

Si suona Passacaglio **A Didactic Introduction to Improvisation in the Italian Practice of *Basso Ostinato****

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§ Come Spiridione dimostra nella sua *Nova instructio* (1670-77), l'*excellentissimus componista* deve essere capace di combinare improvvisando diversi modelli armonici e melodici, costruendo così una forma musicale. Questi modelli si possono ritrovare nei lavori dei grandi maestri. Devono essere analizzati per ricavare gli elementi di base per poi essere sistematizzati. Questo processo può essere meglio evidenziato nelle forme su ostinato, come la bergamasca e il passacaglio. Negli esercizi preliminari le tre voci dell'armonizzazione di base del passacaglio vengono prima scambiate, poi diminuite e arricchite con cromatismi. I pezzi anonimi del manoscritto Chigi Q IV 27 sono una specie di livello intermedio, fra gli esercizi di base e il culmine dell'arte del passacaglio, le *Cento partite sopra passacagli* di Frescobaldi. In quella composizione si trova ogni forma di condotta delle parti, dissonanze, modulazioni, *blue notes*, cambi di proporzioni e mutamenti d'affetto.

§ As Spiridionis shows in his *Nova instructio* (1670-77,) the *Excellentissimus Componista* (the most excellent composer) must be able to combine by improvising different harmonic and melodic models, building up a musical form. These models can be found in the works of the great masters. They must be analyzed for finding out the basic elements and then systematized. This process can be outlined best by ostinato forms, as the bergamasca and the passacaglio. In the preliminary exercises the three voices of the basic harmonization of the passacaglio are at first exchanged, then diminished and enriched with chromaticism. The anonymous pieces in the manuscript Chigi Q IV 27 are a sort of intermediate level, between the basic exercises and the highest level in the art of passacaglio, the *Cento partite sopra passacagli* by Frescobaldi. There one can find every way of voice leading, dissonances, modulations, *blue notes*, changes in proportions and affect shifts.

The century of *basso ostinato*

One could without exaggeration define the seventeenth century as the century of *basso ostinato*. Many compositions of this genre, based mostly on basses of *passacaglio* and *ciaccona*, come from this epoch.¹ The *basso ostinato* was also very important in the didactics of improvisation at that time. Many musical sources, mainly manuscripts, contain compositions on those basses, the pedagogical component of which consists in the fact that their short harmonic scheme is well suited for trying out different rhythmical and melodic solutions at the keyboard. In the field of the variation upon a *basso ostinato*, Frescobaldi's compositions are a peak probably unequalled in the first half of the seventeenth century. In particular, the *Cento partite sopra passacagli* in the *Aggiunta* to the *Primo libro di Toccate e Partite* (1637) constitute a sort of encyclopedia of the possible variations on a *basso*.

Models that facilitate the approach to the art of improvising *passacagli* are to be found in the manuscript *Chigi Q IV 27*, which contains, alongside liturgical forms, *partitas*, and ball music, also compositions of *bassi ostinati*, of variable length (from a few measures to several pages) and in different tonalities (in major up to three sharps and three flats; in minor up to two sharps and three flats).² These pieces, that are untitled (one could call them *passacagli* or *ritornelli*), contain precise stylistic elements, e.g. a kind of *preparamento alla cadenza* (preparing of the cadence) 'extended' (see Ex. 5, a-f). These elements are used systematically in all the compositions. In particular the *preparamento* is used so extensively as to give the impression that the author wished to try out this new *seconda prattica* element in every possible variant (see examples 8 a-f, 9 a-b). The *passacagli* of the *Chigi* manuscript are an important source because they can be considered the 'propaedeutic level' to Frescobaldi's *Cento Partite*. They allow us to better understand an aspect of musical didactics in Rome around the third decade of the 1600s, and to get a glimpse of the 'musical workshop' of the Ferrarese master. At the time of their composition they were also a useful collection for those musicians who, not being (yet) particularly skilled in improvisation, could pick up one piece or another to use as a *ritornello* in several situations,

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¹ The issue of the difference between *passacaglio* and *ciaccona*, which in the sources are often associated, can not be solved here. What is important for our discussion is that in both cases they are short forms of *basso ostinato*, starting with the first degree of the tonality, and going to the fifth. This harmonic scheme has a strong cadence V-I, which comes back constantly (in an *ostinato* way); the movement of such a scheme, strongly projected forward (one could say with 'drive'), comes from the fact that the last harmony of a variation is also the first of the following one.

