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**«Con varietà di bei contraponti render vaga la melodia»**

**The Practice of Basso Continuo with the Brain and the Hands. A panel discussion with Edoardo Bellotti, Nicola Cumer, Thérèse de Goede, Mara Galassi, and Pietro Prosser**

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§ La tavola rotonda sull'improvvisazione e il basso continuo ha preso le mosse dalla discussione delle testimonianze di Agazzari e Gasparini. I partecipanti hanno considerato diversi aspetti: problemi contrappuntistici nella realizzazione del continuo, differenza fra strumenti di fondamento e di ornamento, ruolo degli strumenti a pizzico in confronto con le tastiera e i diversi metodi didattici.

§ The panel discussion on improvisation and basso continuo originated from the evaluation of Agazzari's and Gasparini's sources. The panelists took into consideration different aspects: contrapuntal issues in the realization, difference between foundation- and ornamentation-instruments, the role of plucked instruments in comparison with keyboard, and teaching methods.

### Contrapuntal issues in the continuo

The realization of *basso continuo*, once performers have rejected the habit of using the versions established by editors (a tendency that nevertheless persists in certain study environments) compels a player to use so-called historically informed performance practice. It is also one of the most commonly used examples to help an ordinary concert goer understand the performer's more complex compositional approach to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century music in comparison to the challenge of the musician who interprets a fully written-out page of music from a later period.

The discourse about continuo is articulated in several layers. On one side, there is the evident need of filling the harmony; on the other, the search for a beautiful rendition, musically attractive and technically correct, achieved by shaping melodic lines that can integrate well with the written composition. Furthermore, one has to consider the problem of the *concertazione*, i.e. the choice and the coordination of the different musical components that realize the continuo.

The first issue (the chords), as anybody who deals professionally with *continuo* knows, is not so cumbersome. Harmonization is a relatively simple process, above all in a system in which the harmonic and tonal paths are not particularly bold. Moreover, a reliable and significant group of treatises over the years tend to focus on the aspects related to the realization of the chords. It is less easy to find instructions about the style to adopt in the realization or about the interaction of the different instruments in the *continuo* group. This is the aspect more related to the theme of our conference, since it calls for the ability to participate in the *concerto* extemporaneously, listening carefully to the other musicians, and to compose, more or less *alla mente* (mentally), parts that integrate into the whole.

One problem is obviously the reconstruction of a practice that is historically plausible on the basis of treatises and witnesses of the time; another problem is dealing with the practices in use nowadays. The continuo player, assured by a tradition of evaluation of the sources and practice over many decades, given his possible portfolio of historical competence, is nevertheless placed in a context quite different from that of the past centuries, and he is obliged to face very concrete problems that can influence his choices.

The suggestion for this panel discussion is therefore to begin by thinking about two sources that frame the seventeenth century: the treatise by Agostino Agazzari (1607) and the *Cantate* op. 1 by Francesco Gasparini (1695). This will assist the discussion of how the continuo players, from diverse perspectives of different instruments, interpret their role today.

Agazzari's treatise, *Del suonar sopra il basso con tutti li strumenti* (Siena 1607) is contemporary with Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, and it reflects Monteverdi's aesthetics by placing the poetic text at the center of musical choices, and by adhering convincingly to the *seconda prattica*. The text of the treatise reflects

the orchestral world of the *Orfeo*, which is composite and variegated, suggesting the realization of the continuo with a multiplicity of instruments which only a short time later had largely fallen out of use (lyrone, cittern, etc.).

The principles highlighted by Agazzari, nevertheless, survived in essence for a longer time. They can be summarized in the following points:

1. Division of the instruments into two classes, one providing foundation, which supports the harmony, and the other comprised of the instruments providing ornament, which embellish the musical discourse by dialoguing in counterpoint with the rest of the *concerto*.
2. Evaluation of the context as the basic criterion for the choices. The division mentioned above is due not only to the characteristics of the instruments (not all of them can work as a foundation), but also to the configuration of the *concerto*. The instruments that can carry out both the functions switch from one to the other in accordance with the balance of the ensemble.
3. When one or more instruments of ornamentation are present, the instrument providing the foundation must limit itself to the harmonic function, freeing the space for the other/others to improvise graceful lines.
4. Knowledge of counterpoint is necessary for the person playing ornamentation instruments, but not for those playing foundation instruments; those making the foundation have a less complex musical task.
5. Each instrument has a specific timbre and a precise musical function.
6. It is redundant for everyone to do the same thing.

