

Technique Tip: Diminutions

How to start using Renaissance ornamentation



WRITTEN BY LOBKE SPRENKELING

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Would you like to ornament the Renaissance pieces you're playing, but you don't know where to start? When we play music of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century, an important part of ornamentation is diminutions. This article will explore the basics of diminutions, plus other pre-Baroque ornaments you might play in music of that period. It will also give you practical advice on how to play pre-Baroque music.

A bit of history

In the Renaissance, florid passages were added to a melody in an improvised fashion. These ornaments are called diminutions (in Italian, *diminuzione*) or divisions. They diminish, or subdivide, the longer notes into a series of shorter notes.

Although diminutions were improvised, several authors of treatises of the time composed beautiful ornamented versions of existing pieces. These not only serve as an example of diminutions, but are also marvelous compositions on their own.

In 1535, Sylvestro Ganassi wrote *La Fontegara*, a treatise with highly complex diminutions that seem to be closer to 15th-century practice. The next one in time is the treatise by Diego Ortiz in 1553, a versatile and excellent diminution guide. Ortiz adopted a simpler and more regular style than Ganassi did with his diminutions, a fashion that continued in treatises throughout the 16th century.

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In the second half of the 16th century, Giovanni Bassano, Girolamo Dalla Casa, Riccardo Rognoni and Giovanni Luca Conforto (sometimes spelled Conforti) each published a treatise. They wrote smoothly flowing diminutions, using little rhythmic variety and employing extensive use of sequences.

From 1600 on, some important changes led to the “new style” (Italian, *stile nuovo*), bringing with it an extension of ornaments based on the already existing ones. This is the time of the first operas and the first solo or chamber instrumental forms with basso continuo (sonata, canzona, toccata, fantasia); instrumental dances also existed in the 16th century. This new style can already be observed in Giovanni Battista Bovicelli's *Regole, passaggi di musica...* of 1594, which was influenced by the Florentine Camerata and their insistence on correct and emotive declamation in vocal works. The diminutions were for the most part relegated to the penultimate syllables of the verses, where they did not obscure the meaning of the words.

In general, the ornaments of that time included more varied rhythms, so the diminutions were less predictable and less sequential than before. According to the authors of that time, if the eighth notes were sung rhythmically, they lacked grace or elegance. The search for the expression of emotions, the affect, was much more important than just adding beauty to the melody.

Authors of this new style are Giulio Caccini, Antonio Brunelli and Francesco Rognoni di Taeggio, the son of Riccardo, among others.

How to begin

The most important rule to start is that these ornaments are not slurred, but articulated. They tend to be quite fast, so it is best to use double tonguing, such as a soft *D-G* articulation or *did'l*. The ornaments should be played as if they were the original long note—that is, in a “horizontal” way that leads to the next note, without stretching beats beyond the value of the original note. What we want to do is extend the feeling of the long note by creating lots of short notes, so we must make it “sing” as if we were singing a long note, not make it jump as if it were a dance.

The role of the airstream (and thus our strong air support) is very important: it is the foundation for a light tongue and should create one beautiful smooth tone, stitching together all our small notes. Of course, there is a speed limit to the tongue, so very fast notes could end up being slurred.

A second very important rule is that, when playing diminutions, we should always search for scale-like movement in seconds as much as possible. This means that patterns like arpeggios should be avoided. When we do leap, it should be done from a consonant to another consonant in the harmony—for example, from the tonic note to the third, fifth or octave above.

As we will see later, trills as a concept didn't exist yet.

Diego Ortiz wrote in 1553 that there are three levels of diminution procedures, which can help us to get started.

1. The first way (example 2) is the simplest. The diminution begins and ends on the original note. This was considered the safest, because it preserved the original harmonic counterpoint of the music.
2. The second way (example 3) is to start on the original note—but, instead of ending on it, continue the conjunct movement and join the ornament to the next note. Although this way could result in contrapuntal

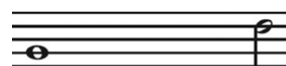
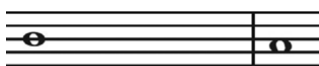
errors, such as forbidden dissonances or parallel fifths, the listener was not supposed to hear them since they were very short passing tones.