² In the case of *passacagli* it is appropriate to use the terms major or minor tonality. The *Chigi* manuscript presents the basses ordered according to the number of accidentals, corresponding to the modern major and minor tonalities.

for example in a strophic aria. The different lengths and tonalities of these musical examples might be particularly useful in the theatre, when it was necessary to play instrumental music during changes of scenery.³ Nevertheless this music cannot compare with the extraordinary complexity of the *Cento partite*, and sometimes they look a little bit scholastic and repetitive; but in any case they represent the result of an accurate study, and show important aspects of the compositional practice of the time. In this way we can not only familiarize ourselves with Frescobaldi's art: through the Chigi manuscript we also have at our disposal music that can be used as stylistic exercises, maybe real *examples* by Frescobaldi's students or musicians from his circle. What we are missing is the previous level, i.e. a series of preliminary exercises that most probably were practically demonstrated to the pupil at the keyboard by the maestro, as later described by Alessandro Scarlatti:

Other features required by the fluency of the style of this present writer, discovered by him in the most noble way of playing, can not be given in a written form, but only orally, with the different manners of hand movements for playing; and therefore he declines to comment about these points.⁴

This essay is therefore an attempt to reconstruct that multi-layered process, to make it useful for the present day in improvisation at the harpsichord. So I present first the building elements of the *passacaglio*, in different degrees of complexity and with increasing difficulty. Then I will offer an overview of the stylistic elements and particular 'ingredients' which belong to the 'higher level', as can be found in composition of the Chigi manuscript and in Frescobaldi.

The didactic method used here is partly inspired by the *Nova Instructio* by Spiridionis (SPIRIDIONIS 2003 and 2008). Let us observe his examples 1a and 1b. Ex 1a is a passage from Frescobaldi's *Toccata ottava* of the First Book; Ex. 1b is the slightly modified version offered by Spiridionis in his method, without mentioning the author or the source. Frescobaldi's bass line is not kept as it was, descending by step. To make the example more easy to memorize, Spiridionis simplifies, so to say, the bass line, changing the C to G and the B-flat to B. In this way the example becomes a descending bass movement with 7-6 suspensions: a standard model that is easier to recall in improvising, notwithstanding the relative complexity of the diminutions in the right hand. At first sight it might look like a small detail. Nevertheless I am sure that this is not a copying mistake by Spiridionis, but a deliberate systematization, with

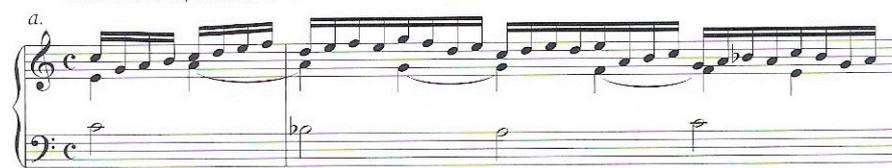
³ See for instance the annotation «Si suona passacaglio» in the Neapolitan manuscript of *Incoronazione di Poppea* by Monteverdi (Finale, Scena VIII), Napoli, Biblioteca del Conservatorio S. Pietro a Majella, Rari 6.4.i. Of this *passacaglio* there is no trace in the manuscript: it was probably never composed, but taken from an anthology, like the Chigi manuscript, or improvised.

⁴ «Altre circostanze accidentali richieste dall'armonia dello stile di questo presente scrittore da lui trovate nel piu' nobil modo di sonare, non ponno darsi in iscritto, mà à voce, colle varie maniere de' movimenti della mano nel sonare; al che si riserba», (GBLb1, MS Add. 14244, p. 40).

the aim of making Frescobaldi's passage easy to incorporate in the repertoire of the student in improvisation. The example by Frescobaldi and Spiridionis is of crucial importance in the practice of historical improvisation, because it shows how one can use the work of the great master for didactic purpose. But to do this it is necessary not only to make a careful analysis, but very often also a simplification of the original models, so that they might be memorized easily and re-used for improvisation.

