo.¹⁹

Diminution occurs when one wishes to ornament a note that lasts, for instance, half a beat; the note's value is reduced, and minor [diminished] figures are performed consistent with that note's value; this can be done ascending or descending.

There follow simple examples of how to diminish each interval with various quaver and semi-quaver passages, taking care not to end up with consecutive fifths.

The *Intavolature per Cembalo e Partimenti* by Rocco Greco²⁰ held in Naples are also an interesting source on this matter; without commentary, there are pages and pages full of divisions, mainly consisting of broken chords and arpeggi, but also, interestingly, examples where the divisions change the rhythm, adding syncopations, as in the following example (Example 5).

Gasparini makes it clear that he does not approve of diminishing the bass line:

Il diminuire il proprio basso io non l'approvo, perchè si può facilmente uscire, allontanandosi dall'intenzione dell'Autore, dal buon gusto della Composizione, e offender il Cantante.²¹

I do not approve of diminutions to one's own bass, because one can easily part, and distance oneself from the author's intention, the good taste of the composition, and offend the singer.

Example 5



For Gasparini to state his views so baldly on divisions suggests this widely used practice was probably greatly abused; he does, however, go on to explain how divisions are played, if they must be played, and refers the reader of the *Armonico Pratico* to his *Cantate da camera*²² for examples. In the Preface to the Cantatas he writes:

Troverete in alcune arie dui Bassi uno per comodo, ò facilità di accompagnare; essendo stato necessario anche accomodarsi alla Stampa, che non hà potuto totalmente dimostrar la mia intenzione. Però dove si trovano sopra il Basso alcune chiavi di Canto, ò Violino si soneranno con la mano destra in forma d'intavolatura. Ivi potranno ancora sodisfarsi l'Arcileuto, e Violoncello.²³ In some arias you will find two basses; one is for convenience and ease of accompaniment, as well as for printing requirements, which have prevented me from fully showing my intention. But when you find over the bass a soprano clef or a violin clef, these are to be played with the right hand in the form of *intavolatura*. These can also be played by the archlute and the cello.

The second aria of the fourth cantata, *Dove sei dove t'ascondi*, has right-hand realisations where the voice is not singing and, where the voice does enter, the bass line divides into two lines, one simple bass and the other diminished, exactly as Gasparini explains in his *Armonico Pratico*. Clearly, in the parts where the right hand is written out, chords are intended to be played in the left hand, and where the left hand has divisions, chords are intended in the right hand (Example 6):²⁴

However, Gasparini's reference to other bass instruments (cello and archlute) does not necessarily mean that these two bass lines must be played by two instruments, simultaneously. Roma R.1 clarifies:

A chi piacerà le diminutioni in semicrome potrà valersi delle precedenti; quali potranno servire anco per il leuto, et altri instrummenti.²⁵ Those who like diminutions in semiquavers will

be able to use the former [examples], which can also be of use to the lute and other instruments.

Often performers today mistakenly allocate more complex or melodic bass lines to the stringed bass, leaving the harpsichordist to simplify both harmonically and rhythmically. This is the very opposite of what should be done; indeed, it is the case that harpsichordists were taught at great length how to render simple bass lines more complex; just as instrumentalists and singers ornament the melody line, so the same can be done in the bass line. That both Roma R.1 and Gasparini should have to specify that the divisions are not intended solely for the harpsichord shows how strong was this tradition.

There are pitfalls when playing "in the Italian manner"; Le Cerf de La Viéville, 'Comparison' in his *Histoire*, 1725, famously observes:

"All that is generally heard in the Italian music is a thorough-bass accompaniment unceasingly varied, this variation being often a kind of breaking of the chords, and an arpeggiation ... These thorough-basses are good only for showing off the quickness of those who accompany on the harpsichord or the viol or again, to go one better on these basses, already varied in themselves, they vary them further, and it goes to him who will vary them the most; in such short, that you cannot hear the melody any more, which would seem too naked after so much brilliance, and vanishes buried beneath a chaos of embroidered and rattling sounds, which pass so lightly that they cannot make any harmony against the melody ... an accompaniment ... ought to be subordinate to the melody, and not overpower it. The voice ought to stand out and attract the main attention; just the opposite happens here: you only hear the thorough-bass accompaniment, which rattles so loudly, that the voice is smothered. An awkwardness arises in basses with broken chords and variations [improvised] on the spot ... the result is a remarkable cacophony such that the composer can no longer recognise his own

