

Performance Practice in Baroque Music

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We are trying to be authentic not because there is anything sacrosanct in historical reproduction but because our best chance of matching the interpretation to the music lies in matching it to the original intentions. We are trying to be better scholars in order to make better music. Ultimately it is our personal responsibility as performing musicians to make historical authenticity a living thing.¹⁾

Performance practice is a translation of the German term *Aufführungspraxis* it is the study of the way in which music of previous eras, was understood and performed. Such a thing is challenging and exciting, but by no means easy. For example, we cannot always understand logically and musical notation of previous ages with complete accuracy.

Certainly, there is some accurate evidence dealing with matters of style and contradictory statements which must be carefully compared. But this should not be discouraging. Because, what two artists from any period in music history would wholeheartedly agree with one another on every point?

The contribution of the study of performance practice is to reproduce, musical solutions to the problems which arise in the study of recreating music of the past. Within the limits of this presentation, the performance practice of Baroque music will be considered.

The performer must first of all be aware that the nature of Baroque music is essentially improvisatory. That is a valid performance of the music depends on a cooperative effort between performer

1) Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1963) P 28

and composer. The composer often wrote down only a frame work of a piece, leaving the remaining elements to be added by the performer. Even many of the so-called complete works of J.S. Bach is not complete, but demand, added ornamentation, rhythmic alteration, realization of a thorough bass. Putnum Aldrich summarized that in the following words:

Strict adherence to the composer's texts by no means assures authentic performances. Quite the reverse, indeed, for it transpired that Baroque musicians did not write what they performed or perform what they wrote. Further investigations have disclosed Baroque standards of timbre, tuning, techniques of performance and interpretation²⁾ which differ strikingly from those that prevail in the world today.

The concerns of this essay are problems of notation, ornamentation, dance rhythms, thorough-bass realization, and the performance of ensemble works.

Notation

The notation of Western music is mathematical. The durations of notes and rests are represented on paper in terms of arithmetic proportions. This fact has led many performers to make one of two equally mistaken. One is that the composer of a particular piece of music meant precisely what he indicated on paper in terms of proportionally time relationships.

This view often leads to try to reproduce these proportions with strict mathematical accuracy and unmusical. The other one is that the composer could not possibly have intended such fidelity to the written score, so that the performer can take any kind of freedom which in his feeling for the music. These solutions is satisfying.



Musical notation is representational. The signs that appear on a score often do not mean exactly what they appear to mean. According

2) Putnam Aldrich, *The authentic performance of Baroque Music* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957) P 192

to the conventions of any given era, they serve as a reminder to the performer of rhythmic or melodic patterns with which he is already acquainted. This means that arithmetically proportional notation often results in nonarithmetic rhythms in performance. The use of nonarithmetic rhythms is not the exclusive property of any specific era of music history. Newman Powell's dissertation on rhythmic freedom has once and for all made this clear.³⁾

Therefore, although Baroque music may look mathematically precise on the manuscript, it should not retain this mathematical precision in performance.

Performance of Ornaments

German, French composers often indicated French ornaments, called *agréments*, by the use of stenographic signs, such as  for trill and  for mordent. These signs do no more than represent the general melodic outline of the ornament in question. The actual performance of the ornament depends on musical context.

The use of stenographic signs for the *agréments* was not merely a shorthand method devised by French composers for the purpose of saving time. It was a means by which they could leave the rhythm of an ornament unspecified while at the same time indicating its systematic pattern. According to Newman Powell,

This must have been because of a desire for an irrational rhythm, an effect of free rhythmic manipulation, improvisatory in character and expressive in function.⁴⁾

Some composers, in prefaces to their publications, tried to translate the meanings of the signs into proportional notation. It is significant, Cambonnières who published the first table of *agréments* in his *Pieces de Clavessin* found it necessary to include the excuse: "Not

3) Newman Powell; *Rhythmic Freedom in the Performance of French Music from 1650 to 1735*, (Stanford Univ. 1958)

4) Newman Powell, P 287-288

being able to write certain passages with ordinary notes, I have indicated them with the following signs, which give much grace to these pieces."⁵⁾

Unreasonably, then, in the rhythmic representation of the agréments seems to have been one of their most characteristic features. This is not to say that proportional rhythms were never used. The rhythmic realization of the ornamentation was dependent on the style of the piece involved. Strongly rhythmic pieces would be more apt to require comparatively strict rhythmic proportions in the ornaments, whereas pieces in free rhythm or pathetic style would invite a rhythmically free performance of the ornaments.

