

## **Basso Continuo in Italian Baroque Music**

Music 281: Western Music to 1750

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Few musical elements are as closely associated with the Baroque Era as is the basso continuo. Also referred to as “thoroughbass,” the basso continuo was novel in that it allowed keyboard players to play an entire accompaniment based on a single, figured note in the bass line. Along with such accompaniments came the keyboard player’s natural inclination to make the piece unique, which led to some subtle instances of improvisation. In its nature, the term *improvisation* implies that “we might or might not have a general idea of the sort of outcome of the activity in question,” which is specifically true for the basso continuo, since the figures provide an idea of what it will be like, but the keyboardist’s own musicality – his choice of where to put suspensions, ornamentations, and whatnot – provides a unique flavor for each performance (Day 293). Most experts agree that continuo playing is not merely the art of realizing a figured bass, but a “blend of many different elements, and that getting the harmonies right is by no means the most important of them” (Dart 348). This art thus contains possible nuances which make it challenging to authentically perform the basso continuo in the modern day.

Basso continuo and figured bass are closely related terms, yet they are not the same – rather, basso continuo employs the use of figured bass. By definition, figured bass is the short-hand notation that places figures (numbers, representing harmonic intervals) beneath a melodic line, allowing accompanists to find the correct chords without reading stacked notes on the staff. It was first used in Italy in the early seventeenth century, quickly becoming a defining characteristic of music in that period (“Figured Bass”). Again, though basso continuo involves figured bass, its definition expands beyond the mere existence of numerical figures below the staff. The origin of the term basso continuo is often associated with the accompaniment of vocal music, in which the lowest

notes in the texture formed a continuous bass line (Borgir 13). It was then up to the accompanists to “realize” this bass line, and realizations could vary based on certain elements of the performer’s choosing.

While the actual figures involved in a figured bass direct which chord must be played, there were ways in which keyboard players could still make their versions unique and interesting, allowing for an improvisatory effect. These methods involved suspensions and ornaments; composers experimented with anything that provided color. Near the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Italian composers began putting greater stress on the text of their pieces, which involved several musical tools for textual expression including “unprepared dissonances (*durezza* and *heterolepsis*), unresolved dissonances in cadences (*ellipsis*), harsh note-clusters (*acciaccatura*), and the persistent repetition of a bass note in a tenorizing cadence (*extensio*) or in the vocal part (*cadentia duriuscula*), thus delaying its resolution” (De Goede 233). Questions arise when considering how a continuo player added these elements to his realization while avoiding conflict with the melodic line. Composers achieved this using various strategies, one of which may have been omitting resolutions – a 4<sup>th</sup> or a 7<sup>th</sup> would not resolve properly, creating an unbalanced dissonance. This is seen in Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* in the recitative of Pastore, in which case there are no figures to instruct the realization of the bass line (De Goede 246). Though such musical elements were initially created as a result of improvisation and as a means to “express more powerfully the meaning of the text in vocal music,” these formulas grew to be a standard (De Goede 249).

In the Baroque era, it is reasonable to assume that improvisational training was as prevalent as the training for any other musical skill. For professional musicians, naturally “fulfilling their professional obligations involved a great deal of improvisation: the realization of figured-bass accompaniments, the performance of preludes during a church service, and so forth” (Schulenberg 2). Nearly every aspect of the professional lives of Bach and Handel would have required this skill

for realizing a figured bass and providing an accompaniment that naturally fit the piece and worked well with the melody, whether vocal or instrumental. Improvisation was thus a staple of Baroque music – a skill clearly necessary for any professional accompanist or composer, as it “depended on many of the same concepts and mental disciplines as did composition” (Schulenberg 2). Though most elements of performance were left to the discretion of the keyboard player, several composers did have a “style” that was somewhat unique to them, causing their realizations to have a particular kind of sonority. Sometimes the figuring is based off of generally accepted rules, yet in other contexts it subtly reveals the composer’s individuality (Rogers 1). In Handel’s bass figuring, for example, there are “recurring patterns . . . with which every serious continuo player should be familiar.” Though this has less to do with Handel’s continuo harmonization than it does with his overall harmonic style, the two ideas are closely connected, since “thoroughbass is closely related to the art of composition” and “each influenced the other” (Rogers 165). Thus, though improvisation (specifically as it is used in the realization of a figured bass) and composition seem two different concepts, they are connected in that composition often influenced the nature of the improvisation when the bass note was harmonized.

