

## **Introduction: A brief history of continuo playing**

**Basso continuo** practices, although not notated or published until c. 1600, were quite common as early as 1550. The practice is defined as an improvised accompaniment based on an independent, continuous bass line.<sup>1</sup> The origins of basso continuo practices may be traced to social and intellectual trends, like Humanism and the Counter-Reformation, of late sixteenth century Italy.

Humanism was a secular movement derived from the study of classical Greek and Roman culture. Throughout the Renaissance, humanist musicians strove to recreate the expressive ideals of ancient classical music. Giovanni de' Bardi (1534-1612) founded a group of humanist artists and thinkers, the *Florentine Camerata*, who experimented with **recitative**, which was their interpretation of ancient musical drama. Recitative is a manner of musically setting text in a way "that imitates and emphasizes the natural inflections, rhythms and syntax of speech."<sup>2</sup> The late Renaissance and early Baroque recreation of this declamatory style utilized harmonizing instruments to support the vocal line with a rhythmically unstructured accompaniment. From these experiments in dramatic recitative, the use of basso continuo developed in musical theater.

Meanwhile, the Counter-Reformation influenced sacred Italian music of the sixteenth century. With the creation of a Roman branch of the Inquisition and the Council of Trent, both in 1542 under Pope Paul III (1534-1549), church musicians were forced to focus on the clarity of text presentation. Church officials were concerned that the liturgical text was made incoherent by imitative entrances and the overlay of many texts at the same

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, s.v. "Thoroughbass."

<sup>2</sup> *Harvard Dictionary*, s.v. "Recitative," by Charlotte Greenspan.

time, a popular musical style in the Italian Renaissance. Whereas the **prima prattica** of the Renaissance had allowed the music to lead the text, the ideals of the Baroque **seconda prattica** now dictated that the text of a composition direct the music. Cipriano de Rore (1516-1565) led the secular school of *seconda prattica* composers and may have been influenced by the trend in sacred music as a result of his work as music director of San Marco's in Venice. Later Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) became an important figure in the *seconda prattica* movement when theorist Giovanni Maria Artusi (1540-1613) publicly condemned Monteverdi's unconventional use of dissonance for the purpose of text expression in Artusi's *Discorso Musicale* (Venice 1606/7), which has not survived.<sup>3</sup> This controversy centered upon Monteverdi's *Il quinto libro de madrigali* (Venice, 1605), which included a defense of Monteverdi's composition practices in its preface. The result of the *seconda prattica* focus on the solo singer was the development of a half-improvised accompaniment style that harmonically supported the vocal line--basso continuo.

Another influential intellectual trend in Italy at this time concerned the **doctrine of affections**, or the idea that the goal of music was to arouse the passions of the listener. Again, text clarity was extremely important. An appropriately improvised basso continuo accompaniment freed both the composer and performer from the multi-layered textures and rigid rhythmic structure of the Renaissance polyphonic madrigal. This allowed the vocalist to sing an elegant, affected line over a supportive harmonic accompaniment.

In practice, basso continuo probably began as a short-score accompaniment provided by instrumentalists in place of missing singers or to assist weaker voices. Chord playing instruments like the harpsichord, organ, lute or harp were well suited to this task.

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<sup>3</sup> Oliver Strunk, *The Baroque Era* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 45.

Eventually, players began improvising accompaniments that were more idiomatic for their instruments, using the bass line of a composition as the foundation for their improvisation. The rising importance of the solo voice in both sacred and secular music encouraged this type of accompaniment. Composers ultimately released the instrumentalists from improvising upon the lowest vocal line of a composition, a method known as **basso seguente**, and composed an independent line for the purpose, resulting in basso continuo. Gradually, compositions for a single voice with basso continuo accompaniment replaced those for several voices.

