

RENAISSANCE ORNAMENTATION THE ART OF IMPROVISED EMBELLISHMENT

by Martha Bixler

Revised for the Junior Recorder Society

Sixteenth-century performers...actively collaborated in the process of composition... [making] crucial decisions that in later times became the exclusive privilege of composers.... [They] were expected to be able to invent new melodic material extempore; they improvised either complete musical lines or sections...of fast passage work that could be substituted for a slower-moving written melody.

—H. M. Brown in *Embellishing 16th-Century Music*.

Two general kinds of improvisation:

1. Improvising a complete musical line over a cantus firmus, a basse danse melody, an ostinato bass or out of whole cloth. According to Brown, improvisation over a cantus firmus probably constituted a part of every musician's education, and should be considered the chief sort of unwritten music before the baroque era.

2. Passages (*passaggi*) superimposed on a chanson or dance melody. These passages are sometimes called diminutions or divisions, the "breaking up" of longer note values into shorter notes. Divisions can be thought of as the breaking up of one note or, more often, dividing up the *interval* between two notes. Thus divisions become festoons of notes like lights hung among the branches of a Christmas tree, decorative and twinkling, but in no way changing the shape of the tree.

This is in fact a form of improvisation, but within limits. The performer must follow the "rules" of renaissance counterpoint, and those given in contemporary treatises. Finally he must trust his own sense of renaissance style and creativity.

First we may note the *differences* between renaissance and baroque ornamentation

1. Renaissance ornamentation is optional. Baroque ornamentation is obligatory. (Donington in *The New Grove*).

2. No signs are used for renaissance ornamentation. There *are* specific ornaments (graces), e.g.:

a. tremolo (fast trill or multiple mordent) in Ganassi (1535), Cardan (1546), Ortiz (1553), and Diruta (1593). Easy to do, says Ganassi.

b. groppo (cadential trill on the subsemitone, *i.e.*, the note below—starting on the upper note—the tonic, and ending with a turn; the first note is usually held before starting the trill) in Cardan, Dalla Casa (1584), Diruta and Caccini (1601—gruppo).

c. trillo (vibrato or repeated-note trill—Brown thinks vibrato) in Zacconi (1592), Conforto (1593), Bovicelli (1594) and Caccini. This is late 16th century.

d. finger-vibrato, too, claims Bernard Thomas, in Cardan.

3. “In baroque music you ornament the note; in renaissance music you ornament the line.” — Noah Greenberg, c. 1963.

4. Renaissance ornamentation is essentially consonant, melodic and flowing, the emotional “affect” of the music remains unchanged when ornaments or ornamental passages are added. Baroque ornamentation displaces a note, causing dissonance and affecting the harmony. The emotional quality of the passage may be changed.

5. Renaissance ornamentation is vocal. Smoothness and singability are the norm. In the baroque period vocal and instrumental practices become separated.

Some Guidelines

Renaissance style: Follow the rules of 16th-century counterpoint. Use consonances on all strong beats. Dissonances are permitted only on weak beats (exception: suspension) and any dissonance must be approached and quitted stepwise. No dissonance may last more than one beat. Stepwise motion predominates. Any skip (none over minor sixth, except octave) must be followed, for balance, immediately by a stepwise progression in the other direction. No augmented or diminished intervals; no chromatic steps. Parallel fifths and octaves are to be avoided. Keep original consonances.

From the Treatises:

1. Ganassi (1535): “Every division must begin and end with the same note as the unornamented ground.” Ganassi makes his ornaments from beat to beat (semibreve to semibreve) and ends his ornaments on the beat. If a division is used *in the place* of one (semibreve) note, it must begin and end on that note. If an *interval* between two notes is already filled in with a pattern or ground, and a new pattern is substituted, the new pattern must begin and end on the same notes as the pattern for which it is substituted. That is, the first notes and last notes of the division should be the same as in the original. This makes for smoothness and ensures that there will be no harmonic changes. (Exception: moving stepwise).

2. Ortiz (1553):

a. “The first and most perfect way [to ornament] is that the last note of the embellishment should be the same given note that was varied....The progression is the same as in the plain song.”

b. “The second way takes a little more license, because at the time of the change from one note to another, it does not progress as in the plain notes, but on the contrary.” (His examples show progressions that are always stepwise, however.)

c. “The third way is to depart from the composition and play by ear.” (Ortiz considers this method risky.)

d. “One must take the voice that is to be varied and write it out again....Go to the book and search for that formation of notes; if it is a cadence, in the cadences, and if not, in the other notes....Take that which suits [you] best and put it in place of the plain notes.”

3. **Hermann Finck (1556):** “In my opinion embellishments both can and ought to be scattered through all the voices, but not all the time...and not simultaneously in all voices...but in a fitting situation...so that one embellishment can be heard and picked out expressly and distinctly from another, yet with the composition whole and unharmed.” Finck thinks the bass should have the fewest ornaments; Coclico (1551) thinks it should have none.

4. Maffei (1562): Ensemble ornamentation

- Add ornaments primarily at cadences.
- Each voice should have only four or five ornamental passages in a piece.
- “Put ornaments on penultimate syllable (note before cadence).”
- “*Passaggi* should fall on long and never on short syllables.”
- Give way to others so two singers do not ornament simultaneously.

5. **Zacconi (1592):** Practice formulae, like scales. Perfect a relatively restricted number of formulae. Musicians who cannot perform *passaggi* well should leave them out entirely. Use the same figure from time to time. “At the start of a polyphonic vocal composition, when the other voices are silent, you should not begin with an embellishment, nor immediately after the start....Gradually unfold your ornamentation, yet do not save everything up for the end, having left the middle dry and empty.”

Modern Utterances

Imogene Horsley: “In the Renaissance. . . both vocal and instrumental virtuosity were. . . based upon skill in improvisation. . . . A performer acquired a vocabulary of melodic figures which could be introduced between the melodic intervals making up the individual lines of a composition. . . . He developed a repertory of patterns. . . .”

H. M. Brown: “Wind players normally tongued even the fastest notes. . . .”

David Hart: “Nothing should be slurred in the late 16th century.” Clarity is necessary. No *pops* as in slurring. Tonguing is a way of clarifying. Paired tonguings are like bowings (push, pull). Try to get as fast as possible moving the tongue as little as possible.

Martha Bixler: Syllables to use *teke (dege)*, *tore* and *lere (diddle and doodle)*. Practice these articulations. Also fast single-tonguing.

David Hart: Divisions have to be fast enough so that there is no illusion of harmony change, particularly in the bass. Don’t ornament inner parts in dance music except at cadences. Do in madrigals. It makes a shimmer. No glissandi (slurred runs). Use *diddle* on reeds. Don’t have top part embellishing vs. sustained lower parts. The accompaniment should be a lute or harpsichord.

Bernard Thomas: Inequality can be used. This is in Tomás de Santa María’s *Arte de taner fantasia* (1565). And there are many syncopations and elaborate rhythms in Ganassi.

Bernard Thomas: “...decorations should be metrical, moving in clearly articulated quavers and semiquavers, on the whole avoiding slides, mordents and appoggiaturas of the true Baroque style.” —from *Introduction to Twenty-one masque dances*. LPM EM2.

Peter Seibert: “These patterns frequently lead from weaker to stronger beats.”

Martha Bixler: Use passing tones, notes of anticipation, auxiliary tones and *échappées*. Imitation good. Motion started should continue. Look for repeats. A change in direction adds energy.

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