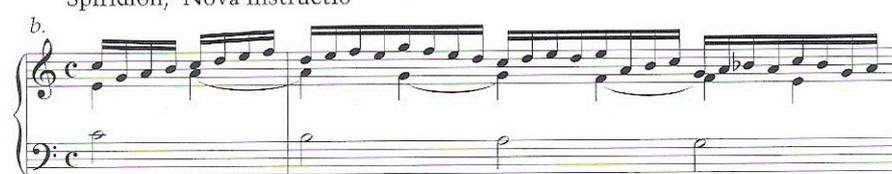
Frescobaldi, Toccata ottava

a.



Spiridion, Nova Instructio

b.



The image shows two musical examples, labeled 'a.' and 'b.', each consisting of a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) in common time (C). Example 'a.' is titled 'Frescobaldi, Toccata ottava' and shows a complex melodic line in the treble clef with many sixteenth notes, and a simple bass line with long notes. Example 'b.' is titled 'Spiridion, Nova Instructio' and shows a simplified version of the same melodic line in the treble clef, with fewer sixteenth notes and a similar simple bass line. The simplification in 'b.' is evident in the reduction of the melodic density.

Example 1 (a-b)

Preliminary exercises

Like Spiridionis, I would prefer to explain this didactic approach by musical examples that need almost no further explanation. At first I have prepared a series of examples with different harmonic and melodic solutions, taken from the repertoire, and 'simplified' into exercises following Spiridionis' example. These models are furthermore used for the whole harmonic scheme (or variation) as systematically as possible; something that happens but seldom in the repertoire. Then the single voices are exchanged, and combined in different ways. This is useful, if not indispensable, for a deep understanding of how a musical figure works, for mastering the variation techniques, and for recalling to the mind and to the fingers the different patterns, recombining them during improvisation. Original examples from musical sources follow the preliminary exercises, providing solutions typical of Italian style at the time of Frescobaldi. To make comparison of the examples easier, all of them are in d minor. It is tacitly understood that the pupil must transpose them into all tonalities; and those examples for which only the *incipit* is given, must be completed using the suggested figure. The most frequent meter is ternary,

though passacagli in binary meter are not rare at all.⁵ The following elements of the *passacaglio* are treated:

- a) Basic harmonization
- b) Diminutions
- c) Chromaticism
- d) *Preparamento* to the cadence

a) Basic harmonization of the *passacaglio* bass, with voice exchange and suspensions.⁶

The image shows a musical score for Example 2 (a-g) in 3/8 time, G minor. It consists of three systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef).
 System 1: (a) shows the original bass line in the bass clef. (b) shows the basic harmonization in three parts (treble, bass, and a middle voice).
 System 2: (c) shows the addition of suspensions in the treble and middle voices. (d) shows voice exchange between the treble and middle voices.
 System 3: (e) shows further voice exchange and suspensions. (f) and (g) show the final stages of the piece, including a cadence. A '7 - 6' fingering is indicated in the bass clef of system 2, and an asterisk (*) is placed in the bass clef of systems 3 and 4.

Example 2 (a-g)

- a: bass of *passacaglio*;
- b: basic harmonization in three parts;
- c: adding suspensions;
- d-g: voices exchanged.

⁵ The majority of the examples is realized in three voices. This sort of realization was, up to the end of the seventeenth century, of great didactic importance. Three-part examples are the majority in (PENNA 1996). The same observation applies to (MUFFAT 1991). Many of the Chigi passacagli and other contemporary collections are basically composed in three voices.

⁶ The *passacaglio* is often identified with a descending tetrachord in the bass (later called also *lamento*): this is only one of the possible variants of the *passacaglio* bass, though it is the most common. It should be noticed that quite often there is an ascending line from the first to the fifth degree, as for example in the second of the *Cento partite* by Frescobaldi.

(* in example Ex.6, f-g, the a in the bass can be changed to d to avoid the 6 4 harmony at the beginning of the variation.)

b) Diminution of a single voice, with parts exchanged.

