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## “Musical Fury”: Impressing Through Expressing in Baroque Improvisation

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## “Musical Fury”: Impressing Through Expressing in Baroque Improvisation

In the Baroque time period, much emphasis was placed on personal expression, emotion, and creativity in both the academic sphere and in the arts. In the arts this can be seen in elaborate and decorative architecture, emotional and expressive paintings, and creative and individualized music. To narrow it down even more, music itself developed from the simple, structured forms of the Renaissance period to the driven, complex, emotional and self-expressive ones of the Baroque period. One of the main features of this period which encouraged such an attitude and supported its growth was improvisation in music. The Baroque time period saw a rise in the importance and use of improvisation in melodies, accompaniments, and in performance practices because individual expression and emotion was highly valued in the Baroque years.

Improvisation grew to such importance in the Baroque period because of the emphasis on personal expression. In this period the composer and the performer became equally important, working in a partnership, and often were the same person. The performer was expected to take liberties to make the music more his own, relying on spontaneous expression and improvisation.<sup>1</sup> The emotional quality of music was highly valued as can be seen in this quote from Charles Butler, an English logician, grammarist, author and minister, in his *Principles of Musik*, 1636: “Good composing is impossible unless the Author, at the time of Composing, be transported as it were with some Musical fury; so that himself scarce knoweth what he doth, nor can presently give a reason for his doing.”<sup>2</sup> An example of how music was valued as emotive comes from a quote in *Ragionamenti Musicali* by Angelo Berardi (an Italian music theorist and composer) from 1681: “Music is the ruler of the passions of the soul.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992, 91.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 95.

Artists were convinced that music has and should receive great emotional depth which could be provided through ornamentation. Another concern for them was that if they did not provide enough ornamentation their listeners would be bored since their emotions were not engaged. C. P. E. Bach, who, although more associated with the Classical period, helped develop the *empfindsamkeit* (sensitive) style in the eighteenth century which stemmed from the Baroque expressive ideals. He spoke of the harpsichord's lack of power to sustain long notes or provide differences in volume, making it difficult to perform an *adagio* without it becoming monotonous.<sup>4</sup> Thus can be seen that the job of both the composer and the performer was to make the music as emotionally expressive and captivating for the audience as possible, often by means of improvisation.

Composers' use of improvisation to express emotion is best seen in vocal or solo music which can freely express without getting in the way of the composer's structure. Early on, there were expectations for which instruments should improvise and which should not. Agostino Agazzari (an Italian composer and music theorist, 1578-1640) discussed this in his *Del sonare sopra 'l basso*, 1607, which is one of the earliest books on performing from a thoroughbass (another term for this is figured bass which is a type of musical notation that describes the intended harmony to be combined with a bass note). He said: "He who plays the lute... must play it nobly, with much invention and variety... he must, in short, so weave the voices together with long groups, trills, and accents, each in its turn, that he gives grace to the consort and one another and allowing time to each."<sup>5</sup> But in general accompanists or orchestral players were cautioned to not interrupt the harmonic progression and to support the soloist, and solo instruments or voices were encouraged to improvise and express.

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Rangel-Ribeiro, *Baroque Music: A Practical Guide for the Performer*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1981, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Nettl et al., "Improvisation, II: Western Art Music." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, 7, <http://www.oxfordmsucionline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/13738pg2>

Timothy Collins speaks to this idea of emotional expressivity in music in his essay, "Reactions against the Virtuoso." He says that from 1580 to 1620 was a period of virtuosity which encouraged elaborate intervallic and rhythmic diminutions for both instruments and voice. These were known as *passaggi* or *gorgie*. Ornamental improvisation and vocal virtuosity came from the desire for music to move the soul and delight the senses, and the polyphonic vocal improvisatory style reached its apex at the end of the sixteenth century at which time a new vocal declamatory style began in France.<sup>6</sup> In Germany there were not as many writings or examples as there were in France or Italy. It is supposed that performers were trained orally and varied from one institution to another.<sup>7</sup> German composer, organist, and music theorist Michael Praetorius, however, did write of vocal embellishments in his *Syntagma musicum* from 1619. The last chapter of his book explains that the singer's role is not much different from an orator, requiring many expressive devices to move the listener.<sup>8</sup>

