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## **Counterpoint and Improvisation in Italian Sources From Gabrieli to Pasquini**

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§ *Suonar di fantasia*, in altre parole improvvisare, era il compito specifico dell'organista: fonti teoriche e pratiche dal Rinascimento sino al XVII secolo mostrano l'esistenza di un approccio pedagogico comune all'arte dell'improvvisazione, nel quale il contrappunto aveva un ruolo fondamentale. Uno studio critico di queste fonti è oggi indispensabile per elaborare un più efficiente metodo didattico per l'organo e, in generale, per gli strumenti da tastiera.

§ *Sonar di fantasia*, in other words to improvise, was the specific task of the organist: theoretical and practical sources from the Renaissance to XVII<sup>th</sup>-century show the existence of a common pedagogic approach to the art of improvisation, in which counterpoint had a key role. A critical study of these sources is nowadays essential to elaborate a more efficient didactic method for the organ, and in general, keyboard instruments.

## **Exordium**

This paper will focus on the most salient aspects in the Italian sources about improvisation and counterpoint in the late Renaissance and early Baroque. In his essay Massimiliano Guido has just illustrated Girolamo Diruta's didactic method, a perfect blend of the hands and the mind, offering a general introduction to the argument.<sup>1</sup>

The modern approach to such a source is weakened by some basic phenomena typical of contemporary teaching methods in conservatories and music departments around the world. Among them, the most complex is the approach to continuo playing, which is generally based on a tonal reading of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century music, and thus didactically rooted in the French manuals of the early eighteenth century, which were written, as is well known, for amateurs, and not for skilled musicians. Our way of teaching and playing continuo, therefore, turns out to be more 'for leisure' than professional. Indirect demonstration of the insufficiency of this approach is evident when, leaving the more explicitly tonal repertoire of the eighteenth century, one moves to the early Seicento and tries to apply the same vertical reading to the chords, as well as the same principles of the tonal system: this results in a complete disaster.

The concept itself of '*basso continuo era*', as the musical Baroque has often been defined, leads to many misunderstandings, and, above all, it does not explain why this praxis was born and raised in the shadow of counterpoint. A new dilemma, similar to the ancient one «what comes first, the music or the words?», comes to the mind of present-day scholars, teachers, and musicians: first the harmony, or the counterpoint? The answer, given by the sources, is clear: counterpoint comes first.

## **Plain chant**

Giovanni Matteo Asola's the *Canto Fermo sopra Messe Himni et altre Cose Ecclesiastiche appartenenti a Sonatori d'Organo per giustamente rispondere al Choro*, published in Venice in 1592, is one of the most frequently reprinted books between the end of Cinquecento and the late Seicento (ASOLA 1993). It is the most systematic anthology of plain chants for organists, «for answering properly to the choir»: it does not show the chant parts reserved to the singers, but only the ones needed by the organist, giving the basis upon which the player improvises his versets in alternation with the choir.

The plain chants are metrically organized, according to a praxis established in the sixteenth-century, with a prevailing ternary meter for the hymns.

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<sup>1</sup> See pp. 63-76.

### **Basso seguente**

Adriano Banchieri, in *L'Organo Suonarino*, published in Venice in 1605, gives the organist a complete set of versets for every liturgical feast, written out in the form of a figured bass (BANCHIERI 1969). This might seem to be in contradiction to the scarcely enthusiastic appreciation of the Olivetan friar for the *basso seguente*:

This new manner of playing upon the Bass, I do not blame it, but neither do I praise it, because young organists neglect to study the *ricercare* in four voices and the fantasia of illustrious men in the profession. Many of them nowadays think to be a good organist just by playing four fast passages at the keyboard on a figured bass; but this is not true, since the valuable organists are those who play a well conceived counterpoint, in which all the four voices are heard (BANCHIERI 1969, p.65).

In the *Kyrie* for the *Messa della Madonna*, there is a quite frequent shift between bass and soprano clefs (Table 1). If one reads the succession of the notes as a single voice, it would result in unrealistic dissonant leaps. The clef-changes – as well as the leaps of a seventh – clearly indicate the entry of different voices, emphasizing how the reading principle of the versets is not vertical/harmonic, but horizontal/counterpoint-oriented.

Deciphering Banchieri's versets is a true activity of 'composition at the keyboard', a term much more pertinent to that historical environment than the modern and often misleading term 'improvisation'.

The *Organo suonarino* is the first known anthology of *partimenti*, a word brought into use from the second half of the seventeenth century for scores written only on a single staff line, with the help of figures and clefs, on which the player has to build the musical work extemporaneously.

