

# AN INTRODUCTION TO BAROQUE ORNAMENTATION

by Kenneth Wollitz

Adapted from an article of the same name by Mr. Wollitz in *American Recorder* Vol. VII, no. 1 (Winter 1966), pp. 4 to 10. Much of this material is also included in Chapter 3 of *The Recorder Book* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

In spite of variations in style from early to late Baroque, and from one part of Europe to another, there was a small vocabulary of specific ornaments which were employed rather consistently throughout most of Europe during the middle and late Baroque, *i.e.*, from approximately the last two decades of the 17th century through the first half of the 18th century. It was during those years that most of the solo literature for the recorder was composed.

A few words about the historical context in which these ornaments were used may be helpful. During the 17th century, a strong polarity developed in European musical style, the two poles being France and Italy. Ornamental practice within the two styles varied greatly. The French employed a vocabulary of “essential graces” (*agréments*), which were exceedingly explicit both in form and function. Rules were given for the performance of a specific ornament on almost every note. (The dominant ornament was the long appoggiatura, which, as will be explained later, usually functioned to alter the harmony.) The *agréments* were later adopted by the rest of Europe but were not applied in other countries with the same rigor as in France. Italian ornamentation, by contrast, was very free, florid, improvisational, and essentially melodic, *i.e.*, it did not affect the harmony. One element is especially relevant: the Italians never notated their ornaments. To do so would have been contrary to their conception of spontaneous and improvisatory embellishment. That element of Italian ornamentation was later adopted in other parts of Europe. Baroque sonatas reveal the Italian origin of their form in that the slow movements are presented in the barest possible notation in order to leave the field free for the performer’s imagination.

This chapter of the Consort Handbook will be devoted only to the *agréments*. For detailed coverage of Italian ornamentation, which would enhance the performance of slow movements in Baroque sonatas, please consult references in the bibliography.

Nomenclature for the *agréments*, still not completely standardized among the modern authorities, was very inconsistent in the 17th and 18th centuries. Each ornament will be referred to here as much as possible by its most common name. The signs met in modern editions will be mentioned as each ornament is presented. A small cross above a note can indicate any one of a number of ornaments. (For complete lists of signs and historical terms, as well as an especially comprehensive system of rationalized nomenclature, Donington’s *Interpretation of Early Music*, included in the bibliography, is recommended.)

Several technical terms to be used here need a brief explanation. The term “main note” refers to the note which is to receive an ornament, i.e., the written note as it stands unadorned in the music. The upper auxiliary is the note one diatonic step above the main note, and the lower auxiliary is the note one diatonic step below the main note. A diatonic step is either a whole or half tone depending upon the musical context.

### **The Long Appoggiatura**

The long appoggiatura is the standard Baroque appoggiatura. Its function is to alter the written harmony by replacing a consonant note momentarily with a dissonant note, usually one step above or below. The dissonance is relieved when the appoggiatura is slurred onto its main note. It is not introduced before the main note but rather takes time from that note’s beginning. The appoggiatura is stressed, and the main note, when it is finally heard, is played more quietly. This ornament provided the Baroque composer and performer with a means of introducing expressive dissonances. Its usual notation in modern editions is a small note preceding the main note (Ex. 1a & 1b). The cross symbol can also be taken to mean an appoggiatura if the context is appropriate, and the ornament may be introduced when there is no sign at all.

The length of the long appoggiatura can be varied according to the wishes of the performer, but some helpful rules have been given. The long appoggiatura usually takes:

- A) One-half of a note which is subdivided into two parts (Ex. 1a & 1b).
- B) Two-thirds of a dotted note, *i.e.*, a note that is subdivided into three parts (Ex. 1c).
- C) All of a note before a rest, the main note then sounding in place of the rest (Ex. 1d).
- D) All of a note which is tied to another note of the same pitch (Ex. 1e).

Ex. 1a                      b                      c

performed

performed

Certain contexts require departure from these rules. The appoggiatura should resolve to its main note before the harmony changes in order not to lose its character as a dissonance, and it might, therefore, have to move to its main note sooner than the rules above would indicate. An unusually long note may also take a somewhat shorter appoggiatura than these rules indicate. Generally, however, the longer the dissonance is sustained, the greater the expressiveness of the ornament.