Agréments must be interpreted in direct relation to the affect and tempo of the piece in which appear, not simply with one precise and rhythmically undifferentiated formula for each type. Ex. 1 shows several possible interpretations of the trill.

The written out ornamentations should be approached in the same way. The fact that they are written out should not mislead us into thinking that these examples are to be performed any more proportionally precisely than those indicated by means of signs.

The Andante from the Italian Concert is a famous example of Bach's written out ornamentation. It is a particularly good illustration because it contains both the French agréments and Italian passaggi which penetrate Bach's writing.

Agréments are ornaments intended to decorate particular notes of the texture. Italian ornaments are most frequently classified according to the intervals they surround. This Andante has been reproduced by Wanda Landowska as it would have appeared had Bach written the ornaments in signs instead of incorporating their realization among

5) Paul Brunold, Andre Tessier (eds.), *Oeuvres Completes de Chambonnières*, (Paris, Maurice Senard, 1925)

6) Denise Restout, (ed.) *Landowska on Music* (New York, Stein and Day, 1964)
P 118-21

the main notes of the melodic line. The procedure used by Landowska is valuable. There are lavish ornamentation in the notation seems to obscure the basic structure of a piece. The passage in Ex. 2 from the chorale prelude "Nun Komm! der Heiland" illustrates how such a reduction can be made.

Rhythmic alteration

Under certain conditions, particularly in French music and music borrowed the French idiom, series of notes written equally were played unequally. This phenomenon was called notes *inégales*. Francois Couperin commented on the notational difficulty in following words:

In my opinion, there are faults in our way of writing music which correspond to the way in which we write our language. The fact is we write a thing differently from the way in which we execute it; and it is this which causes foreigners to play our music less well than we do theirs. For instance, we dot several consecutive quavers in diatonic succession, and yet we write them as equal; our custom has enslaved us; and we hold fast to it.⁷⁾

The most common type of inequality performed that the normally stressed note to be enlarged and the following note to be shortened, so that a series of notes written $\left| \frac{2}{4} \text{ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ \right|$ might have been performed $\left| \frac{2}{4} \text{ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ \right|$ The important words of notes *inégales*, summarized this from Newman Powell's dissertation on rhythmic freedom in French music,⁸⁾

Note values to which alteration was applied were generally on the rhythmic level below the pulse. This means that in a piece in which the half note is the beat notes *inégales* would be applied to

7) Francois Couperin, The art of playing the harpsichord (Breitkopf & Hartel, 1933) P 23

8) Newman Powell, Rhythmic Freedom in the Performance of French Music from 1650 to 1735.

eighth notes, and similarly if the beat were a quarter note, alteration would be applied to sixteenth notes.

Subtle dotting of the rhythms seems to have been the most common way of playing notes *inégaies*, although sharply dotted rhythms were sometimes employed. In the latter case the terms *pointez* or *piquez* were used. The approved notation, however, for the sharply dotted rhythm was to write the rhythm dotted.

The practice of playing notes *inégaies* was applied to series of notes moving in conjunct motion. If, however, the more or less casual appearance of a skip or two appeared in the course of a passage, notes *inégaies* would still be applicable.

Bach used the French style of composition and performance, that is the application of notes *inégaies* occur in his music.

Intensification of dotted notes

A dotted note in Baroque music theoretically lengthens the note by one-half its value, that is often held longer than that in performance. The intensification occurs when dotted notes followed by either one or more shorter notes dominate the rhythm and become a distinct rhythmic formula. J. J. Quantz wrote that:

When in common time the Italians make a stroke through the large C, we all know that this indicates *alla breve* time. The French make use of this meter in various types, such as *bourees*, *entrees*, *rigaudon*, *gavotts*, *rondeaux*. Instead of the crossed C, however, they write a large 2, which likewise indicates that the notes must be played at twice their regular speed. In this meter, as well as in three-four time, the quavers (eighth notes) that follow the dotted crotchets (quarter notes) in the *loure*, *sarabande*, *courante*, and *chaconne* must not be played with their literal value but must be executed in a very short and sharp manner. The dotted notes is played with emphasis, and the bow is detached during the dot. All dotted notes are treated in the same manner if time allows; and if three or more demisemiquavers (thirty-second notes) follow a dot or a rest, they

are not always played with their literal value, especially in slow pieces, but are the greatest possible speed, as is frequently the case in overtures, entrees, and fugues.⁹⁾

The so-called "French Overture" rhythm frequently occurs in pieces that are not called overture. Such examples, in which the dots should be intensified in performance, as opposed to reading them literally, are Bach's Fugue in D Major from the Well-Tempered Clavier Book 1, and the dotted sections in the E-flat Major Prelude from the Clavierübung, Part 3.