This sort of writing is like a kind of reduction, or concentration of the polyphony on a single line: a musical seed, from which, if it is treated wisely by the player, polyphony can blossom. An essential prerequisite to this operation is the knowledge of counterpoint: not a theoretical, but a practical one, shared by singers and instrumentalists in the Renaissance and the Baroque. It is known that Banchieri openly refused to deal with counterpoint, because Girolamo Diruta, in a forthcoming book, planned to discuss the subject extensively. This book is the second part of *Transilvano*, printed in Venice in 1609, containing a chapter about the theory and practice of counterpoint for keyboardists (DIRUTA 1997).

In the *Appendice all'Organo Suonarino*, published in 1638, Banchieri offers a further working model for beginners: the whole *Messa della Domenica* is written this time on two staves, bass and soprano. The player has the task of filling in the missing inner parts. This two-part writing is used in many other anthologies: among them the *Weimar tabulature*, compiled in

MESSA DELLA MADONNA

Basso con sicurissima guida sin'alla finale di versetto in versetto

Kyrie

Kyrie

Kyrie

Christe

Christe

Kyrie

Kyrie

Kyrie

Table 1

1704 by Johann Pachelbel and his students, containing eighty chorales, everyone of them preceded by a fughetta (*La Tabulature de Weimar* 1993). They are written in two parts, bass and soprano, with figures. According to Forkel, this was also the first step used by Bach for instructing his pupils in chorale accompaniment: two given parts, a melody and a bass that the student had to fill up with the inner voices. Only after the pupil had developed this competence and automatism did Bach give the learner the single line of the chant, with the task of improvising also the bass line. This is a sort of *file rouge* that runs through all musical and didactic praxis in Europe from the Renaissance to the late Baroque.

### Counterpoint

At the end of every chapter, the *Organo Suonarino* has several pieces in open score that can be used at different liturgical moments. The *Sonata Ottava* is a short composition in the style of a canzona, which appears as a true model for studying contrapuntal imitation. In the opening bars there are four entries of the subject in the different voices from the soprano to the bass, alternating subject and answer, the latter at the fourth. In the following section there are again four close entrances of the subject, from the soprano to the bass, in this case with the answer at the fifth and modified (tonal answer). The whole is followed by a few measures in homophonic style. This is, obviously, an example that summarizes the possibilities for imitating a subject, and that shows, in a sober construction, how to deal with the free parts, accompanying the subject almost always with imperfect consonances (Table 2).

The example shows how important it was to learn to use imitations in composing at the keyboard. Banchieri describes this element when he introduces the *fantasia* as the key feature of a learned organist (*Decima Conclusione dilucidata nelle Conclusioni nel suono dell'Organo*, Bologna, 1609):

For playing the *Fantasia* one must have learned how to compose a good melody with its finals provided, knowledge of counterpoint, the way of making the fugue at the fifth and the fourth, and finally one must have studied a lot of compositions, to gain beyond the genius which is required, a good intelligence (BANCHIERI 1968a, p. 24).

Sonata Ottava, in Aria Francese

The image displays a musical score for the piano accompaniment of the Sonata Ottava, in Aria Francese. The score is written in treble and bass clefs with a common time signature (C). It consists of six systems of music, each with a measure number in the left margin: 1, 6, 10, 14, 18, and 21. The first system (measures 1-4) features a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a simple accompaniment. The second system (measures 5-8) continues the melodic line in the treble and adds a more active bass line. The third system (measures 9-12) shows a change in the bass line's texture. The fourth system (measures 13-16) features a more complex bass line with sixteenth-note patterns. The fifth system (measures 17-20) continues this complex bass line. The sixth system (measures 21-24) concludes the piece with a final cadence, marked with a double bar line and a repeat sign. The text "Da capo fin al fine" is written above the final measure (measure 24).

Table 2

### **Orgelschule Wegweiser, Augsburg, 1668**

The *Ars Cantandi* by Giacomo Carissimi, one of the leading musicians especially in vocal music and oratorio, is quoted in the preface of this important manual (CARISSIMI 2010). The Augsburg anthology, besides providing the player with models for cadences and sequences, which are based on the different bass movements (a method common to the diminution tutors in the late Renaissance), provides a series of versets in the eight ecclesiastical tones, with a preambulum at the beginning.

In the versets we find three different kinds of writing: the toccata-like verset, the canonic verset, and the fugal verset. In the two following examples we have a canonic form verset: more precisely it is a sequence of three short canons in two voices, linked by cadences. The third and fourth voices do not take part in the canon, and go with the other voices mostly by imperfect consonances, completing the cadential movements. The next one is a fugue-verset, with the entries from the soprano to the bass, as seen before in Banchieri's sonata (see Table 3).

It is interesting to notice how the presence of four voices is limited to a few measures, mostly in cadential formulas. Very often the imitative fragments are built upon the alternation between bass and tenor or alto and soprano, in two- or three-part writing.

