

Notes on playing continuo

Praetorius

What an organist should have as his distinctive qualities:

1. He must understand counterpoint or, at the very least, be able to sing perfectly .
2. He must thoroughly understand music written in score notation or in tablature .
3. He must also have a good ear and a fine sense of hearing ...

... It is necessary, especially for someone who is inexperienced, to read through carefully and well beforehand the song that he will be accompanying ...

... They [the accompanying instruments] should always proceed with a steady, euphonious, and continuous harmony, so as to support the human voices, and sometimes play quietly and peacefully, sometimes loudly and vigorously, according to the character and number of voices; also according to the circumstances of the place and of the concerted group."

Bologna ms (undated)

But the most noble advice that one can give oneself is to make a practice of playing from the Full Score because from that one obtains the surest guide ...

Agazzari 1607

If only one instrument is accompanying, it can be free, "seasoning the consort" as seems best; but if others are accompanying, the player should regard them closely.

Torres 1702

When accompanying do not embellish the part in either hand except with the greatest discretion, for the right will otherwise only confuse the voices (especially if there is only one voice) and the left will otherwise ruin the beat.

Gasparini 1708

I do not approve of the diminution of the bass itself, because it is very easy to miss or depart from the intention of the composer and from the proper spirit of the composition and to offend the singer. But we say "to accompany" advisedly: he who accompanies must take pride in the title of a good, solid accompanist, not of a spirited and agile performer. He may suit his fancy and unleash his brilliance when he plays alone, not when he accompanies; I, at least, intend to suggest how to play with grace and not with confusion.

Le Cerf de la Viéville 1725

The best French accompanists avoid the usual faults of Italian continuo playing - those unceasing, busy figurations, the broken chords, the ever-rolling arpeggios, the manual display, the disagreement between the harpsichord and bass viol, the chaotic embroidery of both left- and right-hand parts. Such accompaniment serves only to destroy the melody and confuse the singer.

J.S. Bach Generalhafterregeln, 1738

The thoroughbass is the most perfect foundation of music. It is played with both hands on a keyboard instrument in such a way that the left hand plays the written notes, while the right hand strikes consonances and dissonances, so that this results in a full-sounding *Harmonie* to the Honour of God and the permissible delight of the soul. The ultimate end or final goal of all music, including the thoroughbass, shall be nothing but for the honour of God and the renewal of the soul (recreation of the spirit). Where these factors are not taken into consideration, there is no true music, rather, a devilish bawling and droning [*Teuflisches Geplerr und Geleyer*].

Geminiani 1755

A good Accompanyer ought to possess the Faculty of playing all sorts of Basses, in different Manners; so as to be able, on proper Occasions, to enliven the Composition, and delight the Singer or Player. But he is to exercise this Faculty with Judgment, Taste and Discretion, agreeable to the Style of the Composition, and the Manner and Intention of the Performer. If an Accompanyer thinks of nothing else but the satisfying his own Whim and Caprice, he may perhaps be said to play well, but will certainly be said to accompany ill."

Whenever the upper part stops and the bass continues, he who accompanies must make some melodious variation on the same harmony, in order to awaken the imagination of the performer, whether he sings or plays, and at the same time to give pleasure to the hearer.

In swift movements the left hand must strike the plain notes of the bass, and the right the chords, in such a manner as not to cause a confusion of sounds, else it will be most prudent to leave out the chords.

Particular care should be taken to touch the keys of the instrument delicately, otherwise the accompaniment of the Drum would be as grateful as that of the Harpsichord.

Daube 1756

There are three basic types:

"The simple or common": simple 3-4 part chords, left hand having the bass line only.

"The natural": following the mood of the piece, in recitatives or if the singer has a long note. Use arpeggio and broken chords, especially in the right hand.

"The artificial or composite": for pieces with one or a few performers. The right hand can imitate the solo part, adding a second melody below/above the solo line, using embellishments, suspensions, counter-subjects, or enlivening the bassline. J.S. Bach could do this extempore, but exceptional caution is required.

C.P.E. Bach

The beauty of a good accompaniment does not consist in many loud and gaudy passages that are devised without any kind of order ... the accompanist can best distinguish himself if he allows a simple steadiness and a noble simplicity to be felt in his accompaniment, and on that account does not disturb the brilliant performance of the soloist.

[the Italians do not use *tasto solo*; for delicate effects they omit the harpsichord altogether, since] "they can scarcely play any chord without rolling it.