If there is no sign indicating whether the main note is to receive the appoggiatura from above or from below (*i.e.*, if the sign is merely a small cross), the following rules may be safely applied:

- A) An appoggiatura from above is used if the preceding note is higher than the main note. (Such an appoggiatura may sometimes proceed to its main note by leap, as in Ex. 1f. In that case, it should be prepared, *i.e.*, preceded by a note on the same pitch.)
- B) An appoggiatura from below is used only if the main note is preceded by the note one step below.

Ex. 1f                      performed

Appoggiaturas can be introduced quite freely by the player when no sign is present. The following are some likely contexts:

- A) If the musical line proceeds entirely in consonant notes, appoggiaturas may be played on the longer notes to liven things up a bit.
- B) A long consonant note can be made more interesting if begun with an appoggiatura. This never applies, however, to long notes which begin a piece or a section of fresh thematic material.
- C) An appoggiatura can always take the place of a trill except at cadences. This arrangement between appoggiaturas and trills is reciprocal, as will be shown later, in the section on trills.

### **The Short Appoggiatura**

Appoggiaturas consuming less than one-half of their main note were standard during most of the early and middle Baroque, but during the later Baroque, the long appoggiatura, with its expressive and extended dissonance, was dominant. Towards the very end of the Baroque era, short appoggiaturas reappeared. These short appoggiaturas vary in length from a quarter or a third of their main note at the maximum to the shortest possible length at the minimum. They are true appoggiaturas, nonetheless, in that they do not begin before the main note but at its beginning. Their function is not the harmony-altering one of long appoggiaturas, for their dissonance is heard too briefly to have a noticeable effect on the harmony. Rather, they impart a snapping, rhythmic accent to their main note. The quicker they are played, the crisper the accent.

Short appoggiaturas are indicated in modern editions by a tiny eighth note, or sometimes a sixteenth. Context will show whether an appoggiatura should be played long or short. Appoggiaturas in the following situations should be played short:

- A) Between two notes of the same pitch.
- B) On a note of the shortest value within a given passage.
- C) On a note which is already discordant to the harmony.
- D) On a triplet (where a long appoggiatura would confuse the rhythm).

### **The Passing Appoggiatura**

In passages of descending thirds in equal note values it was customary in later Baroque practice to “fill in the thirds” with lightly played, relatively short notes, which take their time from the preceding note and are slurred to the following note (Ex. 2b). These are not true appoggiaturas since they come *before* the note to which they are attached and thus do not alter the harmony. Rather, their function is to make the melodic line sweeter and more flowing. Their notation, however, is the same as for a regular appoggiatura from above, a small note to the left of the main note and one step higher (Ex. 2a). Therefore, you must decide by context which ornament is intended.



### The Trill

A trill is a repeated alternation between a main note and its upper auxiliary. Modern trills generally begin on the main note. Baroque trills never do because essentially they are appoggiaturas from above which have an ornamental resolution to their main note instead of simply slurring to it. Like the long appoggiatura, their purpose is to replace a consonant note with a dissonance, which is to be stressed and so sustained as to create an actual change in the written harmony. This alteration is particularly employed in the penultimate strong beat before a cadence, and indeed, in such a context, the performance of a cadential trill is obligatory whether the note is so marked or not. The note is often unmarked since this practice was universally understood by the Baroque performer. Signs indicating a trill include a little zig-zag line, the letter “tr” or simply “t,” and the ubiquitous small cross.

The cadential trill may be considered to have three elements: preparation, beats, and termination. The preparation is the most important element since it achieves the trill’s function of expressively altering the harmony. Therefore, the trill always begins with the upper auxiliary, which sounds on the downbeat of the main note—never before—and is emphasized. The length of the preparation may vary a good deal. It can be held longer at the cadences of slow movements, consuming half or more of the main note’s value. As with the long appoggiatura,

the longer it is sustained, the greater the expressiveness. The preparation is always slurred together with its main note and the ensuing beats.

The beats are the alternation between the main note and its auxiliary. The number and speed depend on the length of the main note, the tempo, and the expressive intentions of the performer. Speed expresses brilliance and is appropriate for a trill within an allegro movement. In a slow movement the beats should be slower and more languorous.