3. The third way (example 4) consists of a freer interpretation: perhaps adapting a longer segment of the original line in the diminution, or substituting for the main melodic note a pattern that does not pass

through that note. Although not mentioned in diminution treatises, this technique can be found in the ornamented works shown in the same treatises. It often involves motivic or sequential patterns. It will only work if you know what is going on in the other voices in the piece. Strive to use contrary movement (motion in opposite directions) where possible.



▲ 1: Title page of *La Fontegara* by Sylvestro Ganassi



Diminutions (ornamentation shown on the top line for original bottom line—all three examples are from Rognoni, Ung Gay Bergier)

2: Beginning and ending on same note, then moving to the next note

3: Joining the first and second notes

4: Free diminution

5

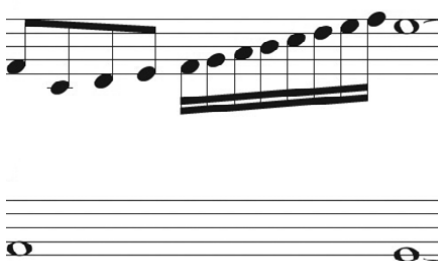


Diminutions (ornamentation shown on the top line for original bottom line)

6



7



5: General use of passaggi (from *Ancor che col partire*, an Italian-language madrigal composed by Flemish composer Cipriano de Rore while he was in Italy, also used by Rognoni)

6: Gropo

and

7: Tirata
(both are from Rore/Rognoni, *Ancor che col partire*)

8



8: Accented and dotted rhythm (as used by Lodovico Zacconi and Girolamo Diruta)

9



10



9: Gropo rafrenato (Giovanni Battista Bovicelli)

10: Bridge (in *Vestiva i colli* by Rognoni)

no: Ouan - do

Tempo

For Renaissance music, where bar lines don't exist yet, the concept of the tactus, or underlying pulse, is essential. This is a basic, natural beat that easily allows for changes in its subdivision (for instance, from duple to triple).

Especially in 16th-century music, you should keep a steady tactus in general, breaking up the long notes into rhythmically regular diminutions. In 17th-century music, this changes a bit, allowing for more expressive tools and for some flexibility in tempo.

Types of 16th- and 17th-century ornaments

Let's have a look at the different types of diminutions:

1. General diminutions or *passaggi* unite the notes of the original melody in mostly adjacent movement (example 5).
2. A special ornament called a *gropo* (or group, as in example 6) is a cadential ornament, employing an alternation between seconds with a turn at the end. For example, movement from B to C can become *BCBCBABC*. This basic form can be extended. If it's on a descending interval, C to B, then it's often played as *CBCBCBCD B*.
3. According to Michael Praetorius in *Syntagma Musicum*, another diminution is the *tirata* (tirade, as in example 7): "Tirate are long rapid runs in a graduated manner up and down."

From the 17th century on, additional ornaments came into use:

4. The *trillo*—not to be confused with the Baroque trill!—is a figure subdividing one long note. Caccini calls the *trillo*: *Ribattuta di Gola* (throat articulation). He writes, "The trillo that I describe is on a single note...; One starts with the first quarter note and then each note is articulated with the throat over the vowel à until the final whole note." Rognoni (1620) also writes: "The trillo is struck with the throat." For recorder players, there are

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different approaches to this ornament:

- Double articulation used like a bouncing ball—gradually going faster, but leaving some room for the last note to sound a bit longer
 - Finger vibrato
 - Lifting the finger in a highly dotted rhythm, also going faster and faster. This variant may end up as a kind of trill, even if it doesn't have the same concept as the Baroque trill (a much different ornament that always starts on the note above the written note).
5. The *accento*, a passing note ornament, is usually a variation of two basic types—one for ascending intervals (especially thirds), and one for descending seconds. Example 8 shows both types, as used by Lodovico Zacconi and Girolamo Diruta. The *accento* was applied to places where diminutions were not appropriate: moments of strong affect, especially of sadness or pain; or at the beginning of an imitative piece where a solo voice starts.
 6. In the *gropo rafrenato* (Bovicelli, *Regole, passaggi di musica*), faster notes like 16ths slow down before the final note (example 9).
 7. Dynamic effects such as the *mesa di voce* (crescendo—decrescendo)
 8. Dotting the rhythm of diminutions (long-short and short-long, called lombardic/lombard rhythm). This was seen as much more graceful in the 17th century than playing just regular diminutions.
 9. Ornaments of note and intensity fluctuation such as the tremolo, literally a "shaking of the voice." We could call this a kind of vibrato—but it is used only as an ornament.




