

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# Techniques of Baroque Accompaniment

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**W**hen J.J. Quantz produced his treatise *On Playing the Flute* in 1752, as a teacher and composer he was in a special position to elucidate the performance practice of the era.<sup>1</sup> He was not to know that within about fifty years figured bass, the very backbone of musical life as he knew it, would be impatiently pushed aside in favour of a new music. We are fortunate indeed that Quantz felt the need to record so many aspects of the 'high baroque', since without this precious and extensive book (and its equally important translation into French), much detail of good-quality performance practice would have been lost.

As regards the art of accompaniment, Quantz addresses many topics which he must have felt were either missing from earlier accompaniment treatises or were necessary in the wake of the new direction music was taking. The purpose of the present article is to select, diagnose, and suggest some practical interpretations for keyboard continuo examples from the thorough-bass period. I have chosen extracts from the repertory which will appeal to today's early music keyboard accompanist, whether beginner or advanced. I urge those at all levels who are interested in early music accompaniment, to sit at the keyboard and play through them.

As with any unfamiliar written language we need to be aware that the text alone is inadequate, and, with older musical texts, we need to understand the history of the convention of notation. This is especially so given the normative communication of music as aural transmission.<sup>2</sup> Nobody in their right mind would attempt to read a script in a foreign language to an audience of native speakers without having first been educated in the basic workings of the language,<sup>3</sup> and figured bass should be viewed in this light.

Superficially, figured bass appears far too open for today's trained keyboardist who has learned to read complex structures of prescribed notes at sight. In fact, figured bass is strictly governed by aural phenomena, and the player simply needs to understand and recognise the aural rules. Since one must, therefore, be able to recognise the compositional formulae at work, the player is brought nearer to the composer than when merely reading a part. The accompanist must then select those elements which will accord with the sounds made by

the other instruments in the ensemble.

The mid 18th-century treatises by Quantz and C.P.E. Bach<sup>4</sup> are useful for their accompaniment information, but more than 200 other treatises survive from between 1600 and 1800 dealing, at least in part, with our subject.<sup>5</sup> Those unfamiliar with practical figured bass at the keyboard are recommended to read Peter Williams' *Figured Bass Accompaniment* (1970), or the more recent *Continuo Playing According to Handel* by David Ledbetter (1990). Other publications relevant to this article are listed in the bibliography.

## Style

The manner of accompanying performance in the past would have varied from player to player. A player's style would be influenced by the tonal qualities of the instrument used, his knowledge of the music, the acoustic environment, and the sound produced by the other instruments. We know from the few descriptive accounts and from details in the repertory that during this period, covering some 180 years, styles varied according to time and place. Aspects such as fluidity and impact were not likely to be included in a written report since these features would have been conveyed aurally.<sup>6</sup> In this article I will be focusing on the shape and flow of accompaniment which, I suggest, is far more important in conveying the music than any preoccupation with 'correct harmony'. When approached from this angle the accompanist becomes familiar with horizontal progressions rather than the vertical preoccupation of the theorist, and the music is more fun to play (and to hear). By taking model phrases of figured bass, deconstructing them, and substantiating any hypothesis through careful consultation of the historical evidence, the modules chosen can act as formulaic models for practical continuo playing of early music today. This emphasis on familiarity will surely bring the accompaniment performer closer to the original practice.<sup>7</sup>

The two structural elements contributing to flow and shape in measured music are 'the rhythmic motor' (the RM factor) and 'the textural dynamic' (the TD factor).<sup>8</sup> These two aspects of performance, as I hope will become apparent, can be seen to be vying with one another in the music of the period. The successful continuo player will not lose sight of these two ideologies whilst playing, since the accompanist is expected to: a) keep time in the ensemble,<sup>9</sup> and b)

add interest to the performance by adjusting the texture according to harmonic developments within the composition.

## The RM factor

The RM factor is based upon a system of hierarchy between the beats of the bar. The theory can be summarised as follows:

1. Beat one is prime.
2. Beat *three* (in four time) is secondary.
3. Beat four is of next importance as it anticipates beat one.
4. Beat two is of least importance.