For keyboard players in the Baroque era, however, the intricate challenges of playing the basso continuo did not exclusively involve realization of the figured bass, as being able to do so at sight was probably considered an essential part of the musician’s training (Dart 348). Many aspects of the art are less definite and tangible, and it is “these other elements – adding rhythmic drive, making each performance new and living, helping to give melodic security, clarifying texture, controlling intonation and ensemble – that make continuo-playing such an excitement, and that were responsible for its dominant role in music during the 17th and 18th centuries” (Dart 348). The greatest challenge is not merely to understand the art but to be able to perfect it and to add nuances which make it interesting. There exists a belief that continuo figuring was intended for inexperienced

performers, though this is not the case, as figuring can demand a variety of different performance styles. The figuring “can do more than merely show the simple harmonic progressions,” but can also “indicate where the chords should be enlivened or enriched through the addition of suspensions or retardations” (Rogers 4). Continuo playing was clearly not for mediocre keyboardists, as it involved such numerous subtleties which were employed to make it interesting and exciting.

The basso continuo in Baroque music also creates multiple performance practice issues when performed in the modern day. Since many tools for adding improvisation were accepted at the time, there is no way to be certain that a modern performance sounds identical to the original. It can be difficult to tell where to apply textually expressive devices – relevant information on the use of dissonance in Baroque music is difficult to find, and in some instances, the bass line may even be unfigured (De Goede 233). Another issue regarding performance practice deals with the doubling of the bass line. Typically, most modern analysts accept that “two instruments are needed for [the basso continuo’s] proper performance: a chordal instrument for the realization, and a cello or viola da gamba to sustain and reinforce the bass line” (Borgir 5). While other sources claim this may not be the case, most modern versions of Baroque pieces do include this doubling, whether it is in the original or not. This gives performers little influence in their desired level of authenticity, as they are merely forced to “follow the same practice as editors” (Borgir 5).

In regard to this issue of performance practice, analysts immediately note that some modern realizations of the figured bass in period pieces are likely more authentic than others, asserting that the differences in realization are due either to a lack of figures in the original music or liberties taken regarding how much ornamentation or dissonance to add to certain resolutions. It is possible to do too much of this, particularly if such liberties come from the mind of the modern editor rather than the keyboardist. One expert notes an example of a “bad realization” in which a modern editor (whose name, in order “to avoid embarrassment,” is not mentioned) “overcrowded the continuo

part with ornaments instead of leaving such embellishments to the concertino soloist” (Bergmann 32). As one of the most important characteristics of basso continuo realization is the unique embellishments (and even unique harmonies, if the bass is unfigured) added by each performer, notating too many of them would be contrary to the original nature of the piece. The modern editor in question “has entirely altered the function of a continuo and the sonority of the work and pushed the accompanist into a predominant position, contrary to all methods of the basso continuo since its inception” (Bergmann 32). An art which is so reliant upon originality and improvised musical ideas cannot be given such restrictions.

The art of performing the basso continuo has many nuances that do not merely relate to realizing a harmonization of the figured bass. There were, and still are, methods which allowed keyboard players to add their own unique detail to each piece, and composers offered subtle hints as to where these were intended to be used. Often no two realizations are the same, and sometimes one is obviously less authentic than other. Some merely have more color due to such elements as unresolved dissonance, which was one of the methods composers employed to exhibit their styles. The basso continuo thus generates several performance practice issues, and needs to be studied and researched thoroughly in order for modern editors and keyboard players to keep their editions and performances authentic.

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