The image displays a musical score for 18 variations, labeled 'a' through 'r'. Each variation is presented as a two-staff system (treble and bass clef). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The variations show a systematic exchange of melodic and harmonic material between the two staves. For example, in variation 'a', the treble staff has a melodic line while the bass staff has a harmonic accompaniment. In variation 'b', the roles are reversed. This pattern continues through variations 'c' to 'r', with some variations featuring more complex rhythmic patterns or melodic lines. The score is organized into six groups of three variations each, with the first variation of each group starting on a new line.

Example 3 (a-r)

The diminution presented in examples e-h represents, one could say, a topos in the passacagli of the Frescobaldian era, in both instrumental and vocal music: for instance the incipit of the *Cento partite*, and the aria di passacaglia *Così mi disprezzate* in *Arie musicali*. Examples k-r have suspensions. One can also look for other figures in the literature to enlarge one's repertoire.

c) Chromaticism

Example 4 (a-i)

d) *Preparamento* to the cadence⁷

This is an ingredient typical of the Italian passacagli in the early Seicento. It boosts the harmonic tension before the cadence, and it is characterized by the dissonance that the voice repetition in the right hand makes above the descending bass. This tension is resolved on the dominant harmony.

⁷ I use this term because of the similarity of the phenomenon in the passacagli with what Bartolomeo Bismantova described as *preparamento alla cadenza*, in which the note repetition of the voices above the moving bass creates in a cadence a strong harmonic tension. In the *passacagli* there is a sort of amplification of Bismantova's *preparamento* (BISMANTOVA 1978, p.79).

Example 5 (a-f) consists of six measures of music, labeled a through f, arranged in three rows. Each measure is written on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). Measure a is marked 'à 3' and measure b is marked 'à 4'. The notation includes various rhythmic values and accidentals, such as sharps and naturals, across the two staves of each measure.

Example 5 (a-f)

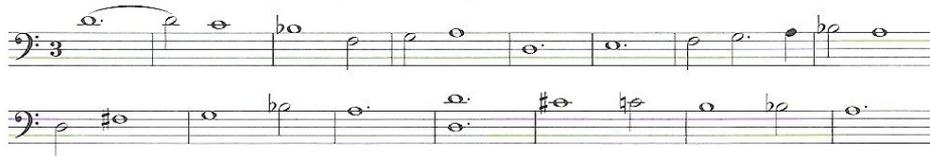
Other elements and techniques of composition/improvisation in the *passacaglio* (original examples)

a) *Diversità di passi*

Example 6 (a-d) consists of four measures of music, labeled a through d, arranged in two rows. Each measure is written on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The notation includes various rhythmic values and accidentals, such as sharps and naturals, across the two staves of each measure.

Example 6 (a-d)

A further example is given in the first four measures in Frescobaldi's *Cento partite*: note the search for the diversity of passages by the author, also in the bass movement: descending, ascending, chromatically ascending, chromatically descending.



Example 6.2
Frescobaldi's *Cento partite*, *incipit*.

Accentuation of the second beat of the measure is also fairly common.



Example 6.3 (a-d)

A typical figure in different solutions, with accentuation on the second beat of the measure.

- a: with 7-6 suspension;
- b: with the *preparamento*;
- c-d: in canon.

b) Blue notes

The third, sixth and seventh scale degree of the major scale are lowered to achieve a particular expressivity. This does not necessarily mean a change of mode from major to minor: this phenomenon could be better described as a mixture of the two scales, or just as a color change.

The image displays a musical score for Example 7 (a-f), consisting of six systems of music (a-f) for piano. Each system is written in a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into six systems, each labeled with a letter from 'a' to 'f'. System 'a' is in 3/4 time. System 'b' changes to 6/4 time. System 'c' is in 3/4 time and includes a trill (tr) in the right hand. System 'd' is in 3/4 time. System 'e' is in 3/4 time and includes a trill (tr) in the right hand. System 'f' is in 3/4 time. The score features various musical notations, including notes, rests, and ornaments, with some notes highlighted in yellow to indicate blue notes.

