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## "The Performance of the Basso Continuo in Italian Baroque Music" By Tharald Borgir

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Tharald Borgir. *The Performance of the Basso Continuo in Italian Baroque Music*. Studies in Musicology, 90. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987. vii, 180p. ISBN 0-8357-1675-9.

This book is a revision and expansion of the author's 1971 Ph.D. dissertation (Univ. of California, Berkeley) of nearly the same title. It consists of twenty-one rather brief chapters, divided into four parts, concerning bass-line doubling, bowed bass instruments, extended lutes, and continuo realization, respectively. The fourth part is an addition to the original dissertation, and it is characterized by a degree of clarity, balance, and maturity that is sometimes missing from the older portions of the work, which deal primarily with the choice of instruments and their function in the performance of continuo and bass-line parts.

In Part 1 Borgir attacks a purported twentieth-century myth that two instruments at least — one to play chords and the other to sustain the bass line — are always needed for a proper performance of any continuo part. No specific modern writers who sustain this view are cited, however. At the conclusion of Part 1, on page 61, we learn that Frank Arnold (1931) insisted that chordal realization was always required, although he said nothing of the kind about continuo doubling by bass-line instruments. Only François Couperin (1714) and C.P.E. Bach (1762) are given as sources of both elements of this error. Peter Williams, *Figured Bass Accompaniment*, which was published too late (1970) for consideration in Borgir's dissertation, did not sustain the doubling "myth" because its refutation could already be found in a series of articles (cited in Williams's *New Grove* entry) beginning with Nigel Fortune, "Continuo Instruments in Italian Monodies," *Galpin Society Journal* 6 (1953), 10-13.

In his zeal to dispel this supposed myth, Borgir at times seems to be arguing that chordal and bass-line instruments were rarely, if ever, used together in seventeenth-century Italy: "Contrary to twentieth-century notions, there is no general practice of doubling the continuo line with a bass-line instrument in the early Italian Baroque period" (p. 62). "The review of the birth of the basso continuo practice and its roots in sixteenth-century music fails to provide any argument for doubling the

bass line. Theorists make no statements in support of such a practice" (p. 19). He means, of course, that there is no evidence for a *universal* practice of adding a bass instrument precisely to the performance of the continuo part itself, and he shows that references to bass instruments in seventeenth-century prefaces and treatises do not imply such a practice. Instead, they refer to reinforcing the bass voice of a polyphonic texture. This is different from reinforcing the continuo, which is either an appendage to the bass (not vice versa) or a quasi-independent element, which coincides with, e.g., the string bass only in tutti string passages. A significant early seventeenth-century repertoire with continuo but no bass was Italian monody accompanied by chitarrone, guitar, etc., often played by the singer. This becomes the focus of Chapter 2. The third chapter shows that in the church sonata the bass is a principal contrapuntal voice, and the continuo doubles it, often with a simplified version.

In opera and oratorio (Chapter 4), on the other hand, the continuo, even in the obviously noncontrapuntal texture of the recitative, was reinforced by a bass, and even a contrabass, probably because large theaters and churches required a greater volume of sound. Borgir presents evidence for this practice found in performing parts and descriptions of performances. On the other hand, he shows that similar recitatives and arias when found in chamber cantatas were generally accompanied only by a chordal instrument (in keeping with the monody tradition) until obligato bass arias became prominent beginning in the 1670s (Chapter 5). Likewise in the performance of sacred vocal music (Chapter 6), pay records reveal the increasing importance and employment of string bass players in the later seventeenth century, suggesting their participation even in vocal solos, formerly accompanied only by organs and other chordal instruments. In concerted church music, according to the author, bass instruments formed part of the contrapuntal texture; the continuo was founded upon the lowest voice sounding, whether bass, tenor, alto, or soprano.

Having argued that in contrapuntal music the bass is a principal part and the continuo an appendage to it, Borgir presses further, in Chapter 7, to relegate the continuo to an optional, even unnecessary role in "secular" (nonchurch) instrumental music of the early and middle Italian Baroque. He argues that Salomone Rossi's early trios are like "textless canzonette" in no need of chordal accompaniment. But Rossi's title page for the 1607 *Sinfonie et gagliarde* specifies "due viole, over doi cornetti, & un chitarrone o altro istromento da corpo," and the third impression of the third book (1638) "due viole da braccio, & un chitarrone, o altro simile

stromento." Borgir's claims that the chitarrone normally played the bass line alone is groundless, as we shall see. Likewise Borgir presents no good reason to interpret Rossi's use of Agazzari's term "istromento da corpo" to mean large-bodied instead of chordal instrument. And he does not mention the fact that Rossi's chitarrone parts contain figures.

