

3. 12 Steps to Your First Continuo Performance: Practice and score preparation

First, note that there will be no discussion of historical technique here. Use your standard hand position and strive for a sound that blends with the instruments surrounding you. If you are interested in studying the finer points of historical harp playing, consult with an expert in the field. Otherwise, dive in with your current technique. Whether you play with fingertips or nails, on metal or gut, thumbs up or under, sitting or standing, play with confidence and style!

Second, continuo playing is an aural art. The best option for acquiring this skill is to study with a knowledgeable continuo player. Since harp teachers in the field are rare, take lessons with your local harpsichordist, organist or lutenist. Purchase different recordings of a piece and play along with these recordings. Most importantly, you need to practice making music with other players as often as possible.

Your 12-step continuo program:

1. Insert a blank staff above the bass line for personal notes (cut and paste)³⁸
2. Create two copies of the piece (one for performance and one working copy)
3. Understand the form of the composition (Basic tonal and formal structure)
4. Decide on an initial methodology (figures, Roman numerals or chord symbols) and analyze every beat (harmonic analysis)
5. Note cadential formulae, basic harmonic progressions and modulations (add pedal changes)

³⁸ North, 18.

6. Limit the range of each chord to avoid voice crossing (above the bass line and below the melody)
7. Recognize structurally important chords (hemiolas, text accents, word painting)
8. Eliminate unnecessary chords (sustained harmonies and complicated text, articulation or ornamentation by the soloist)
9. Adjust the part to your skill level (plan on always playing the bass line, unless you are joined by another continuo player)
10. Add fingerings and begin working with a metronome
11. Add cadential ornamentation, melodic imitation and any solo material
12. Create contrapuntal melodies in place of particularly challenging harmonic changes

Step 1. Insert a blank staff above the bass line for personal notes (cut and paste). This is essential if you want to be able to read your notes. Use it to write text reminders or fill in the staff with musical ideas. If necessary, write your “improvised” part on this inserted treble staff. Remember to keep the melody line and text above, the blank staff in the middle, and the bass line with figures below.

Step 2. Create two copies of the piece (with the inserted staff), one for performance and one working copy. Then you can really work with the first copy, marking brainstorm ideas or chord changes. This copy will become filled with scribbles after a few rehearsals. In addition to marking figures, you will be adding markings for arpeggios, accents, and favorite ornaments. After a few rehearsals your ideas will start to take shape. Determine which markings are essential and neatly transfer them to your performance copy. Of course you may still mark this second copy. Quick decisions as to the quality of a chord or

a change in instrumentation for a recitative require that you be willing and able to mark your part at all times. Do not bind your part in a plastic protector.

Step 3. Understand the basic tonal and formal structure of the composition. Know the key in which you are playing and to which you are modulating. Be prepared with appropriate cadences. Also, understand the repeat structure of your piece and know that the soloist may be adding ornamentation the second time through any given material. You might want to be prepared with some ornamentation yourself. Remember to fix difficult page turns in advance.

Step 4. Decide on an initial methodology, be it figures, Roman numerals or chord symbols, and analyze every beat. To start, use whatever system allows you to respond quickly. Set a goal to use figured bass at a later date. Liberally mark your part with harmonizations, as necessary. If you are new to continuo playing, analyze every beat so that you really understand the structure of the piece and can determine what chord changes are important. Mark the figures as carefully as you would pedals.

Step 5. Note cadential formulae, basic harmonic progressions and modulations and add the necessary pedal changes. Do not be caught off guard! Mark your pedal or lever changes clearly, perhaps in color. If you are working with a multi-row instrument for the first time, clearly mark any upcoming reaches to the inner row. Circle the note or try a colored arrow just above the note.

Step 6. Limit the range of each chord in order to play above the bass line and below the melody. Experiment with the range of your instrument *after* you have become familiar with the piece. For now, stick to **The Rules** and limit your range.

Step 7. Recognize important hemiolas, text accents, or word painting. Emphasize hemiolas with accented, unbroken chords (although the accents may need to be removed later). Enhance the text in a recitative by creating an accompaniment that flows with the language. Aurally paint the text by adding an ascending scale for discussions of the heavens, or a telltale arpeggio at the mention of the harp or lyre. You are beginning to add your own style here. Be creative!

Step 8. Eliminate unnecessary chords. Sustained harmonies and complicated text, articulation or ornamentation by the soloist require a simple, thoughtful accompaniment. Use the resonance of your instrument to carry the singer through sustained harmonies. Pluck a lively chromatic bass line **près de le table** and do not harmonize every chord above the line. Clean up the part. You are beginning to make your part more idiomatic.

Step 9. Adjust the part to your skill level. Perhaps some spots just don't work for you, or you are having trouble keeping up with your left hand. Simplify the line! Or maybe there is a pesky crossover that trips you up. Get rid of it! Now that you understand the structure of the piece, determine what may be simplified or eliminated without jeopardizing the integrity of the composition. Always plan on playing the bass line, unless another continuo player joins you.

Step 10. Add fingerings and begin working with a metronome. Continue to simplify your part if necessary.

Step 11. Add cadential ornamentation, melodic imitation and any solo material. Experiment with some "ditties" (discussed in 2. **Style: When in Rome: Ornamentation**). Listen to what the soloist is doing. Can you imitate his or her ornamentation? Write this in! Fill in cadences and connect sections with flair.