Such are the thoughts on vocal and solo improvisation. But more than just solo improvisation developed in the Baroque period. Improvisation in accompaniments were in use from the medieval time period on, but they became more common and a matter of theory and composition/performance practices in the Baroque period. Basso continuo is the most well-known name for this practice and is associated with the Baroque period. The beginnings of basso continuo and figured bass (the notation most commonly associated with basso continuo) came from less of a desire for individuality and more

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy A. Collins, "'Reactions against the Virtuoso.' Instrumental Ornamentation Practice and the Stile Moderno." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 32, no. 2 (Dec., 2001): 138, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1562263>.

<sup>7</sup> John Butt, "Improvised Vocal Ornamentation and German Baroque Compositional Theory: An Approach to 'Historical' Performance Practice." *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 116, no. 1 (January 1, 1991): 43, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/766493>.

<sup>8</sup> Butt, "Improvised Vocal Ornamentation," 44.

because of the need to fill in for lacking voices, prepare for a solo, and accompany an improvising soloist.<sup>9</sup>

Improvisation did not simply appear as a way for performers to engage the music more personally in the Baroque period, but had its start in the medieval and renaissance periods. Although improvisation started in these earlier periods it never had the emotional reasoning behind it that came about in the Baroque period. Since the fifteenth century, improvisation has been understood and practiced in several ways. In its basic form, improvisation is meant to define any type of musical performance that is not confined to a musical work in fixed notation. There were two manifestations of this idea, compositions written in the style of improvisation, and improvisations based on features of written music. There is not much evidence for improvisation before the 15<sup>th</sup> century simply because of the tradition of preserving music by memory, but the documents that are in existence point to improvised counterpoint specifically on sacred chant.<sup>10</sup>

Examples of the practice of improvisation in these early times are found in treatises from musical scholars. One is found in Johannes Tinctoris's treatise, *Liber de arte contrapuncti*, from 1477, in which he described the difference between composed and improvised music and stated his belief that improvisation creates variety and interest.<sup>11</sup> Even earlier than that are examples of improvisation in its simplest form. The ninth century *Musica Enchiriadis* (anonymous) describes how to double a chant at perfect intervals and to make oblique motion at the beginnings and ends of chants. But it was not until

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<sup>9</sup> F. T. Arnold, *The Art of Accompaniment from a Thorough-bass: As Practised in the XVIIth & XVIIIth Centuries*. London, Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1931, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Nettl et al., "Improvisation, II," 2.

<sup>11</sup> Kyle Schick, "Improvisation: Performer as Co-composer." *Musical Offerings* 2, no. 3 (2012): 27-28, doi:[10.15385/jmo.2012.3.1.3](https://doi.org/10.15385/jmo.2012.3.1.3).

the fifteenth century that writers first started to distinguish between improvised and written musical styles.<sup>12</sup>

In the Renaissance period, improvisation developed into the *faburden* style, which was first practiced in England and involved singing in thirds and sixths, dating to around 1430.<sup>13</sup> Musical scholars debate about many of the details of *faburden*, but what is agreed upon is that it was improvised, for three voices, in parallel form, and emphasized consonant thirds and sixths.<sup>14</sup> A method of improvising other than the English *faburden* in the Renaissance period was adding a voice over a *cantus firmus*. *Cantus firmus* is translated “fixed song” and is a melody that forms the basis for a polyphonic piece of music. The procedure for adding the polyphony was published in Portuguese music theorist and composer, Vicente Lusitano’s, *Introduçione facilissima*, in 1553. In a few years, this practice was said to be too old-fashioned and Zarlino, an Italian music theorist and composer, gave instructions on improvising two-voice canons on a *cantus firmus* and two- and three-part canons without a *cantus firmus*. He also proposed rules for making invertible counterpoint and adding a third part in an already composed duet in improvisatory form.<sup>15</sup> Improvisation that took place during these times was mainly used in churches although it did develop as a popular art form. The reason for its use was that it created variety and interest<sup>16</sup> which is quite distinct from the Baroque reasons that included emotion and expression, not just variety.

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<sup>12</sup> Nettl et al., “Improvisation, II,” 3.