Agazzari's exposition is very clear and practical. Nowadays we would say it is commonsensical. It is also applicable with relative ease to today's practice, because the general principles are more important than a set of fixed rules.

One of the problems in the study of *basso continuo* is that treatises after Agazzari tend to forget his arguments and deal mostly with the rules for realizing chords. They become more a manual for practical harmonization than one on the stylistic principles of continuo playing. At this point there is a growing tendency to place the organ or the harpsichord at the center of the discourse. For this reason, a century later, the reference manual will be *L'Armonico pratico al cimbalo* by Francesco Gasparini.

Rather than focusing on the 1708 treatise (better known than Agazzari's) I think it is more relevant to consider the anthology of cantatas that Gasparini published as opus 1 in Rome in 1695. In this work he makes explicit the possibility of a continuo realization strongly profiled as melody, to be played by the right hand at the harpsichord, by the violoncello, or by the archlute, opening up a window on a performance practice probably more widespread than is generally recognized today. This practice would utilize the characteristics of the different instruments in the continuo realization rather than perpetrate the trivial collective doubling of the same elements. In Gasparini's words:

To the lovers of music [...] in certain arias you shall find two basses for your convenience, or ease in accompanying; since it was necessary to set the music for printing, I was not totally capable of rendering my intention. Therefore where you find some treble clefs above the bass line, these notes will be played by the right hand as in a tablature. There the archlute or the violoncello could also play the notes just as well.

I would like to add another but nevertheless interesting small detail. For the bass line, the historical evidence from the few single parts outside the complete scores shows a clear distinction between the role of the contra-bass/violone and that of the keyboard instruments or the violoncello. The violone is not used solely for doubling the bass line, but also for highlighting the most salient notes, avoiding in this way the creation of a sound carpet rich in timbre but confused (more Wagnerian than Baroque), while emphasizing its own capacity to provide depth to the chords calling for it, as Agazzari prescribes in his description of the violone.

As for adherence to the historical sources, I believe that the arc that can be traced between Agazzari and Gasparini with the help of the treatises and the other historical evidence is sufficiently solid to allow us to grasp something about the way a continuo group could have worked in an Italian environment during the Seicento. The contexts in which today's performers study, live, and work, albeit historically informed, are nevertheless very distant from those of the seventeenth century. The following are some of their characteristics:

1. an experience of listening and studying in different and sometimes remote areas from those in which the Baroque music will be performed.
2. the necessity of re-establishing the practice of playing *in concerto* improvising, coming from a classical tradition in which the written score was the most important element.
3. familiarity with a much wider repertoire geographically and chronologically, in comparison to musicians of the seventeenth century.
4. the use of instruments that, even though they are said to be 'original', actually are a modern synthesis of historical features, working well for the person playing, but not corresponding to any existing historical model.
5. the confrontation with a discographic market which is increasingly imposing models, fashions, and sounds.
6. performance situations, especially with reference to spaces and audiences, that are very different from those of past centuries.

Given this situation, every continuo player, according to the instrument he is playing, his experience and his inclinations, starts producing the continuo probably in an autonomous way, and with a particular specificity. This is illustrated in our panel by musicians from different backgrounds and, above all, with different experiences with the instruments used for the continuo. I would like to start the discussion with a couple of questions:

1. The historical sources seem to be quite clear about the need not to enlarge the continuo section simply by considering the timbre possibilities, but to be aware of the relationship with the voices (*corpo delle voci*), and to consider the characteristics of all the instruments for achieving an interesting result, not so much for the color, but for the compositional relationship between the parts. From this perspective, a predominant continuo function is not always given to the organ or the harpsichord. If there are other instruments, the keyboards should not take priority. Is this true in current practice?
2. How much is knowledge of strict counterpoint useful for the formation and experience of a continuo player? We know that very often the composers defended the presence of mistakes in the voice leading, as parallel fifths or octaves, even in the written music, when these procedures allowed for a better fluidity in the general musical discourse. And how does the performer think about counterpoint while playing continuo?
3. Since continuo realization even today implies a particular skill in linking the brain with the hands, I would ask whether in the ordinary practice of continuo we can really talk about improvisation, on the basis of patterns learned in advance and automatically absorbed through practice. How widespread, on the other hand, is the habit of preparing the continuo by writing it down, especially if one would like to give a more complex realization? If this tendency is common, can it influence the taste of the listener to the point of influencing the market for continuo players?