Step 12. Create contrapuntal melodies in place of particularly challenging harmonic changes. Do not insert something that might interfere with the soloist, just a tiny melody for your right hand. This technique can help to alleviate any remaining tricky spots, as well as to provide a contrasting texture.

All of these steps take time. However, with practice you will process all of this with increasing speed. Try to have finished at least through **Step 5** prior to your first rehearsal. Also, remember to determine the appropriate tuning and prepare your instrument accordingly prior to the first rehearsal. Not all of the steps listed above are applicable to every piece (see the series of Figures below).

When you do arrive at your first rehearsal, bear in mind that choices regarding continuo instrumentation for any Baroque performance, especially opera, are subject to adjustment during the first rehearsals. Come prepared to play everything in the score, but know that you will not ultimately play all that you have practiced. Although you may find this disappointing, use your knowledge of the score to study the realizations of other players.

A - mo - ro - sa par - go - let - ta, sde - gno - set - ta, che d'a-mor
 sprez - za l'im - pe - ro; Tu non sai con qual ar - do - re
 o - gni co - re sa fe - rit, cru - da, se - ve - ro.

Figure 32. *Amorosa pargoletta* by Nicholas Lanier. Reprinted, by permission, from Gordon J. Callon's *Songs with Theorbo (ca. 1650-1663)*, in *Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era*, vol. 105 (Madison: A-R Editions, Inc., 2000), page 6. The edition includes tablature, which is not reprinted here.³⁹

³⁹ Callon, 6.

A - mo - ro - sa par - go - let - ta, sde - gno - set - ta, che d'a-mor

sprez - za l'im-pe - ro; Tu non sai con qual ar - do - re

o - gni co - re sa fe - rir, cru - da, se - ve - ro.

Figure 33. Step 1: add a blank staff

A - mo - ro - sa par - go - let - ta, sde - gno - set - ta, che d'a-mor

sprez - za l'im - pe - ro; Tu non sai con qual ar - do - re

o - gni co - re sa fe - rit, cru - da, se - ve - ro.

GM

GM CM

AM DM BM EM

A Section

B Section

Figure 34. Step 3: basic tonal and formal structure

A - mo - ro - sa par - go - let - ta, sde - gno - set - ta, che d'a-mor

sprez - za l'im-pe - ro; Tu non sai con qual ar - do - re

o - gni co - re sa fe - rir, cru - da, se - ve - ro.

A Section

B Section

GM

GM CM

AM DM BM EM

6 # # 6

6 6 # # - #

6 # # # #5 #3 6 # #

Figure 35. Step 4: harmonic analysis using figured bass

A - mo - ro - sa par - go - let - ta, sde - gno - set - ta, che d'a-mor

sprez - za l'im-pe - ro; Tu non sai con qual ar - do - re

o - gni co - re sa fe - rir, cru - da, se - ve - ro.

A Section

B Section

Figure 36. Step 5: cadences and pedal changes

A - mo - ro - sa par - go - let - ta, sde - gno - set - ta, che d'a - mor

A Section

6 # # 6

sprez - za l'im - pe - ro; Tu non sai con qual ar - do - re

B Section

6 6 4 - #3 # - #

o - gni co - re sa fe - rir, cru - da, se - ve - ro.

G# C# D# G#

6 # # #5 6 # #

Figure 37. Step 6: limit the range of each chord

A - mo - ro - sa par - go - let - ta, sde - gno - set - ta, che d'a-mor

A Section

6 # # 6

sprez - za l'im-pe - ro; Tu non sai con qual ar - do - re

colla voce

6 6 4 - #3 B Section # - #

o - gni co - re sa fe - rir, cru - da, se - ve - ro.

G# C# D# # G#

6 # # #5 6 # #

colla voce

Figure 38. Step 7: text accents and word painting

A - mo - ro - sa par - go - let - ta, sde - gno - set - ta, che d'a-mor
 sprez - za l'im-pe - ro; Tu non sai con qual ar - do - re
 o - gni co - re sa fe - rir, cru - da, se - ve - ro.

A Section
 B Section

colla voce

colla voce

6 6 4 - #3
 # G#
 G# C# D# #5 6 # #

Figure 39. Step 8: eliminate unnecessary chords

A - mo - ro - sa par - go - let - ta, sde - gno - set - ta, che d'a-mor

A Section

6 # # 6

sprez - za l'im-pe - ro; Tu non sai con qual ar - do - re

colla voce

6 6 4 - #3

B Section

-

o - gni co - re sa fe - rir, cru - da, se - ve - ro.

G# C# D# G#

6 # # #5 6 # #

colla voce

Figure 40. Step 11: add cadential ornamentation

A - mo - ro - sa par - go - let - ta, sde - gno - set - ta, che d'a-mor
 sprez - za l'im-pe - ro; Tu non sai con qual ar - do - re
 o - gni co - re sa fe - rit, cru - da, se - ve - ro.

Figure 41. *Amorosa pargoletta*, as realized by Lanier⁴⁰

Suggested Readings:

Lawrence-King, Andrew. "The harp as a continuo instrument in early Italian opera." In *Historical Harps*, ed. Heidrun Rosenzweig, 133-144. Dornach, Switzerland: Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, 1991.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Porter, William Vernon, Jr. "The Origins of the Baroque Solo Song: a study of Italian manuscripts and prints from 1590-1610." Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1962.

Callon, Gordon J., ed. *Songs with Theorbo (ca. 1650-1663)*. In *Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era*, vol. 105. Madison: A-R Editions, Inc., 2000.