Dance Rhythms

Music of the later 17th and 18th centuries was extended over dance rhythms, particularly inherited from French court dances, which were refined by Lully (1632-1687) and executed by Louis XIV and his courtiers. These dances composers favored the menuet, gavotte, bouree, sarabande, courante, and gigue. Two Italian dances were also popular, the corrente and the giga. By the late 17th and 18th centuries, this type of music was, in general, no longer intended for dancing, but the characteristic rhythms continued to be used by composers.

These dances penetrated almost every style of both sacred and secular music. In other words, not only pieces labeled as dances, such as those in suites, incorporated dance rhythms but also pieces without dance titles. The use of these rhythms must not be regarded only from a theoretical point of view. A stylistically adequate execution of the music depended on the performer's ability to project these rhythms to the listener.

There is not only internal evidence in the music to corroborate this observation, but also commentaries on the use of dance rhythms by the composers themselves.¹⁰⁾

9) Quantz, P290-291. Johann Joachim Quantz, on Playing the Flute, trans. Edward R. Reilly, New York, The Free Press, 1966.

10) James Grassineau, A musical dictionary (London, J. Wilcox, 1740)

Instrumental music of all types incorporated dance rhythms. The importance of dance rhythms in fugues is discussed by Bach's famous student Johann Philipp Kirnberger, who said that, if one neglects to practice the composition of characteristic dance, one will only with difficulty or not at all achieve a good melody. Above all, it is impossible to compose or to perform a fugue well if one does not know every type of rhythm; and therefore, because this study is neglected today, music has sunk from its former dignity, and one can no longer endure fugues, because through miserable performance which defines¹¹⁾ neither phrase nor accents, they have become a mere chaos of sounds.

Two examples of dance fugues from the Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1, by Bach, are the fugue in C-sharp major, No. 3 which is based on the bouree rhythm, and the fugue in B-flat major, No. 21¹²⁾ which takes its rhythmic character from the menuet. There are many examples from Bach's organ literature. The Prelude in F major (Ex. 3) from the Eight Little Preludes and Fugues is constructed as a menuet and both the Fugue in C minor (Ex. 4) and Fugue in G minor (Ex. 5) appear to be the rhythm of the bourrée.

Although Kirnberger was particularly concerned about the importance of knowing dance rhythms in order to be able to compose or perform fugues he also considered such knowledge indispensable for performance in general.

How will the musician give the piece he performs the appropriate expression which the composer conceived, if he cannot determine with the help of the various kinds of notes that occur therein, exactly what sort of movement and what character are appropriate to each measure?

In order to acquire the necessary qualities for a good performance, the musician can do nothing better than diligently play all sorts of characteristic dances. Each of these dance types has its own rhythm,

11) Newman Powell

12) Gottfried Taubert, described this dance, 1717.

its each motif, thus one identifies them easily and through repeated practice one unconsciously becomes accustomed to distinguishing the proper rhythm of each dance type, defining its motifs and accents, so that finally one easily recognizes in a long piece the various and intermingling rhythms, phrases, and accents. Furthermore, one becomes accustomed to giving each piece its proper expression, since each kind of dance melody has its own characteristic measure and note values.¹³⁾

Thorough Bass

The function of the basso continuo or thorough bass is to provide a relatively continuous harmonic background for a composition.

Renaissance counterpoint was conceived as a conjunction of intervals produced by a combination of voices. Baroque composition is based on an harmonic sense between the bass and soprano. Bass notes, with or without figures, represent a foundation to which harmonies must be added. These harmonies, however, need elaboration in performance. The background provided by the fundamental instruments has a rhythmic as well as a harmonic function. It is not merely intended to fill in chords suited to complement another part or parts but must also help to clarify the rhythmic structure of the composition.

The realization of a continuo part depends not only on the composition in question, but it is also unexpected on the place of performance, instruments used, and the size of the performing group. For this reason it is very difficult to formulate one set of rules governing realizations. A few suggestions should be offered in order to encourage musicians to work out their own realizations.