### **Spiridionis, *Nova instructio*, Bamberg 1670**

The famous and substantial anthology by Spiridione, published in four parts between 1670 and 1674, is maybe the most complete and systematic example of an improvisation tutor in the Baroque epoch (SPIRIDIONIS 2003 and 2008). The largest portion is made up of cadences, i.e. ascending and descending movements, by step or leap, in the bass. On every movement more than one hundred variations are proposed. The collection is completed by contrapuntal pieces, canzoni and canzonette, that are interesting models of applied counterpoint. As shown in the examples in Table 4, they are short compositions, organized like the versets in the *Orgelschule Wegweiser* according to the eight tones (see Table 4).

In the Third Part the author gives some explanations about the way of building canons, applying inversion, retrograde, and other artifices. Above all Spiridione shows how to vary the subject rhythmically, once again according to the well-known concept of fantasia *simplex* (simple) and *variata* (varied) (see Table 5).

**Orgelschule Wegweiser**  
Augsburg, 1668

Versus 2

The first system of Versus 2 consists of two staves. The upper staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. It contains a sequence of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests. The lower staff begins with a bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests. The second system also consists of two staves. The upper staff continues the melodic line with various note values and rests. The lower staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The piece concludes with a final cadence in the upper staff.

Versus 3

The first system of Versus 3 consists of two staves. The upper staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. It contains a sequence of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests. The lower staff begins with a bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests. The second system also consists of two staves. The upper staff continues the melodic line with various note values and rests. The lower staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The third system also consists of two staves. The upper staff continues the melodic line with various note values and rests. The lower staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The piece concludes with a final cadence in the upper staff.

Table 3



Spiridion a Monte Carmelo  
Nova Instructio

Canzona 21 La Nenningiana

4

7

10 Canzona 22 La Kraffiana

13

17

Detailed description: The image shows a musical score for two pieces. The first piece, 'Canzona 21 La Nenningiana', is in G major and 3/4 time. It consists of 9 measures. The first system (measures 1-3) shows a treble clef with a melody of eighth and sixteenth notes, and a bass clef with a simple accompaniment. The second system (measures 4-6) continues the melody with some chromaticism. The third system (measures 7-9) concludes the piece with a final cadence. The second piece, 'Canzona 22 La Kraffiana', is in G major and 3/4 time. It consists of 9 measures. The first system (measures 10-12) begins with a rest in the treble clef and a rhythmic pattern in the bass clef. The second system (measures 13-16) features a more active treble melody. The third system (measures 17-19) ends with a final cadence.

Table 4



### Bernardo Pasquini

The keyboard production of Pasquini, one of the most famous composers and teachers of the Baroque, can be categorized in three different typologies:

- a) fully written out pieces (toccate, ricercari, fantasie, canzoni, varitions, dances); almost all collected in the large autograph manuscript in Berlin;
- b) counterpoint exercises and ricercari in the *Saggi di Contrappunto*;
- c) versets and partimenti, in the partially autograph manuscript in London.

The analysis of this material, today accessible in the new edition by Armando Carideo (PASQUINI 2000-12), reveals a surprising continuity with the sources we have quoted so far. It is possible to define a precise didactic project elaborated by Pasquini, where every typology has a complementary role. If the written out compositions offer examples of cadences, sequences and contrapuntal schemes to analyze and rediscover in the development of the piece, the same formulas are found in the partimenti, conceived as exercises to be realized extemporaneously. To solve them it is essential to study the counterpoint in the way described in the *Saggi*. The majority of these partimenti can be understood and realized not through a vertical harmonic reading, but with a horizontal one, i.e. contrapuntal, as shown in the examples in Table 6.

Table 6

There are two fugal versets, very similar to Banchieri's *Sonata Ottava*, also in the order of the entrances. The subject of the second verset is a rhythmic variation of the subject of the first one.

### Finis

This short excursus helps us find a continuous path that crosses all of musical education and keyboard practice in Europe between the Renaissance and the Baroque. This methodology combines different complementary elements:

- a) written-out music as a model to read and study (and not primarily to be performed);

- b) the basso continuo (*partimento*) as a pedagogical tool, strictly related to counterpoint;
- c) patterns (cadences, sequences, and so on) as schemata to be memorized in a practical manner.

From the historical sources we can get some advice for a revision of our contemporary pedagogic model for keyboard studies. I would sum up it with the following remarks:

- a) a tighter complementarity between theory and performance;
- b) a contrapuntal approach to the keyboard;
- c) a re-reading of basso continuo, starting from the early Seicento, as strictly related to counterpoint

This, according to me, would be of extreme help to fill the gap between music theory and performance that, according to many, seems to be the most negative element in the musical culture of our time.

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