<sup>13</sup> Schick, “Improvisation: Performer,” 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Nettl et al., “Improvisation, II,” 3.

<sup>16</sup> Schick, “Improvisation: Performer,” 28.

Most of the evidence for this type of music is in vocal literature and no clear discussion of instrumental improvisation has been found. The earliest evidence for instrumental music of this kind is from the fifteenth century in Italian dance music (bassadanza and saltarello). Collections of bassadanza tenors along with pictures depicting two instruments possibly improvising over a tenor instrument are the only indications that such dances could have been performed by improvising groups.<sup>17</sup> Before the Baroque period, most improvisation occurred in churches as choirs sang polyphony above a cantus firmus or in polyphonic groups.<sup>18</sup> It was not until the Baroque time period that emphasis was placed on the solo performer and the purpose of improvisation for expression.

Although ornamented/improvised accompaniment did exist in the Baroque period, the early Baroque used ornamentation mainly as melodic material. Vocal ornamentations are found written out but could also be added on. Jacopo Peri praised the vocalist Vettoria Archilei, who sang in his opera *L'Euridice*, in 1600 because she not only performed the ornaments he wrote but also adorned his compositions “with those pretty and graceful [things] which cannot be written, and writing them, cannot be learned from writings.”<sup>19</sup> At this time, instrumental ornamentation was also allowed but only where such ornamentation would not get in the way of vocal parts. If there was no vocal part, the character of the music would guide such decisions. This is completely separate from instrumental music which is not written out but needs to be supplied, as in the case of a basso continuo.<sup>20</sup>

As the instruction and techniques for improvising became more of a matter of discussion, theory and categorization, virtuosity and improvisatory competence became highly desired in a performer. This

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<sup>17</sup> Nettl et al., “Improvisation, II,” 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 3

<sup>19</sup> Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music*, 169.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 170.

shift of focus from composer to performer came with the Baroque period and its emphasis on expression and emotion. Performers were required to know harmonization theory and have the ability to follow the outline of what a composer wanted, as oftentimes the figured bass written by composers was incomplete or lacking.<sup>21</sup>

The clearest distinction of improvisation in the Baroque period were embellishments of existing parts and the creation of completely new parts. Composers started to take more control over ornamentation by writing out embellishments and by adding symbols or abbreviations for some patterns.<sup>22</sup> In the seventeenth century, treatises on harmony focused on two-part species counterpoint as the basis of composition.<sup>23</sup> In the early seventeenth century all the chromaticism and embellishments were composed against a cantus firmus in the tenor or bass. However, figured bass was more of an indication of harmonic intention in a piece of music. The melody and bass line would already be written but the accompanists were expected to fill in the middle, as opposed to cantus firmus which only had one line written above which performers were expected to improvise multiple lines. In practice, figured bass realization was thought of as a skill that all musicians should have, especially keyboard players. Two categories of early continuo are a shorthand used in place of tablature or scores in accompanying, and independent, essential bass lines of recitative, sonata or other forms.<sup>24</sup>

Performance practice for elaborating musical lines presumably varied from one musical institution to another and performers were most likely trained orally in Germany especially. Italy had a

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<sup>21</sup> Schick, "Improvisation: Performer," 31.

<sup>22</sup> Nettl et al., "Improvisation, II," 6.

<sup>23</sup> David Schulenberg, "Composition before Rameau: Harmony, Figured Bass, and Style in the Baroque." *College Music Symposium* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 132, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40373749>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

great amount of published materials concerning ornamentation but nothing was definite in Germany until 1619 when Praetorius published his third volume of *Syntagma musicum*. Praetorius explained that the singer's job is not unlike an orator, and how he needs to use many expressive devices to move the listener. These include *accentus, tremolo, grupp, tirata, trillo, passagi*. All of these are applied according to a system to simple note patterns and intervals.<sup>25</sup> As J. S. Bach used them, *accenti* were a long appoggiatura from above or below the note written. Praetorius himself however, treated them much more freely and had specific directions for different combinations of written notes and approaches as pictured below:



Ex. 1: This figure describes Praetorius's approach to ornamenting a note or a combination of notes. The first measure of each example is the note(s) to be embellished and the measures after show different ways of doing so.

