

# ORNAMENTATION FOR CONSORT PLAYERS FIRST STEPS

by Peter Seibert

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Can you imagine what it is like to play the same galliard non-stop fifty times through? I found myself in that situation at the end of an early music workshop, where the faculty played for Renaissance dancing all afternoon prior to the conclusion of activities.

Ornamentation is not limited to dance music and appears to have been employed in most early music. Yet how many twentieth-century players are truly comfortable making creative additions to the printed text?

The delight we experience in playing early instruments and music may sustain us through the early process of learning our instrument, but as we progress further into the field and seek a greater understanding of how music was played, we come upon the notion that the printed text of a piece of music—i.e., the notes—may be looked on as merely a sketch of what was expected in performance. Then the going gets tough. If performances usually included more notes than were written, what were those notes?

Teachers often give the impression that if we study the treatises, we shall, with practice, be able to ornament early music more authentically. It is true that if we have time to play from Ganassi daily for a year, we will gain in knowledge and technique. The problem is that most of us, when looking at the many examples of ornamentation given in the famous treatises, see an ocean of notes that frightens us, and we assume that we must do it the same way in order to be “correct.”

I support reading and practicing from the treatises, especially if you have time and are not easily put off by what seems complex and confusing at first glance. However, when we try to emulate historical models, we often overlook the most important aspects of ornamentation: freedom of spirit and a sense of creativity. The emphasis on scholarly correctness puts many players into a frame of mind that is completely at odds with the way musicians of the Renaissance appear to have played, and *our* approach becomes in this sense *unauthentic*.

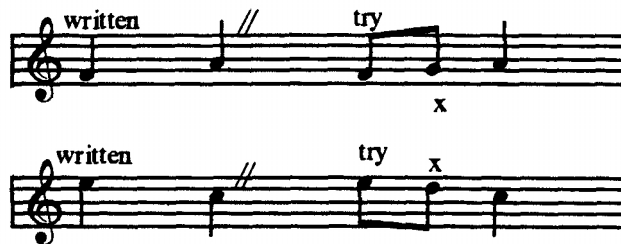
In the interest of bridging the gap between many amateur players and the great historical treatises, I offer a fundamental approach to ornamentation of music from roughly the mid-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century. The goal of this article is to provide you with material that you can use with confidence. The models are synthetic: they are based upon common practice of the period but lack the virtuoso requirements of the historical models themselves. Of course, if you use these suggestions at every opportunity, the music is likely to become monotonous. Having gotten used to employing these devices, you can then address the question of taste. What a luxury it will be for you to be able to edit

out some of your ornamental ideas!

The musical examples given here are linear because much of Renaissance ornamentation is stepwise (or scalewise) in nature, particularly as it leads into the next written note. These patterns frequently lead from weaker to stronger beats.

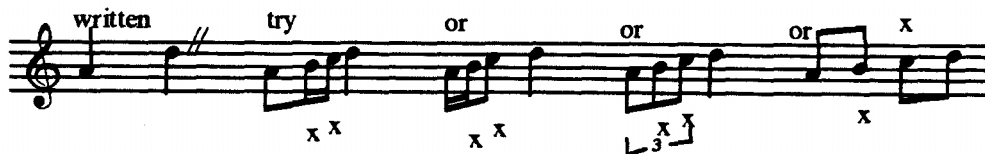
### Example 1: The interval of a third

When your part ascends or descends a third, try filling in the note in between, stealing part of the rhythmic value from the first note. The added (ornamental) note is marked by an "x."



### Example 2: The interval of a fourth

Here you can introduce two passing (ornamental) notes. The first rhythmic solution is perhaps the most obvious but the others are worth experimenting with. Observe that in the last solution the second "written" note is displaced, affecting the vertical relationship of the notes (the harmonies) written by the composer. Sometimes you will like the effect, sometimes not.



### Example 3: Larger intervals

You can also fill in fifths and larger intervals with stepwise motion, the limiting factors being your taste and technical ability.



### Example 4: Repeated pitches

I often prefer to leave repeated pitches unornamented, but you can try interposing the step above or below. See where it is leading; perhaps that will have sonic effect on what you decide to do.