It is reasonable to assume that the practice of basso continuo was in use prior to the first publications including the technique because the publications made no attempt to explain the process of realization. Basso continuo probably originated as early as the 1550's, or earlier considering Diego Ortiz's (flourished 1530-1560) *Tratado de glosas sobre clausulas* (Rome, 1553), which makes use of a continuo-like accompaniment in an apparently established style. Bardi also makes note of similar instrumental accompaniments in his *Discorso mandato a Caccini sopra la musica antica e'l cantar bene* (Florence, 1578), which is addressed to composer and performer Giulio Caccini (1551-1618): "I speak of that sort of music which today is sung to instruments, either in company with others, or alone."<sup>4</sup> Later, he adds "...since it is the usual thing nowadays to enliven musical performances by adding to the voice the delicate melody of instruments..."<sup>5</sup> In the *Discourse*, Bardi discusses how the instrumentalist must accompany the singer in a comparable style. He stresses the dominance of the text over harmony and mentions both

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<sup>4</sup> Giovanni de' Bardi, "Discourse on Ancient Music and Good Singing," in *The Renaissance*, ed. Oliver Strunk (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 101.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.



the lute and the harpsichord as possible accompanying instruments.<sup>6</sup> Prior to this time, polyphonic vocal music had dominated the Renaissance music, and the addition of instruments, with emphasis solely on the bass and treble lines, was new.

Giovanni Croce's (c.1557-1609) *Motetti a otto voci* (Venice, 1594) formally presented the practice of basso continuo on the printed page by providing a *basso per l'organo*. (In reality, this line was a *basso seguente*, and it was not required in order to perform the compositions.) Despite Croce's publication, a few years later a prominent group of composers fought to be credited with the invention. Emilio de' Cavalieri (c.1550-1602) is generally credited with producing the earliest figured bass in print with the publication of *La rappresentatione di anima e di corpo* (Rome, 1600). Florentine composer Jacopo Peri (1561-1633) credits Cavalieri in the Foreword to his music drama *Euridice* (Florence, 1601): "...Signor Emilio del Cavaliere, before any other of whom I know, enabled us with marvelous invention to hear our kind of music on the stage, nonetheless as early as 1594..."<sup>7</sup> "Our kind of music" refers to dramatic recitative, the declamatory technique that Peri used in his own *Euridice*. The practice of recitative, as mentioned above, implies the use of basso continuo.

Giulio Caccini also published compositions using basso continuo at this time. His version of *Euridice* was published in Florence in 1600, before Peri's, but it was not performed until 1602. More importantly, Caccini published the first volume of secular monodies to include basso continuo, *Le nuove musiche* (Florence, 1602). A **monody** is simply an early seventeenth century Italian solo song with instrumental accompaniment.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 107-9.

<sup>7</sup> Jacopo Peri, "Euridice. Foreword," in *The Baroque Era*, 13.

In the Foreword to *Le nuove musiche*, Caccini clearly indicates a preference for the theorbo as the instrument best-suited to realize the accompaniment: "...for the theorbo in its special capacity and the easiest to use and put into effect, as that instrument is better fitted to accompany the voice... than any other."<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, the friar Lodovico Grossi da Viadana (1564-1627) produced the first sacred publication using basso continuo, *Centi concerti ecclesiastici* (1602). The accompanying line is technically a basso seguente and not an independent basso continuo line, but the preface to this collection contains important information on correct continuo practices. Viadana assumes that an organist will be realizing the basso continuo. He states his preference for a simple accompaniment, executed in a manner that does not obscure the vocal line, and with particular attention to range.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately some realizations and treatises concerning performance practices of Baroque basso continuo do exist. These extant documents indicate that many options remain as to the instrumentation, realization, ornamentation, tuning and more when performing a given piece. Although the harp was a fairly prominent continuo instrument throughout the Baroque period, there is a lacuna of information concerning harp continuo performance practices. Any written information was directed towards keyboard and lute players, and the skill of improvising continuo on the harp was learned aurally. However, brief references to the harp in Baroque music publications and art of the time clearly indicate that the harp was an essential continuo instrument until about 1750.

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<sup>8</sup> Giulio Caccini, "*Le nuove musiche*. Foreword," in *The Baroque Era*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Lodovico Grossi da Viadana, "*Cento concerti ecclesiastici*. Preface," in *The Baroque Era*, 61-

This manual provides the foundation for further studies of Baroque continuo playing on the harp. Included in this manual are instructions on learning how to read and harmonize figured bass, the basic rules of good counterpoint, an introduction to the concept of style, detailed examples of how to prepare for a first performance, a variety of chapters demonstrating the use of harp and continuo in the Baroque era, advice on instrument selection and learning to tune by ear.

**Suggested Readings:**

Sadie, Julie Anne, ed. *Companion to Baroque Music*. Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990