### **The specificity of plucked instruments**

In the first part of the discussion, Pietro Prosser (lutist) and Mara Galassi (harpist) highlighted the specificity of plucked instruments and their treatment as continuo instruments. They started from very pragmatic considerations that, nevertheless, have a strong influence in the everyday life of a continuo player.

Lute and harp differ from keyboard instruments in the necessity of adjusting their parts exactly in order to be able play without turning pages. Concerning the lute the habit of reading from intabulation has also to be considered. Lute-players have always prepared their parts, and this can explain the lack of specific sources, which probably stayed in private possession and, therefore, were doomed to dispersion over the centuries.

Prosser described some aspects related to the organological complexity of the lute. The term itself indicates a whole family, and every repertoire, epoch, and geographic area would call for a specific choice within that large group. Practical reasons (the most trivial being the availability of an extra-seat on the

aircraft) often induce modern players to different decisions, sometimes based on criteria external to the repertoire to be performed. Each instrument (i.e. archlute, theorbo, calichon, guitar) has its own structure, a different number of string choirs, often double or octave strings, and a specific tuning. In the case of the theorbo or the guitar, the tuning system might be re-entrant, modifying both the compass of the instrument and the way of thinking about musical lines and continuo. The theorbo, as an example, is a very low instrument, while the guitar has a tuning re-entrant in the middle range (with the fifth order higher than the fourth) that makes the instrument higher, and often makes it difficult to have the fundamental of the chord in the bass. As a consequence the guitar can not be a foundation instrument for the harmony. Furthermore, instruments with sympathetic strings, like the theorbo, do not have a complete chromatic scale in the bass.

All this variety has strong implications when one thinks about a contrapuntal realization of the basso continuo. The presence of double or octave choirs of strings (for the archlute generally in the fifth order, while the modern theorbo, simplifying historical reality, is played normally with single strings) modifies deeply the relationship between the written (or thought) note, the one played, and the one which is actually perceived. The continuo realization has to take into account the presence of octave strings and their sounding dynamics: it is more like a high note doubled an octave lower, than a low note that is lightened by the sounding of a higher octave; the opposite of the effect of the organ. There is also a historically relevant question to solve. Continuo treatises were intended for keyboard players and this is a problem for lute and harp players. Practically, they lack specific historical sources; conceptually the reason for such a situation is not clear at all. It might be just a practical reason, since the representation of counterpoint is more intuitive in a keyboard score; or must one believe in the 'superiority' of the keyboard in the science of counterpoint?

Mara Galassi brought into the discussion the importance of diapason. For the harp of the seventeenth century a huge variety of pitches existed, from A at 390 Hz typical of Roman harps, to A at 460 Hz of Venetian instruments: this is a difference of a third, with intermediate possibilities. Variations in length and tension of the strings, caused by different pitch, have a great influence on the choice and organization of counterpoint. The result will be more or less clear depending also on the register in which it is played. Also for the harps there is an issue related to the different tuning systems, according to period and geographic area (in C, in F, and in Handel's era also in G, in D, and in B-flat). This is an element of the greatest practical importance when one has to realize the continuo.

**The *concertazione* in larger compositions, and the relationship between keyboard and plucked instruments.**

The conversation with Prosser and Galassi continued with the presence of plucked instruments in the orchestra and the *concertazione* of continuo. An important reference is (DONI 1974), who gives a lively image of the Roman musical scene in the early Seicento. He mentions the harp many times, offering details about performance practice. His preference for this instrument over the harpsichord is openly stated with regard to scenic music. Today, on the contrary, the needs of plucked instruments are subordinated to the keyboard. It is very rare to work at a real *concertazione*: plucked instruments are asked to be there, but without ‘disturbing’ the work of the keyboard.