As a result of this hierarchy, 1-3-4-2, an analogy can be made with the four-cylinder combustion motor which uses this pattern as its firing order, being the most satisfactory pattern for the smooth running of engines. Direct evidence for its usage in the high baroque period is somewhat lacking,<sup>10</sup> even in Quantz, yet I have been able to find an approximate reference to it in the "well known and widely circulated" Saint-Lambert accompaniment treatise of 1707:<sup>11</sup>

The principal beat of a measure (in all types of measure) is the first beat: that one predominates over all others. In the two-beat measure, the first and second [beats] are *nearly equally* principal [beats]. In the three-beat measure, the first and last [beats] are [principal beats]. And in the four-beat measure, the first and third [beats are principal beats].<sup>12</sup> (*my emphasis*)

My interpretation of this passage is that beat three (in a four-beat measure) would have been understood as

slightly subservient to beat one ("nearly equal"), but superior to the other beats (I take Saint-Lambert's 'two-beat measure' as the model since it is more detailed than the others). Also, although beat four is not discussed, Saint-Lambert's understanding of the function of the last beat in three time, as being a principal beat, rather implies that the last beat in four time will be of more importance than beat two, but not as great as beat one or three.

If we are to apply this structure of emphasis to harpsichord or organ accompaniment, both of which lack any obvious touch dynamic, then it must be done by varying the number of notes which sound on each beat. The technique for organists will differ from that for harpsichordists, since the decaying of a plucked note on principal beats can be 'held over' to good effect.<sup>13</sup> Example 1 is one of Handel's figured bass exercises,<sup>14</sup> and it has been realised in a way which I suggest accords with the RM factor.

A number of important issues arise from an examination of this example:

- There is a two-bar pattern. The pattern is developed as a feature of the exercise/composition. As with many pieces in the period, the opening pattern (often two bars) is the window to the whole piece. Careful study of this opening pays great dividends. A four-note chord for beat one is used.
- We can make beat two of bar one the *least* important by holding over the chord from the previous beat. This, and the subsequent minim on beat three (which is also there by necessity of the harmony), sets up an expectation in the listener for hearing half-speed movement over a walking bass.<sup>15</sup>

### Ex.1 Handel's exercise in figured bass N°19

Suggested Realisation

Basso

etc.

This expectation is undermined by the crotchet movement (made necessary by the harmony) in the realisation of bar two. In fact, bar two is an answering phrase to bar one.

- Beat three in the first bar of each phrase has been reduced to a three-note texture in order to comply with the RM factor. Beat four has been left as a single note texture. There is the option of adding a C or G above the bass (to give it slightly more weight than beat two), but in view of the way the music reveals itself, the bass finding the root of the dominant on beat four (giving a strong lead to the predictable tonic in the next bar), this beat can be given extra prominence compared to beat two through articulation alone.
- The melody had to be 'discovered'. There is nothing specific in the information Handel has written to give us the melody, but without this rising and falling tune, the progression is nonsense (try experimenting with alternative melodies and different inversions of the prescribed chords). It is by working with (or against) the melody that the accompanist can best accomplish his or her task.
- The ninth chords *could* be prepared by sounding the relevant note on the previous beat four (not shown in this realisation). This must depend on the nature of the instrument used, the acoustic environment, and the mood of the player at the time. This flexibility is an important aspect of continuo work. In this case, the difficulty is balancing the melody with an accompaniment on the same instrument, since the lines overlap.
- The chord on beat two of the *second* bar (of each phrase) is always unavoidably strong. This is because there is only one common note from the preceding chord which can be held over. Indeed, because two of the newly struck notes can be carried on into beat three (the Db and F), it may be that Handel is deliberately syncopating the rhythm here. It should be noted that the hierarchy of the beats in a bar can be interrupted, provided there is a clear case for doing so. Composers of the period quite often seem to be 'toying with the rhythm' (the hemiola is a prime example). The result in this bar would be that beats two and four become strong, and beat three weak. This is achieved by allowing the thirds in the right

hand to descend while only adding one note (the G) on beat three.