Example 7 (a-f)
Blue notes in Frescobaldi.

c) *Durezze*: particular voice leading and dissonance treatment.

The image displays a musical score for Example 8 (a-f), consisting of six systems of music (a-f) for piano. The score is written in 3/4 time and features complex voice leading and dissonance treatment. System a shows a tritonus interval in the upper voice. System b continues the melodic line. System c features a tritonus interval in the lower voice. System d shows a tritonus interval in the upper voice. System e, labeled 'Chigi', includes trills (tr) in both voices. System f, labeled 'f.', shows a trill (tr) in the upper voice and a Quinte interval in the lower voice.

Example 8 (a-f)
Durezze in Frescobaldi and Chigi ms.

In Ex. 8a, even thinking of a voice crossing in the upper voices, between measure 3 and 4, the aural effect of the tritonus is not eliminated.

d) Other *preparamenti*.

The image contains three musical examples labeled a, b, and c. Example a is in 3/4 time, featuring a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a chordal accompaniment. Example b is in 3/4 time, featuring a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a chordal accompaniment. Example c is labeled 'Frescobaldi' and is in 3/4 time, featuring a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a chordal accompaniment. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and trills.

Example 9 (a-c)

The *preparamenti* in the compositions of the Chigi manuscript have often a harsh sonority; it seems that the anonymous author is looking for a cluster effect. Frescobaldi, on the other hand, increases the harmonic tension by a nervous movement of the voices, combined with pedal notes and trills. Notice in example 9c the doubling of the fourth at the distance of two octaves, and the resolution of only the lower of them: the d in the soprano, i.e. the note that prepares the cadence and makes the dissonant fourth over the bass, remains unresolved (see also Ex. 8 c and d).⁸

e) *Passaggi ad altro tono* (Shifts to another tone)

In the *bassi ostinati* of the Frescobaldian epoch, changes to another tone are often found: sometimes a composition ends in a different tone (i.e. the *Cento partite* start in d minor and end in e minor).⁹

These *passaggi ad altro tono* are often combined with a change of *affetto* (see for instance the *passacaglio* in B-flat major in the *Aggiunta* of the *Primo*

⁸ A similar phenomenon is described at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Francesco Gasparini in *L'armonico pratico al cembalo* (GASPARINI 2001). Dealing with the *stile pieno* (full style), Gasparini explains that unresolved fourth (in this case in the right hand) as an *acciaccatura*.

⁹ This way of building a musical form, not rare in the keyboard music of the early Baroque, was maybe influenced by the fact that the *partitas*, as well as the *toccatas*, need not be played in their entirety. See Gregorio Strozzi's annotation to his *Toccate di Passacagli*.

libro di Toccate: first part in B-flat in a dancing 6/4, second part in g minor in a calmer 3/2 with chromaticism).

These are the most common *passaggi* in other tones:

- in major: from I to the VI degree, and from I to V.
- in minor: I-III, I-IV, and I-V.

Modulations up a fourth are also common, even more than once in the same composition. They are used in both major and minor, and they create a sort of big harmonic *crescendo* throughout the piece. Storace's *passacaglio* in f minor has the following tonal scheme, with original affect indications: f minor – b-flat minor (*grave*) - E-flat major (*allegro*), while his ciaccona in C major: C major – F major – B-flat major – C major. Here follows the passage from B-flat to C:



Example 10

I leave the closing statement to Spiridionis, who hopes to motivate his readers to assiduous study by these words:

Hoc secretum, si perfecte penetraveris, nullo quasi negotio excellentissimus componista evadere, ac inventis millena ac millena addere poteris (SPIRIDIONIS 2008, p.85).¹⁰

¹⁰ The Latin verb *componere* can be translated as *to combine*, which matches the aim of Spiridionis' work, rather than as *to compose*. The latter, in fact, recalls written music more than improvised. *Componista*, with reference to the didactic tradition presented here, can be also an improviser, who does not create his solutions from nothing, but makes reference to a personal repertory of formulas, more or less elaborated, that are put together during improvisation. Therefore I suggest translating thus: «If you are able to penetrate this secret in depth, you will become with small effort an excellent expert of combination, and you will be able to add thousands of other [ideas]».

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