The harmonies are generally conceived in three or four parts, in which the left hand plays the bass note and the right hand, the others. An organist should avoid using the pedal. If a three or four-part texture proves to be inadequate for a large work, a full-voiced

13) Powell, Kimberger on Dance Rhythms, P 67

accompaniment should be invented.¹⁴⁾

The performer should not add harmonies to nonharmonic tones in the bass line. The faster the bass notes move, the few chords that need to be added. If the bass line is moving in sixteenth notes, perhaps a quarter-note chord in the upper part which is sufficient for each group of four sixteenths.

Some kind of a counter-melody in the realization is permissible when accompanying a soloist. This melody need not be elaborate but should complement and enhance the solo line, whether vocal or instrumental. Rules of voice-leading, such as the preparation of dissonances, should be carefully observed. The performer should also avoid doubling the soloist. The use of imitation may be one device to facilitate this rule.

Ornamentation should be an inherent part of a good continuo, particularly the addition of appoggiaturas, which are among the most essential embellishments. They enhance the harmony as well as the melody. According to C.P.E. Bach, "Appoggiaturas modify chords which would be too simple without them. All syncopations and dissonances can be traced back to them. What would harmony be without these elements?"¹⁵⁾

If the composition on the dance rhythm, that realization should reflect this rhythm.

Chordal figurations, such as arpeggios of various types, may be supplied by the right hand in lively and quick pieces where they are absent from the bass line. They are used much less on the organ.

Where long notes appear in the bass line, such as in recitatives the harpsichordist will probably find it necessary to repeat them often than they are notated, so that the sound will not die away too quickly.

14) George J. Buelow, *Thorough Bass Accompaniment* according to Johann David Heinichen (Berkeley & Los Angeles, Univ. Calif. Press, 1966.)

15) C.P.E. Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, (New York W.W. Norton, 1949.) P 87

Although the nature of thorough bass is improvisatory, and therefore there is no single solution for a piece, one may find it instructive to study two realizations from the 18th century itself. The first is a realization by J.D. Heinichen of a cantata by Alessandro Scarlatti,¹⁶⁾ and the other, a realization of an Albinoni sonata by H.N. Gerber, corrected by J.S. Bach.¹⁷⁾

Performance of Ensemble Works

The instrumentation of Baroque music is often quite flexible. Although it was the Baroque composer who developed the idiomatic characteristics of voice and instrument, new possibilities arose from the deliberate exchange of idioms between different instruments or between instruments and voice.

For example, lute ornaments could be transferred to the harpsichord, or violin figuration could appear in organ music. Substitutions of instruments were by no means foreign to the Baroque composer. But the choice of alternate instruments was not as free in Baroque music as it had been in music of the Renaissance, the option was still often very wide. According to Bukofzer, Heinrich Schutz, in the polychoral *Psalmen Davids* (1619) adopted the grand manner of Gabrieli in compositions for two, three, and four choruses with instruments. Like Gabrieli, he allowed great latitude for the arranger since he did not always specify the orchestrations. Praetorius, instrumentations for Lassus motets would suggest that the clefs of the individual parts hinted at almost unlimited vocal and instrumental combinations.¹⁸⁾

Solo and trio sonata were commonly published for a choice of violin, flute, or oboe. Francois Couperin says in the preface to *Concerts*

16) Buelow, P 282-94

17) Philipp Spitta, Johann Sebastian Bach (New York, Dover Pub., 1951.) P388-98

18) M. Bukofzer, Music in the Baroque Era (New York, W.W. Norton, 1947.)

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Royaux of 1722.

They suit not only the harpsichord but also the violin, the flute, the oboe, the viol, and the bassoon.¹⁹⁾

The choice, of course, presupposed the performer's musical discrimination. Some pieces were idiomatically conceived for a particular instrument or instruments, but others were not.

The performance of vocal music also admits a certain amount of flexibility particularly in terms of the size of choirs. The average choir consisted of from 12 to 16 singers.²⁰⁾ If singers were absent, their parts would probably have been taken over by instrumentalists. It should be noted that such works as choral cantatas and oratorios did not require the large choruses so common today. The instrumental support for choir numbered about the same than the number of singers. In the church music, the main continuo instrument seems to have been the organ, at least for large choral works.

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19) Donington P 437

20) H. T. David & A.Mendel, *The Bach Reader* (New York, W.W. Noton, 1966) P 120-21

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Ex. 1

a b c d

Ex. 2

mordent mordent turn coulé

coulé tirata tirata

Ex. 3

Ex. 4

Ex. 5