#### The TD factor

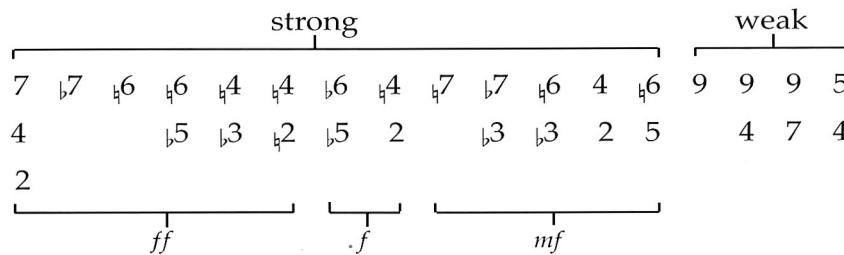
The TD factor is based upon the idea that thicker textures are played by the accompanist during 'remote' key passages. This thesis accords with the practice of emphasising dissonance (since 'remote' keys contain notes which are not in the 'home' scale). As an extension to this practice, the dominant should have more emphasis than the tonic: in fact the tonic should be *understated* at the end of cadences. We can imagine a continuum where the tonic has least emphasis, and we gradually pass through the dominant and the dominant's dominant to remote keys which carry the most emphasis. Despite this slightly confusing difference between dissonance within the scale and dissonances outside the scale (which clearly show up in figured bass as accidentals added to the figures), we need to find historical evidence which supports any change of texture for harmonic reasons.

The theory of a textural dynamic as performance practice ideology appears, in the written record at least, as early as 1707 when Saint-Lambert suggests:

Just as one is not obliged to play three different Parts in a chord of the [right hand] accompaniment at all times (since one is free to double some of [the Parts] when one wishes to, or even to leave out one of the three [Parts] when that seems necessary), one can also sometimes provide a fourth [Part] in the chords assigned by the general Rules . . . either to soften the harshness of a dissonance, or, on the contrary, to make it more piquant so as to better savor its resolution to a consonance.<sup>16</sup>

What a pity Saint-Lambert failed to include musical examples to support this text (which incidentally is the last paragraph in his treatise). He clearly means a fourth 'part' (as in a dominant seventh, or possibly an added ninth to a seventh), but his text does not really suggest the 'savouring' of remote key passages, rather the emphasising of a solitary dissonance, especially one prepared at a cadence. By the mid-18th century the concept of emphasis has evidently shifted, possibly commensurate with the change in

Ex.2 Chart showing the relative loudness of figured bass figures (extrapolated from Quantz)



musical style, and now extends to incorporate remote keys (see Ex.2).

Quantz states:

I am convinced that if you . . . accustom yourself to this manner of accompanying: that is [amongst other things] paying close attention to the notes raised by sharps or naturals or lowered by flats that lead to a foreign tonality, then I say that you will easily divine when to use the piano, mezzo-forte, forte, and fortissimo without their being written out.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly, the rise in popularity of the piano ought to be taken into account here, but earlier in the treatise Quantz has explained how these dynamic effects can be achieved at the harpsichord:

Thus, passages marked piano on this instrument [the harpsichord] may be improved by moderating the touch, and by decreasing the number of parts, and those marked forte by strengthening the touch, and by increasing the number of parts in both hands.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, Quantz is referring to passages with dynamic markings here, something which is indicative of the new trends in music-making. Nevertheless textural dynamic was expected of the harpsichordist and emphasis was to be given, by degrees, according to the remoteness of the passage to the home key, as well as to certain chords which were considered pungent.

Example 3, for 'cembalo' continuo, has been chosen for its four-two chord as part of the opening subject. In this extract I have presented a harpsichord realisation using ligatures which are a simple and

appropriate way of showing detail.<sup>19</sup> Notes are held until the change of harmony forces their cessation. It should be noted that the accompaniment is in the French 'full-voiced style' using an eight-note texture on the opening chord.<sup>20</sup> This style is considered suitable given the music's French character, Telemann's *Affettuoso* indication,<sup>21</sup> and the composer's great gift of being able to mimic the styles of the day. Furthermore, the sheer power of the treble recorder parts calls for a rich and loud support.<sup>22</sup>

The following points concerning the textural dynamic can be noted:

- The arpeggiations (on most beats) are always performed after the beat.<sup>23</sup> The speed of the spread is optional and can be used to give emphasis.
- The first chord is as full as possible (equating with Quantz's *fortissimo*). This is to establish the forces available in the ensemble. In effect, it acts as a reverence, although it is important to keep time. The tenor F on the second beat of bar one is optional for the accompanist, and will depend on the ensemble (it must be decided beforehand whether the gamba player will play the note alone, or whether the harpsichordist will also play it). The chord of beat one can be held right up to beat three, although the little finger of the left hand will need to be moved up an octave to play the chord on beat three.
- The chord on beat three is made *mezzo-forte* by employing a five note chord which is superimposed above the over-held F from beat two. This is the all-important harmonic statement, and one must 'savour' the dissonance here. The gamba player will, of course, be bowing a sustained F through this principal beat.
- Beat four is made weaker than beat three by over-holding the necessary notes from beat three (the Bb