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11

ung gay ber-gier pri-ait u - ne ber - - - - -

11: Fragment with a number of types of diminutions, following the words in a vocal piece (Rognoni, Ung gay bergier)

LINKS OF INTEREST:

- Lobke Sprenkeling's web site: <https://lobke.world>
- Articles in her recorder technique series: <https://americanrecorder.org/extra>. Sprenkeling's versions of the scores for **Belle qui tiens ma vie** and **Triste España**, both mentioned in this article, are also found there.
- Videos for some articles in this series: www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag
- Lobke Sprenkeling's recording, *Pulchra Es*, demonstrates diminutions plus sonatas and canzonas of the Renaissance: reviewed in **AR Summer 2023**; <https://lobke.world/products>; stream via Spotify, iTunes, etc.; www.youtube.com/@LobkeSprenkeling/videos
- Most of the treatises mentioned here can be found by searching for the author or for "diminution" on <https://imslp.org> or <http://cpdl.org/wiki>
- Passaggi app: about \$18.50 at www.passaggi.co.uk
- Embellishment Workout by Cat on the Keys Music: about \$11.70 at www.catonthekesmusic.co.uk/embellishments-workouts
- *L'Art de Diminuer* by Philippe Matharel: \$50, sold by many music vendors including www.vonhuene.com
- Critique for **AR Summer 2022** includes reviews of two commercial publications to help you learn diminutions written by Diego Ortiz and G.P. Palestrina.

This piece is part of Sprenkeling's technique series.

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How to add diminutions to your daily practice

We are lucky to have examples of amazing diminutions composed by the authors of the time. Play as many as you can. The most important thing to keep in mind as you work on these diminutions is to get to know the original melody as well as possible. Sing and play the original before really starting to play the diminished version.

If the original has a text, follow its musical phrasing as much as possible for your diminutions. We shouldn't forget that these were the hits of the time, so the original was well-known. It would be as if we diminished *Yesterday* by the Beatles—you would instantly know when the diminutions weren't following the phrases!

In the same way, diminutions should respect and even magnify the character of the original. We can see this in Rognoni's diminutions on *Ung gay bergier*, which are very playful, as is the original text (example 11). On the other hand, the diminutions by Bovicelli on Palestrina's *Io Son Ferito* augment the intensity of the pain of love expressed by the text.

Analyze the diminutions in all of the available examples. Observe where the different types of ornaments are used by the author of each treatise in order to understand how you can apply such ornaments yourself.

The authors didn't always notate ornaments for cadences. Sometimes these require some sort of *gropo* or, if it's a 17th-century diminution, a *trillo*.

Ortiz with his 1553 treatise has a great versatile guide. Play through all of his examples and improvise on the ostinato bass patterns (grounds) that he provides for the *Recercadas sobre tenores italianos*. Improvising on a ground is always an excellent exercise!

The "Passaggi" app provides the accompaniments for Ortiz's treatise, as well as drones to use for practice and accompaniment tracks for several

Renaissance works, diminished by authors of the time. Other handy materials are the *Embellishment Workout*; and also *L'Art de Diminuer* by Philippe Matharel, a summary of the diminutions for individual intervals, given by several authors from the 16th and 17th centuries—and, of course, consult the historical treatises themselves.

How to diminish from scratch

Now it's your turn! Start with easy Renaissance songs, diminishing the top voice. Good examples are the popular 16th-century pavane *Belle qui tiens ma vie* (on page 36) or *Triste españa* by Juan del Encina (both scores are on the ARS web site). Here are some steps to follow:

1. Add diminutions and other ornaments to obvious moments first, like cadences and changes in the melody where you feel it would be very natural to add some decoration. For instance, the interval *D E* may be diminished with *D cd E*.
2. Start small. Add only one or two notes, and extend that little by little. Begin by just filling up an interval. It's about building bridges of mostly seconds between one note and another.
3. Start at an easy tempo—don't go faster than your brain can follow. Try to relax; be comfortable and playful!
4. Follow the phrasing of the piece as much you can. If it's originally a vocal work (like example 11), try to breathe where a singer would breathe—don't forget that there's a text, a meaning, an ambience. Try to respect those qualities, to keep the intent of the original. Is the original a madrigal, a chanson, or a dance form like a pavane?
5. If you've got a motive that works, don't be afraid to repeat it. This will only add cohesion to your diminutions. If you never repeat a motive, the result could actually lack cohesion. It's not a bad idea to use a motive twice, even three or four times. If you get bored with that pattern, probably there's a reason—that's when you