<sup>25</sup> John Butt, "Improvised Vocal Ornamentation and German Baroque Compositional Theory: An Approach to 'Historical' Performance Practice." *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 116, no. 1 (January 1, 1991): 41-62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/766493>, 44.

<sup>26</sup> F. T. Arnold, *The Art*, 10.

The *gruppo* (*groppolo*, *gruppetto*) and *trillo* are similar in that they alternate between the written note and one a step above in repeated fashion, however the *gruppo* differentiates in ending in that it goes down to the note one step below the written note and then back up to finish the trill. The *tirata* is as it sounds, a tirade, or fast and long scale passage. Praetorius himself defined *passage* as “quick runs, either by step or by leap, through all intervals, both rising and falling, which are written and performed over notes of any duration.”<sup>27</sup>

Christoph Bernhard, a German vocalist, composer, kapellmeister, and music theorist from the 1600s, divided the singing style into two fields: the first uses simpler ornaments and the second adds improvised diminution (a long note divided into a series of shorter, more melodic notes). The first category is itself divided into two: *cantar sodo*, which is concerned only with the notes, and *cantar d'affetto*, which takes the text into account. Ornaments such as the *trillo*, *accento*, and *tremolo* can be used in both of these categories of the first singing style. The second singing style Bernhard termed *cantar passagiato* (or *lombarda*) with these being some of the details: diminution must be applied sparingly, must not have too wide a range or damage the harmonic structure, and in general should return to the originally notated pitches. Diminutions in the bass were forbidden because they could destroy the fundamental music.<sup>28</sup>

The art of improvising over a bass was not the only type of vocal improvisation in the Baroque era. Often vocalists would be expected to improvise over a cantus firmus, an already composed melody line, in contrapuntal form. Mastery of this kind of improvising was required of members of the papal choir. When more than one part would be improvised over the cantus firmus dissonances could easily result. Some commentators prized these sounds but it was not fully desired and thus a method called

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>28</sup> John Butt, “Improvised Vocal Ornamentation,” 45.

*contraponto in concerto* was developed to aid multiple singers to improvise over a cantus firmus without contrapuntal errors.<sup>29</sup>

Improvising over a cantus firmus was quite popular in Italy and especially in the context of sacred music as similar to the Renaissance period. The treatment of vocal embellishments in seventeenth century England was slightly different. Thomas Morley, an English composer, organist, theorist, and singer, employed imitation, canon, double counterpoint, and inversion in his descant style.<sup>30</sup>

Although the most popular form of improvisation during the Baroque period was soloistic, there was also much improvisation in accompaniments, though it had to be treated very carefully so as not to cause a disturbance in the primary melody. The secondary importance of improvised accompaniment shows how valued an expressive melody line was to the composers and listeners of music during that time. However, just as there were many directions and theories on how to improvise a solo line, there were also many methods concerning accompanying. Their primary function was to direct the accompanist on how to best improvise without drawing too much attention away from the soloist. Monsieur de Saint Lambert, A French clavecinist, teacher, and composer, wrote a treatise on the performance of accompaniment and in speaking of “Taste in Accompaniment,” said:

“This taste principally consists of a careful handling of the harmony of one’s Instrument – in such a way that one does not draw so much sound [son] from the Harpsichord that it entirely overwhelms the solo voice [*la voix qui chante*], or, on the contrary, that one does not draw so little [sound] that it does not support [the solo voice] enough.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Nettl et al., “Improvisation, II,” 8.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Charlotte Mattax Moersch, “Keyboard Improvisation in the Baroque Period.” In *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, edited by Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 165.

It was a great concern for musicians and music theorists of the time that the accompaniment be played in just the right way to assist but not detract from the solo. The result is a large body of information on how to play accompaniments.