The orchestration is instead essential, as is the analysis of the score, in order to understand how to divide the tasks and what sort of basses to use for the realization. This would avoid the possibility that all the instruments play the same line together. Some help can be found in pieces with precise instrumentation. A good example is the *Sinfonia* by Lelio Colista for plucked instruments. This composition is transcribed in (KIRCHER 1970, p. 484) and its parts are distributed as follows:

*Canto* = Citara;  
*Canto secondo e Alto* = lutes;  
*Tenore primo e secondo* = tiorbe;  
*Basso* = harp.

This example provides some hints on how to distribute the parts within a larger continuo consort. The harp works as the foundation, because it is the lowest instrument, having very long bass strings and sounding chromatically to the bottom note.

Another useful example is the opening *Sinfonia* from Landi’s *Sant’Alessio* (LANDI 1970). There the difference of function between the harpsichord (with its “*basso continuo per i gravicembali*”) and the group of harp, lute, theorbo, and cittern that have an independent bass line is very clear. Their function is not a mere ornamentation of the harpsichord line. Quite often they reinforce the entries of the other parts, the subjects of imitation, or other interesting motives, making thus an important contribution to the clarity of the structure in a larger ensemble. Other examples can be found in the repertoire of sonatas with two basses, in which one is simple and the other ornamented.

In general one can see in the repertoire a standard way of realizing the continuo, in which the harpsichord simply plays a foundation part and the task of ornamenting and highlighting the structural elements of the polyphony is a prerogative of the other instruments in the continuo group. When there is a single ornamented bass line, the correct procedure ought be to sketch a simpler line for the bass and to give the plucked instruments the ornamentation. Nowadays the tendency is rather the contrary: ask everybody to play chords, on top of which the harpsichordists display their virtuosity.

Edoardo Bellotti (organist) confirmed that also in the repertoire of Heinrich Schütz the organ is explicitly required to play the simple bass, while the violone can have parts more ornamented and complex. When other instruments are lacking, Praetorius suggests a differentiation of the functions between pedal and manuals, or between the two hands. It is clear that, when there are other instruments available, the organ should realize a very simple continuo, as a foundation, while the rest (ornamentation and counterpoints) is reserved for the other accompanying instruments.

Thérèse de Goede (harpsichordist) stressed that the analysis of the repertoire confirms a distinction between ornamentation and foundation. Without this clarification a great abundance of instruments playing the continuo turns into that 'soup' that (AGAZZARI 1979) warns players to avoid. A large continuo section has to be structured by extracting the main bass line from the more ornamented one, and by distinguishing the functions of the different instruments.

Nicola Cumer (harpsichordist) suggested that the contemporary tendency of keyboard players to act as the main character in the continuo is due to the lack of preparation of other instrumentalists, who are not yet able to do what Agazzari prescribed, probably because of our modern education system. At the same time budget limitations often do not allow a continuo section as rich as the one described by Agazzari. Also the discographic market, which is nowadays very powerful and often determines musical choices, has a great influence. An ample continuo section, playing in a contrapuntally rich way, would call for more rehearsals and longer recording sessions, not to mention more cuts during the editing. All these elements mean high costs, which are not thought to be affordable.

Another factor to take into account is the standardization of instruments. This aspect is slowly changing, with the construction of more and more different models, but so far the tendency is to have few types and to use them for everything.

The centrality of keyboard instruments in the present-day realization of continuo can be explained on one hand by the tradition that makes the organist an authority among the players and that sees church music as the most contrapuntally refined, on the other hand by the visual immediacy of the counterpoint on the keyboard. One should be also take into consideration the impossibility of having the same counterpoint on other instruments. For example it is impossible on the theorbo.