In LEARN for AR Fall 2023, "What Now?," I mentioned that we should play a new piece perfectly the first three times—because if we repeat the same mistake those three times, it will stick in our muscle memory. My friend Dennis wondered: how can we play it perfectly if it's a new piece and we're not able to play the entire piece perfectly? I'd like to give some hints about how to do that when learning a new piece.

Think of what your strengths and weaknesses are. Do you need to reinforce rhythm? If so, practice the rhythm separately before playing it. You can clap it, or speak it using the Takadimi or Kodály system. Listening to the piece and getting acquainted with it is also a great idea. How does the rhythm flow? How does the melody go? What do the other instruments do, if there are any?

Are the notes difficult for you? In that case, you can practice saying, or even better singing, the note names, while staying in the rhythm. You can also clap the rhythm while you sing the notes. You can write in the names of the notes—try to get to know them well enough to erase them after a while, so that you don't become dependent on this visual aid. Another tool is to rest the mouthpiece of the recorder on your chin, and sing the note names while you silently finger the notes.

Divide the piece into smaller sections; focus on one small section and get it right. Here is where you can work on air, articulation and coordination. Don't rush! The brain has to be able to follow the fingers, the breath support, and the tongue.

Analyze what you're doing: feel, listen, and be aware of what's going on. Also analyze the music: where do the phrases begin and end? Is there a comma in the middle? Of course, when you play slowly, you will have to breathe in more places than when you speed up. Even so, it's important to establish at least certain breaths that go with the musical phrases.

Don't start at the beginning all the time. If you do, you may be very familiar with the start of the piece and not so much with the rest of it.

I hope these ideas clarify what it means to play "perfectly" the first few times, and that they help you relax and enjoy the journey more!

Soprano

Bel - le qui tiens ma vi - e, cap - ti - ve dans tes yeux Qui m'a l'a -

Alto

Tenor

Bass

S

me ra - vi - e, d'un sou - rire gra - ci - eux, Viens tôt me se - cou - rir Ou me__ fau -

A

T

B

S

dra mou - rir. Viens tôt me se - cou - rir Ou me__ fau - dra mou - rir.

A

T

B

▲ **Belle qui tiens ma vie by Thoinot Arbeau (Orchesography, 1589).** Transcription by Lobke Sprenkeling.

Translation: Beauty, you who hold my life captive in your eyes,
You who make my soul delighted with a gracious smile,
Come soon to rescue me, or I shall die.

need to do something else *or* create something that's an extension of that original motive. Repeat the motive, but vary its rhythm; or repeat a rhythmic motive and change the notes.

6. Normally in written-out diminutions of the time, you will see that the ornamentation doesn't start on the first note of the piece. It's a good idea to give space to the beginning of the melody before adding ornaments.
7. Keep your diminutions regular. Try not to play a long note and a couple of rapid notes, creating a constant irregular rhythm. Divide the notes over the musical space. Think of eighth notes instead of a rhythm using a dotted quarter note and 32nds.
8. Simplicity is better. We tend to want to do too much. Don't get too far away from the original notes. I think of getting back to the written notes about halfway through my diminution.
9. Look at the other voices to make sure that your diminution isn't in conflict with them or creating parallel intervals with them like fourths, fifths or octaves. Also if you're playing the highest voice, limit your distance to a fifth below the written note. If you go down too far, you'll cross into the range of a lower voice.
10. Don't diminish the last note of a phrase, except when you choose to make it a bridge leading into the next phrase, as you might do in *Ves-tiva i colli* by Rognoni (example 10).
11. If the original melody repeats itself, don't go big with your diminutions during the first time through; save something for later. Make your diminutions grow organically as part of your musical narrative.
12. For 17th-century music, add dotted rhythms, *trillos* and other ornaments of that time.

Your efforts won't always be perfect, but that is part of improvising diminutions. You'll find that it's about puzzling your way from one place to another, which can be very pleasurable! ❁



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