The trill is terminated by either a turn (Ex. 3b) or an anticipation (Ex. 3c). Either is acceptable unless the composer's notation indicates one or the other. The turn is indicated by a dotted main note followed by two short notes (dotted half-note and two eighths, dotted quarter and two sixteenths, etc.) or by an undotted main note followed by a pair of tiny "grace notes." Examples 3d and 3e show these notations. The two final notes of the turn are generally played at the same speed as the preceding beats. Therefore, if they are written out (as the two sixteenth notes are in Ex. 3d), the rhythm of the notation is deceptive, usually showing longer note values than are actually played. The termination is always slurred together with the preceding beats and preparation. Example 3b shows an approximate performance of a trill terminated by a turn.

The termination by a note of anticipation is indicated when the main note is dotted and followed by a single short note (dotted half and quarter, dotted quarter and eighth, etc. See Ex. 3f). The beats of the trill end on the main note, which is slightly held. An instant of silence then intervenes (*silence d'articulation*) before the anticipation, which is generally played as a very short note separated from the final cadence note. The shorter and sharper it is played, the more "kick" it imparts to the final cadence note. Again, the notational convention indicating this termination does not correspond to the note's actual length. Example 3c shows a possible performance of a trill terminated by an anticipation.

Often, notes receiving cadential trills are preceded by a note one step above, which is identical with the first note of the trill. The trill, nonetheless, begins on the upper auxiliary, the note being simply rearticulated. Another possibility is to connect this preceding note to the upper auxiliary by a tie, thus giving a trill with a particularly long preparation. A tie written in the music indicates this practice (see Ex. 3g and 3h). Another way of indicating preparation is a tiny note for the appoggiatura placed before the main note (Ex. 3i).

Ex. 3a

Trills are indicated by *tr.* above notes. Examples include: a trill on a note (a), a trill on a note with a wavy line underneath (b), a trill on a note with a wavy line underneath (c), a trill on a note (d), a trill on a note with a wavy line underneath (e), a trill on a note (f), a trill on a note (g), a trill on a note (h), and a trill on a note (i).

It should be realized that the rhythmic contour of the examples given above is only schematic. Once the basic form of the ornament is understood, its details may be varied according to the performer's wishes. The length and emphasis of the preparation; the number, speed, and rhythm of the beats; and the rhythm, articulation, and even the form of the termination—all of these components—can be played with a freedom which allows endless changes of expression and meaning. Conceived in this way, the “obligatory” cadential trill is always as fresh and as subtle as the imagination of the player.

Trills without termination may occur in many contexts:

- A) On relatively short notes, particularly within a fast movement.
- B) On the second of two repeated notes, especially if the second is on a strong beat.
- C) Replacing the simple appoggiatura from above.
- D) On the third, fifth, seventh, etc. notes of a descending scale passage: in other words, on any of the downbeat notes except the initial one (Ex. 4).

Trills for contexts A, B, and D are often very short, no more than four notes. They all begin on their upper auxiliary and provide sparkle, brilliance, rhythmic emphasis, and increased melodic interest. C is simply a slightly elaborated appoggiatura from above. It is a graceful effect when tempo and the main note's length allow time for it. When a descending scale passage with trills (Ex. 4) is moving at a lively clip, there is no time to articulate the upbeat notes and the upper auxiliaries of the ensuing trilled notes. They can thus be connected with ties, as shown below.



### The Mordent

The mordent is a rapid movement from the main note to its lower auxiliary and back again. It is played on the beat of the main note and is accented. Its function is to give emphasis to the main note. Therefore, it should be played very sharply and quickly. The sign for the mordent is given in Ex. 5; the small cross may also be interpreted as a mordent. Mordents are effective on notes approached from below by step or leap but are less effective when approached from above by a leap; they are never played on notes approached by step from above.



### The Turn

The most common Baroque turn is the upper turn consisting of four equal notes: the upper auxiliary, the main note, the lower auxiliary, and again the main note. They are all slurred (Ex. 6a). The first note of the turn receives the accent and behaves like a trill in replacing a consonance by a dissonance. Thus, the upper turn can be used freely in place of a trill on notes which are too short to allow the more elaborate form of the trill to be clearly executed.

The lower turn begins on the lower auxiliary, which is accented, then moves to the main note, the upper auxiliary, and back to the main note (Ex. 6b). The lower turn is much less frequent than the upper turn. The sign for both these ornaments is the same, so the choice must be decided upon by the performer from the context.