### **The polyphonic continuo and the function of structural clarity**

Thérèse de Goede stressed the necessity of thinking more deeply about complementarity of the voices and instruments. This is demonstrated by many examples, and has to do also with an interesting factor concerning timbre. It is



particularly relevant if one cares about the differences in color in the circulation or anticipation of motives in between the parts. In this regard, the prescription of not doubling the melody ought not to be taken as absolute, especially in the case of a continuo that cares about functional distinctions and different registers of the instruments in relation to the polyphonic texture of the composition. What is valid for solo music, i.e. to stay away from the melody and not to interfere with it, might not be true when dealing with a more complex polyphony, where indeed the doubling of voices by the instruments can have an important structural function.

Mara Galassi claimed that if instruments like the citara or the violin are involved in the continuo realization, not overlapping with the chant is simply impossible. There is also evidence, once again in (DONI 1974), about the possibility that the violins improvise motives that can reinforce the meaning of the words. Also the *Lamento d'Arianna* in the stage version was accompanied in its entirety by violins. If we had it, it would be a good example of how to use violins in the *stile rappresentativo*.

### **The realization of the continuo on the organ**

Answering a question by Massimiliano Guido, Edoardo Bellotti highlighted some contradictions in the modern curriculum of a musician. The continuo player is usually trained in the tonal-harmonic structures of the eighteenth century (Rameau). To go backward to Monteverdi, Luzzaschi, or Landi with such a preparation is very difficult, because the rules of harmony that they have been taught do not work in that context. It would be more useful to teach from a historical perspective, starting from what is found in sources. The realization of continuo on the organ calls for a totally different approach in comparison with the harpsichord. The choice of the notes to play depends also on the kind of organ. This element is of crucial importance, but the present market has imposed everywhere the use of small basket[!]-organs, small chamber instruments that were never used except in very specific situations. To apply the same sound concept indiscriminately to all the repertoire is a gross mistake, and it becomes ridiculous when such an instrument is used, for example, in the St. Matthew Passion, which calls for another dimension of sound.

This kind of organ entered the scene in the 1950s and 60s as an alternative to the big romantic German organs, seen as inadequate for [unsuited to?] ancient music. Nevertheless, they are not a good solution because they are totally inadequate for a contrapuntal realization, and do not correspond to a historical Italian model. In Frescobaldi's and also Corelli's time, the continuo was played with a principal; an Italian principal, not the romantic German one, but still a principal, with a rich and round tone.

The organ world is far from uniform: there are many differences between instruments, and the influence of such a complexity on the continuo is

significant, especially in dealing with music alternating *solos* and *tutti*. A trivial but quite common possibility is to always play full chords. A contrapuntal realization in three voices is more interesting, more difficult to elaborate, but more well-thought. This is also the direction that teaching should follow, instead of insisting on four-part chords.

In comparison with what we read in the treatises, it seems that nowadays we play continuo on the organ and the harpsichord in the opposite way. All the theoreticians suggest accompanying the soloists with a few notes, being careful not to cover and to disturb them; when one is accompanying a big ensemble as a double choir, then the organist has to be very present. Today we hear a display of virtuosity in sonatas a due or a tre, and on the contrary a fastidious avoidance of elaboration in music for a larger ensemble. This tendency has to be radically changed.

The teaching perspective also has to be modified: it would be better to start with counterpoint and come later to tonal harmony, because the reverse generates many misunderstandings. A realization in two or three parts would allow the player to do much more, and with greater freedom in comparison to the constraint of thinking a specific chord on a determined bass.

### **The placement of instruments**

It is moreover useful to think about the placement of the organ in relation to the church's acoustics and the function of the instrument. In this regard there is a great difference between Lutheran and Catholic contexts. In Lutheran churches the organ accompanies the congregation and therefore has a (Rück)positive placed closer to the people. In Catholic churches the organist does not have to accompany the faithful, but a professional choir, so the positive is placed in the balcony. There are also geographical differences to take into consideration, even within a single area. In the case of Italy there may be more than one organ, and the same applies to balconies. It is necessary to develop the skill of *cantar lontano* (to sing from far way), as they did in the past, looking at a conductor or listening to each other.

It would be very useful to be able to reconstruct the historical placements of the vocalists and instrumental groups as well, in order to return to the music its original aural character. Unfortunately, many conductors are not willing to experiment and they opt for safer solutions, apparently more comfortable (like playing all together in front of the main altar) but in reality totally wrong for the music's sake, especially in the polychoral repertoire.

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