### Example 5: The interval of a second: scalewise movement

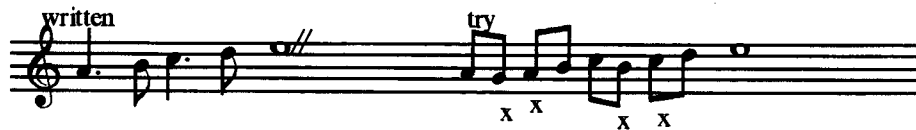
Since the written motion is already linear, you may want to ornament by introducing a note from the *opposite* direction to give energy to the written ascent or descent. On the other hand, going one note *beyond* the target note can also be effective.



### Examples 6-8: Intervals of a second when the rhythm is dotted

As in Example 5, these situations lend themselves to graceful turns in the melodic line that can create florid interest. Start your ornamentation by going in the opposite direction from the written line. Examples 6 and 7 show the figure in ascending and descending forms. Example 8 employs ideas from both Example 7 and Example 3.

#### Example 6



#### Example 7

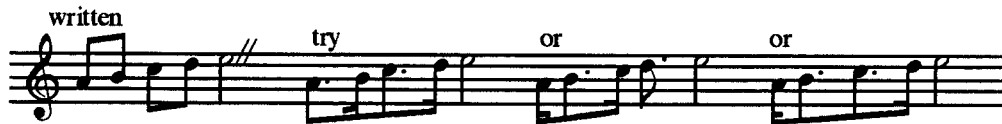


### Example 8



### Example 9: Rhythmic alteration

An approach to varying music that does not require the introduction of any new notes is the rhythmic alteration of written material. For example, in a dance piece where the parts move generally in quarter-note motion, you might change the rhythms of the eighth-note passages.



Beyond these specific contexts, ornamentation is often associated with repetition. Any repeat sign is an invitation for ornamentation, as is any recurrence of a musical motive in your part. Learning to recognize opportunities to ornament music is part of the challenge of becoming an early musician.

In general, each note within a Renaissance ornamentation pattern is tongued, in contrast to most ornaments of Baroque music, which are slurred. Whether you use simple tonguing or a compound articulation pattern depends upon your skill in this area. If you are trying to become comfortable with ornamentation, you need not inhibit yourself by simultaneously trying to employ compound tonguing. Try to learn one thing at a time.

Experiment with these ideas, and try not to be self-critical for a while. If you have been reluctant to employ ornamentation in the past, it is important to allow yourself time to be less than perfect. After all, you are teaching yourself that it is all right to ornament the music and that you are capable of it; you are not trying to achieve technical mastery or be historically exact. Not yet. That can follow as you gain confidence in your abilities and if you choose to study further.

Following the article I have applied the devices given in the examples to a 1547 branle by Attaignant. My ornamentation choices are arbitrary, and another time I might do it differently. Ornamentation regularly opens new vistas. Although I have ornamented only the top part of this dance, I could have taken the same approach with any of the four parts or even all of them at once. Try your own hand at ornamenting this melody. Your ornamentation may be more sparse than mine; at times I, too, use considerably less. The amount you use is unimportant. What matters is that you have the confidence to ornament where you want to.

Now it is time to reach for some of your own consort music and apply

some of these ideas. Take some risks!

If you are interested in more complex models of ornamentation, the London Pro Musica series *Ricercate e passaggi/Improvisation and ornamentation, 1580-1630*, offers several volumes in which highly ornamented music is printed with the original melody close at hand for comparison. Although these examples might appear overwhelming at first, they are worth careful study (and practice), and you can begin to get a feel for musical contexts in which non-linear ornamentation is appropriate and stylish.

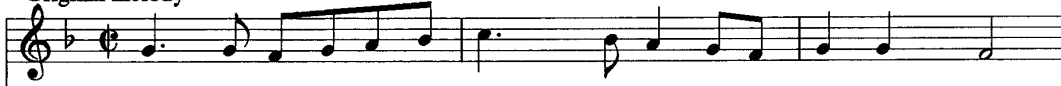
Other sources that may be of interest:

- Brown, Howard Mayer. *Embellishing 16th-Century Music*. London: Oxford University Press, 1976 (paperback).
- Ortiz, Diego. *Tratado de glosas...(1553)*. Modern edition, Kassel: Bärenreiter BA 684, 1961.
- Wollitz, Kenneth. *The Recorder Book*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982, pp. 71-82.

# Branle

Pierre Attaignant

Original melody



Ornamentation