Ex.3 Telemann's *Sonata à tré* (Triosonata in F), 1st movement

**Affettuoso**

1

5 6 4 2

and G) and only sounding three new notes.<sup>24</sup>

- Beat one of the second bar is as weak as possible since it is the tonic after a cadence.<sup>25</sup>
- A counter-melody is provided. The uppermost inner part has been designed to feature a conjunct upward melody in contrary motion to the falling conjunct (albeit decorated) subject of the soloists (bar one to the first beat of bar two). The rising theme is continued by the harpsichord in bar two as it complies with the necessary change in harmony.
- The chord on beat one of bar three (C major) is stronger than that of bar two (F major) since the dominant should be stronger than the tonic. In fact this C major chord marks the start of a long (two and a half bar) descent to the next cadence (not given).

### Conclusion

It can be seen that the two techniques outlined above give the accompanist plenty to think about during the process of accompanying. Applying the rhythmic motor to a continuo performance will give structure and impetus to a piece of music when often there appears to be none in the music text. In my experience the RM factor can work especially well in *allegri*, where soloists enjoy the controlled circular motion. However it can also help bring shape to an *adagio*, particularly those which qualify as what we today would call *moderato*.

The TD factor gives the keyboard accompanist the challenge of varying the texture according to harmonic development. Although this process will mostly apply to large-scale development within a composition, nonetheless, as I hope to have demonstrated, it can be used during shorter phrases where the harmony will allow. In addition the player may increase or decrease the number of notes in order to accentuate or prepare for a dissonant feature in the composition.

The two factors come into contradiction with each other when the first beat of a bar follows a cadence and falls on the tonic. The accompanist must consider the ensemble, and the performers must agree stylistic matters beforehand.

Example 4 (on following page) is a movement from a suite by Zipoli. Another source of evidence for accompaniment practice must be the solo repertory. When I came across this piece I was glad of (and somewhat surprised by) Zipoli's left-hand arrangement, which clearly is independent from the monophonic melody. It gives us an insight into the way in which players might have thought of accompanying what is essentially an unexceptional harmonic composition, and shows what can be done with many baroque pieces.

In the Zipoli piece the following points are of interest:

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- The opening bar is almost a model of RM at work. (Beat four is stronger than necessary because its harmonic function is to introduce the cadence.) Note that, because of the six beat opening phrase, beat three of bar two is stronger than beat one. (Note also that beat two of bar two is without any newly-struck accompaniment.)
- The beauty of the ambiguity between four-four and two-four. 'High baroque' pieces often have phrases which end halfway through a bar, yet all pieces end with the correct final phrase-length to restore them to four-four. Zipoli's three-note chord halfway through bar two not only defies the RM factor, it defies the TD factor by emphasising the tonic at the end of a cadence. This is surely a case of deliberate 'toying with the rhythm'.
- The strong-weak feature of bars six and seven (the uppermost voice being held over the weak beats). Note how beat four of bar seven is given emphasis because this '6' chord is the introductory chord to the cadence ending on beat one of bar nine.
- The syncopated part-writing in bars ten (beat four) and eleven. This is also featured and developed in the 'B' section (bars 21 to 23).
- Finally, the most stunning feature of all: the four-note chord accompaniment which occurs on *beat two* in bar 12. But surely beat two is meant to be the weakest beat in the bar? As if to prove to us that this is no publication error, Zipoli includes this feature in the 'B' section (bar 17). These two chords have more emphasis in the accompaniment than anywhere else in the whole piece. It should become clear by now that this composer is deliberately iconoclastic. Zipoli can only be breaking the rules of regular music practice, as long as those rules existed in the first place. This style of composition is true baroque, the twisted pearl, the 'jarring' style of music which was, *ex facto*, to give the entire thorough-bass period its convenient name.

1. I use the title of the modern edition by Edward Reilly (1966). Full details are given in my bibliography under Quantz 1752. The treatise has an extensive chapter for the accompanist (ch. xvi).

2. I will not dwell on this subject here. Despite attempts by many past authors, music notation has repeatedly failed to record performance detail. People were more familiar with and accomplished at feats of memory in the past and I see no reason why music should be an exception. Many musicians today still perform and compose without being able to read notation.

3. It is difficult to make this analogy without recalling President Kennedy's famous blunder when addressing the Germans: "Ich bin eine Berliner" (I am a jelly doughnut).