If, however, the sign is placed slightly to the right of the main note (Ex. 6c), the main note is to be sounded before beginning the turn. In this situation, it is the main note which receives the accent, and the turn becomes merely a bit of increased melodic activity as the main note passes to the following note. Again, a slur connects all the notes. If the main note is dotted, an interpretation as in Ex. 6d can be used. The rhythmic interpretation of these melodic and unstressed turns can be greatly varied. Since almost every writer resorts to a different

structure to notate them, this suggests that their performance must have been very free.

**Ex. 6 a** **performed**

**a** **b** **c** **d**

### The Slide

The slide consists of a run of two consecutive notes beginning a third above or below the main note. They are slightly accented, quickly played, and are slurred to the main note. They take their time from the beginning of the main note, consuming approximately half of undotted notes and a third of dotted ones. The slide is usually notated by two tiny notes on the actual pitches to be played (Ex. 7). This graceful ornament can be introduced almost anywhere and gives a mild accent to the main note. The more quickly it is played, the stronger the accent.

**Ex. 7** **performed**

**a** **b** **c** **d**

### The Port de Voix

The *port de voix* (Ex. 8) is a compound ornament combining an appoggiatura from below with a mordent. The appoggiatura follows the normal rules regarding its length. This combination was so common, especially in France, that some writers feel that any appoggiatura from below should be followed by a mordent in performing Baroque music. This is an exaggeration, but certainly any appoggiatura from below can be so elaborated.

Ex. 8



### The Double Cadence

The double cadence is a compound ornament consisting of a cadential trill preceded by a dotted note, which takes a turn, and sometimes a mordent as well. This is a standard ornament at important cadences which display a pair of dotted notes. It is presented by different writers with a great variety of rhythmic schemes. One possibility is given in Ex. 9.

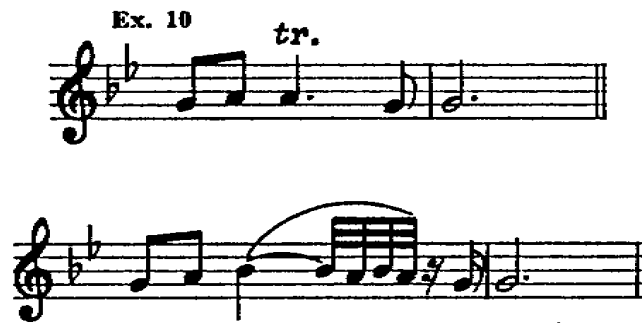


### Conclusion

The preceding descriptions demonstrate what precise entities these *agréments* were, clearly defined in both form and function. However, every detail of the simplest or most elaborate ornament can be varied in rhythm or stress, and even the smallest variation can bring a subtle change of expression and meaning. Baroque ornaments are as flexible as the player who performs them.

Further variety can be obtained by interchanging ornaments which perform analogous functions. For example, the upper turn, the trill without termination, and the trill with termination are all members of the same family, whose prototype is the upper appoggiatura, and to some degree they may be thought of as increasingly elaborate versions of that basic form. A similar relationship exists between the appoggiatura from below, the *port de voix*, and the lower turn. The substitution of one ornament for another can greatly change the expression of a passage.

There are other reasons for altering or substituting ornaments. Quantz suggests that the size and resonance of a room should affect the speed of a trill. (A strong resonance will blur a fast trill.) Higher, more clearly speaking notes can take faster and more brilliantly performed ornaments, which would sound indistinct and garbled in the quieter low register. In addition, alteration can solve otherwise impossible technical problems such as the trill between low A and B-flat on the alto recorder. This trill is repeatedly demanded at cadences in the key of G minor. A possible solution is to extend the preparation and curtail the beats to a minimum of two (Ex. 10).



Some general suggestions by Quantz and other writers will conclude this discussion. Ornaments should not be introduced at the beginning of a piece. A melody must first be heard unadorned if the embellishment is to be fully appreciated. A corollary to this rule is that in sequential patterns the ornamentation increases as the repetitions continue. One should never ornament the first phrase and leave subsequent repetitions plain. At the very least, they should receive the same ornamentation. Ornaments provide drama, increase melodic activity, and heighten expression. If they are sensitively employed in relation to the music's structure, they contribute immeasurably to a vibrant and meaningful performance.

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