Example 6

Par - la - miin - se - gna - mi sve - la - mia - mo - re

work, which comes forth totally disfigured. You are supposed, in the midst of all this, to take pleasure in admiring the quickness of hand of the performers.²⁶

Although a biased account, clearly many of the techniques described in this article were in use, with varying degrees of success. Gasparini, Sangiovanni and many others give strong warnings about playing without discretion and *buon gusto*; by 1720 continuo styles had developed fully and some were absurdly intrusive and severely deplored. The notion of *buon gusto* in Italian performance, while elusive, was widely recognised, and it is in the practices of continuo playing that a major key to these interpretative matters can be found - it is as easy today as it was then to play in a manner which is a mistaken reinterpretation of a subtle skill.

This article touches upon some of the more important aspects of continuo playing in the Italian style; there are however many more issues not discussed here which are equally as important.²⁷ The distinction between regional styles of playing, for example; it must be remembered that Italy was not, in the 17th and 18th centuries, a united country and, just as architectural differences are immediately apparent between Italian cities, so style in the

arts of each city was under the influence of their rulers; although obviously artists and musicians did travel and were aware of the different trends in vogue in the different cities. Stylistic distinctions between periods must be borne in mind; the accompaniment of 17th-century music is just as different from that of the following century as the composition itself, and the accompaniment of monody, characteristic of the first half of the *seicento*, should not be heard full of the acciaccaturas and arpeggi typical of the *settecento*.

The style of continuo playing heard today often fails to comply with contemporary treatises, instruction or musical examples. By placing enough importance on these documents, manuscript sources and music, and by putting into effect what they say, the performances that result will bear far greater resemblance to Italian music as the Italian composers clearly expected and wished it to be performed, and modern performers will develop the thorough professionalism, technical competence and good taste on which those composers relied in their own musicians, rather than explaining style only in words.

Giulia Nuti's research in Italy was funded by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.

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- 4 G. Sangiovanni, *Primi ammaestramenti della musica figurata ... come pure vi si danno le Regole del Basso Continuo per ben accompagnare nel Clavicembalo, et Organo la Parte che canta e che suona*, Modena, 1714, p.34.
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- 6 Bologna, Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale G.B. Martini, Anon., *Regole per sonare il cembalo sopra la parte del basso continuo*, P.140 n.12, c.1700, p.9.
- 7 Ibid. p.6.
- 8 Bologna, Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale G.B. Martini, Anon., *Regole per li Principianti da suonare il Basso sopra il Clavicembalo, o Spinetta*, K.81, c.1700, p.7.
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- 10 A. Tonelli, *Teorica Musicale ordinata alla moderna pratica*, Bologna, Museo Bibliografico Musicale, L.54, p.37.
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- 12 G. Sangiovanni, *Primi Ammaestramenti*.
- 13 A. Scarlatti, *Per accompagnare il Cembalo ò Organo ò altro Strumento*, London, British Library, Add.14244, p.40.
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- 15 Rome, Biblioteca dell'Accademia dei Lincei e Corsiniana, Anon., *Regole per accompagnar sopra la parte d'autore incerte*. MS Musica R.1. Hereafter referred to as Roma R.1.
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- 17 F. Gasparini, *L'Armonico Pratico*, Chapter IX, p.96.
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- 19 Rome, Biblioteca dell'Accademia dei Lincei e Corsiniana, *Regole*, pp.28 v.-42.
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- 22 F. Gasparini, *Cantate da camera a voce sola, opera prima*, Rome, 1695. Facsimile reprint Florence, S.P.E.S., 1984.
- 23 Ibid. 'A gl'Amatori della Musica'.
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- 26 Quoted in R. Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music*, London, 1975, p.369.
- 27 See G. Nuti, *Per rendere più grata l'armonia. Style in the realisation of Italian basso continuo in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries* [forthcoming] for more detailed discussions on these subjects.

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