4. Bach 1753/62 (see bibliography).

5. I include treatises for non-keyboard instruments and other related materials. My own list (begun as a special project for my Master's degree in 1995) includes the references found in: Arnold 1931, Federhofer 1961, Williams 1970, Powell 1991, Poulin 1994, and Montgomery 1996.

6. Quantz himself recommends going and listening to good players.

Ex.4 Zipoli Suite in G minor Opus 1, Pt. 2 (1716), 4th movement

The image shows a page of sheet music for a Giga Allegro. The title 'Giga Allegro' is at the top left. The music is in 12/8 time, indicated by a '12/8' signature. There are two staves: a treble staff on top and a bass staff on the bottom. The treble staff has a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The bass staff has a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The music consists of eight lines of musical notation, numbered 1 through 8 on the left side. The notation includes various note heads, stems, and bar lines. Articulations like dots and dashes are present. The bass staff features some rests and sustained notes. The music is written on five-line staff paper.

7. We tend to think of baroque harmony as a constant, whereas there is a good case for suggesting that various progressions became fashionable, and thereby familiar to contemporary musicians, only to become outmoded and replaced by new ones.

8. I am indebted to John Toll, who introduced me to both topics during my postgraduate studies in early music performance.

9. Bach's adage that the accompanist is 'the guardian of the beat' is well known, but Quantz too stresses the importance of learning to play the flute either with or against a beat (initially by tapping the foot, but later by working with or against the accompanist).

10. Any information would be most welcome.

11. Saint Lambert, 1707. The quote is from John Powell's preface (p. ix).

12. Saint Lambert, 1707, p. 102. Translation and square brackets by John Powell.

13. I would have thought that the problem with the sustaining quality of the organ is that, by releasing the key, attention is drawn to its cessation, thereby countering any attempt to make weak beats unimportant.

14. These exercises are part of Handel's tutor (in autograph) for Princess Anne. They are published in Ledbetter 1990.

15. A 'walking bass' is usually associated with *andante*. Example 1 is surely *adagio* (none of Handel's exercises have speed indications) yet there is some similarity to *andante* movements in that the bass is an ostinato on-beat rhythm and moves at twice the speed of the inner voices. *Adagios* can be played at a moderate pace in this period (Quantz categorises all music as either *adagio* or *allegro*, but states that the *adagio* is the more flexible depending on its mood [key related] or style).

16. Saint-Lambert 1707, p. 113. The square brackets are John Powell's and the round brackets are (presumably) Saint-Lambert's (although John Powell is indebted to Burchill's 'translation and commentary', *ibid.* Introduction, p. xv.).

17. Quantz 1752, p. 255

18. *Ibid.*, p. 253

19. Ligatures are used in unmeasured preludes, but also appear in the realisations of accompaniments in the treatises by Gasparini (Gasparini 1708) and Heinichen (Heinichen 1728).

20. The full-voiced style, where the left hand is used to enrich the texture by doubling up the harmony, originates with the Clavecinistes. Details can be found in D'Anglebert's accompaniment appendage to *Pièces de clavecin*... (D'Anglebert 1689A) and Delair 1690. There is evidence for it being a feature of accompaniment outside of France in the Rome manuscripts (Anon [Rome] 1720).

21. *Affettuoso* is codified by Quantz as a slow piece, but he points out that its precise interpretation will depend on key and metre. Here, in F major and common time, the piece can be performed more quickly than what is now thought of as an *adagio*.

22. Saint-Lambert suggests increasing the accompaniment texture to five notes for strong singers and to seven notes for very strong singers (Saint-Lambert 1707, Ch. 9, §3).

23. The evidence for arpeggiating after the bass note has been played on the beat is found in the various ornament tables from Chambonnières to Dandrieu (see Ferguson 1966/77).

24. Over-holding is another very important aspect to accompaniment, yet is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this article. There is evidence to suggest that the Germans wrote in four distinct parts despite over-holding notes in practice (the student's notes of J.S. Bach's lectures attest to this, see Bach 1738). The over-holding of notes common to accompaniment chords is referred to by Bach's son, C.P.E., as 'the singing effect' [of accompaniment] (Bach 1753/62, §14, p. 372).

25. This accords with C.P.E. Bach's doctrine. Bach talks of reinforcing (i.e. playing more loudly) the accompaniment either at modulatory changes or under the notes that introduce closing cadences (Bach 1753/62, pp. 370-71, §10 and §12 on performance). This implies that the tonic must be understated as a resolution to the cadence.

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