A basic understanding of accompanying in the Baroque period is based on reading what is called figured bass, or basso continuo. Instead of the entire part for the accompaniment being written out, the composer used a kind of short-hand notation called figured bass. The figured bass would indicate the harmonic intervals above the bass to be played and the performer would read this and play a “realization” of what the composer intended. There are several advantages to writing in this way. Firstly, it saves on composing and copying time as well as printing costs. If there is only one simple line written for the accompaniment, each performer can adapt to his own instrument without any trouble. A fully written piece for one instrument could be more difficult for another to perform, but a bass line would cause no problems. The ensemble as a whole has more freedom to work out balance depending on the instrument and the place of performance. Besides these very logical reasons for composers to leave the embellishing up to the accompanists, they also set a high priority on spontaneity. An accompanist who could provide a stable rhythm, adapt to the momentary needs for balance, and keep every measure moving, could keep the entire ensemble together and encourage the rest of the performers to be as involved. It is always better to have an accompanist who plays with life than one who only plays what is written.<sup>32</sup>

Obviously there had to be some guidelines for any type of basso continuo performing so that the performer would play the improvisation with the same harmonic structure that the composer intended. Some composers objected to the idea that they should provide such a figured bass, insisting that it would only confuse the performer to see such markings or that they should already be intelligent

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<sup>32</sup> Donnington, *The Interpretation*, 289.

enough to not need the tablature.<sup>33</sup> But not all agreed with them. C. P. E. Bach said in his *Essay* from 1762, “the more thought I have given to it, the more richness I have found in the turns of harmony... it is impossible to devise fixed rules. An accompaniment made from an unfigured part can only be inadequate.”<sup>34</sup> This means that if a composer has a certain harmonic line to be followed (the “richness I have found in the turns of harmony”) he should construct a figured bass. For progressions that are more common and contain many sequences, the same amount of care would not be as necessary.

A system did then have to be devised so that the figured bass of one piece would be comparable to another and so that all performers of continuo would have the same knowledge and thus be able to switch from one piece to another without having to learn another formula for realizing the bass. The most typical figures used and their meaning are as follows:

1. No sign above the bass means that a triad is to be played.
2. Any accidentals written by themselves apply to the third above the bass.
3. A slash through a number (usually 4 or 5) or next to a number, means to raise that interval a half step higher.
4. Some abbreviations for intervals above the bass: 6 for 6/3    7 for 7/5/3    6/5 for 6/5/3  
4/3 for 6/4/3    2, or 4/2 for 6/4/2
5. Figures that are written directly above one another are played at the same time; those that are written after another are played consecutively.<sup>35</sup>
6. Horizontal lines mean that the figure and thus the harmony continues the same.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 291.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 292.

<sup>35</sup> Herman Keller, *Thoroughbass Method*. Translated and edited by Carl Parrish. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965, 13.

7. Figures that are underneath a rest indicate the harmony that is prevailing.
8. Passing tones and those that change in the bass, especially of smaller note value, have no figuring and are not harmonized.<sup>36</sup>

This is definitely not an exhaustive list by any means, but it provides an idea of just how much thought would go in to performing a figured bass and how much a composer would rely on the performer to know what was meant by the signs. As C. P. E. Bach said, "He who is too lazy or too ignorant to figure his own basses as a good performance requires should get it done for him by an expert accompanist."<sup>37</sup>

There is much more detail involved in accompanimental improvisation in the Baroque period, but simply too much for one paper to cover it all. There was debate over the use of improvisation techniques in orchestras, and many composers condemned it saying it distracted from the soloist or the main melody.<sup>38</sup> However, this also means that the practice was in use, otherwise it could not have been condemned. Some other writers recommended improvisation in the orchestra if the piece was lacking in quality or a copyist had failed to mark ornaments.<sup>39</sup> All this points to the importance placed in the Baroque period on expression and emotion. Musicians believed that nothing should be done that would take away from the expressive solo line. And so improvised accompaniments were treated very carefully. Solo improvisation was strongly encouraged and used frequently as it was an excellent way to show emotion. Freedom in the accompaniment was also desired and encouraged when there were

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Donnington, *The Interpretation*, 292.

<sup>38</sup> Spitzer, John, and Neal Zaslaw. "Improvised Ornamentation in Eighteenth-Century Orchestras." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 39, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 524-77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/831627>, 529.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 531.

trusted performers who were able to hold the ensemble together instead of distract from the purpose of the piece. Improvisation definitely increased and developed in the Baroque period from the Renaissance and this is due mainly to the fact that emotion and expression were greatly valued.

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