- re pedal points: "The strange figures turn out to be indications of nothing more than ordinary progressions ..

Those who figure them must accept the fact that they will be played *tasto solo* anyway."

- *re pizzicato*: "When the bass and several other parts perform their notes *pizzicato*, the accompanist pauses, leaving the passage to the cellos and double basses. But if only the bass is *pizzicato* the accompanist plays his chords, in a *staccato* manner."

Johann Christian Kittel (1732-1809) - *Der angehende praktische Organist, Erfurt 1808, student of Bach*

When Sebastian Bach performed a church cantata, one of his most capable pupils always had to accompany on the harpsichord. It will easily be guessed that no one dared to put forward a meager thoroughbass accompaniment. Nevertheless, one always had to be prepared to have Bach's hands and fingers intervene among the hands and fingers of the player, and without getting in the way of the latter, furnish the accompaniment with masses of harmonies which made an even greater impression than the unsuspected close proximity of the strict teacher.

Recitatives

Tosi 1757

types of recit:

(1) ecclesiastical: the singer should add *appoggiature*, keep the mood serious and the time freer than in (2) or (3)

(2) operatic: a quick, *scherzo*-like imitation of speech is required

(3) chamber cantatas: as if the singer actually meant what he was singing

St. Lambert 1707

At times, having played a long full chord, restrike a single note or two, as if the harpsichord were playing itself; or, if suitable, repeat the chord constantly, like musket fire, and follow this by a dramatic pause on a "*grand accord*."

Gasparini 1708 .

Do not annoy or disturb the singer with a continuous breaking of chords, or with ascending and descending scale passages ... Use *acciaccature* of 1 to 4 notes for rich effects. After striking the chord, leave it sounding so that the singer can hear it clearly and sing at his own convenience.

In order to perform the accompaniments of recitatives with some degree of good taste, the consonances must be deployed almost like an *arpeggio*, though not continuously so. Once the harmony of a note has been heard, one must hold the keys fast and permit the singer to take the lead, singing at his discretion and in accord with the expression of the words. Do not annoy or disturb him with a continuous *arpeggio*, or with ascending and descending scale passages, as some do. I do not know whether I should call those performers *grandiloquent* [*Sonatoroni*] or trivial [*Sonatorelli*] who, in their desire to display their facility, create confusion, and imagine that it is inspiration.

Pasquali 1757

In recitative the harmony is to be filled up as much as possible. Spread the chords, whether the text is common, tender or passionate. For anger or surprise, use little or no arpeggio, both hands striking almost at once. The last chords should be abrupt if the sense is at an end.

Quantz 1752

There are certain recitatives in which the bass and the other instruments for which they are scored have a definite subject or a rhythmical movement in notes that continue to sound, regardless of the rests in the solo voice. These must be performed in a strictly rhythmical manner, in order to keep together well. The other kinds of recitative are, according to their nature, sung sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, regardless of the measure, even though they are divided into measures in the notation. The change to a new harmony must take place very quickly, immediately upon the ending of the previous chord. In rapid declamation, the accompanist must refrain from arpeggiating, all the more so if the harmony changes frequently. Recitatives accompanied by instruments capable of producing sustained tones tolerate arpeggios particularly well. In accompanying recitative, no other ornaments and graces are used on keyboard instruments.

CPE Bach 1762

An accompanist must be watchful. He must listen constantly to the principal performer .. He must never desert the singer. When the declamation is rapid, the chords must be ready instantly ... without arpeggios. Arpeggios find their natural employment in quite different situations: in slow recitatives and in pieces with sustained chords played by other instruments. As soon as the accompaniment moves from sustained to short detached notes, the accompanist must play detached resolute chords, unarpeggiated, and fully held by both hands. Even if the part is notated in tied white notes, the keyboardist should play detached. A heavy attack is most necessary in the theatre ... When a singer departs from the written notes, it is better to strike the chord repeatedly than to play isolated notes.

In recitatives with sustained accompanying instruments; the organ holds only the bass, the chords being lifted soon after they are played. Organs are seldom purely tuned, with the result that held chords, which are often chromatic in such recitatives, would sound ugly.

Rousseau 1782

In Italian recitativo secco play each chord fully but only once; do not restrike or re-arpeggiate unless the strings are also accompanying. Play the chords short and add no ornaments. The Italians like to hear nothing from the accompaniment in such recitative. But for French recitative sustain the chords, arpeggiate gracefully and continually from top to bottom, and fill out the sounds as you can