Of course, the most persuasive evidence that seventeenth-century Italian composers considered chordal realization of the continuo to be optional is the common wording of title pages, in which the option "violone, o cembalo" is offered. Evidence that the violone was preferred and the cembalo best left out is scarce, however. Borgir offers the dedication to Bononcini's Op. 4 (1671), which says "Si deve avvertire, che fara maggiore effetto il Violone, che la Spinetta, per essere i Bassi più proprii dell'uno, che dell'altra." But to me, this warning would seem unnecessary if it had been generally understood that violone was normally the first choice. And although he does offer a choice, Bononcini does not warn against using both violone and spinet. Undoubtedly there are seventeenth-century Italian sonatas conceived without continuo: Giovanni Battista Vitali's *Sonate da camera a tre*, Op. 14 (1692) are designated for two violins and violone in both title page and in the parts, and the violone part has no figures (evidence not mentioned by Borgir). Undoubtedly performances without continuo, like F. M. Veracini's (of ca. 1722-23 but reported some sixty-six years later, through hearsay, by Charles Burney—date and source unknown to Borgir) were not isolated events. But neither Borgir nor Jensen (to whose work Borgir refers) have presented sufficient evidence to demonstrate that bass instrument without continuo was ever the preferred performance method in any significant body of seventeenth-century Italian ensemble sonatas. In any event, Borgir reports that about 1700 there is a tendency to use both chordal and bass instruments together, which, he says, may have become a general obligation about 1750 or later.

In Part 2, Borgir demonstrates, at least to my satisfaction, that in seventeenth-century Italy the term *violone* normally refers to the nontransposing bass member of the viola da gamba family, tuned to GG. The contrabass and two sizes of bass violins (*viole da braccio*) are also briefly discussed.

Part 3 is devoted to the thesis that the chitarrone and other extended lutes, although at first used as chordal instruments, primarily play the bass line alone after about 1635. This idea, like several others of Borgir's, originates with the wording of title pages, which often give the extended lute as an alternative to the violone, e.g., "duo violini, e violone,

o arcileuto col basso per l'organo" (Antonio Veracini, Op. 1, 1692) or "violino e violone o arcileuto col basso per il cimbalo" (Antonio Veracini, Op. 3, 1696). I cite the two collections by Antonio Veracini (1659-1733) because they were printed with one figured bass in the part for violone or archlute and another, with an occasionally simplified bass line, in the keyboard part. If the archlute were intended to play only the bass line, why did Veracini's printers, in Florence and Modena, respectively, bother to include so many figures in its part (even more than in the keyboard continuo parts)?

Borgir's evidence for extended lutes as bass-line instruments is scanty and misinterpreted. Writing about 1635, Doni says that when a lute or theorbo plays with an organ or harpsichord, they should play diminutions, because playing full chords would result in clashes (presumably because of the different temperaments customarily employed) that would, however, escape notice if fast runs were played instead. Obviously Doni implies that players of lute-family instruments normally would have added chords, and in any case he does not advise them to play only the bass, as Borgir would have it. Francesco Turini, writing in 1629, also expects the chitarrone to realize the continuo, because he says "the chitarrone alone without the keyboard instrument turns out to be too empty in the accompaniment by the middle parts, especially in tied notes, dissonances, and high notes, and it does not succeed well in playing an octave lower."<sup>1</sup> None of this verbiage would be necessary if it were understood that the chitarrone would play only the bass line.

More important is the evidence that Borgir ignores. In Modena, Biblioteca Estense, Mus G239, pp. 107-27, there are a series of ornamented cadences and sequences showed simultaneously as bass line and in chordal realization intabulated for theorbo, apparently by Pietro Bertacchini, ca. 1660-70, according to Mirko Caffagni.<sup>2</sup> In Glasgow University Library, MS R.d.43, there are 40 pages of figured bass examples realized chordally in theorbo tablature written by Nicola Matteis of Naples before the publication of his related work for guitar, *The False Consonances of Music* (London, 1682), according to Sylvia Garnsey.<sup>3</sup> Nigel North describes a manuscript, Tokyo, Nanki Music

1. My translation of "il chitarrone solo senza l'istromento da tasto riesce troppo vuoto ne li accompagnamenti de le parti di mezzo, & massime nelle ligature, & durezza, & molto più ne le alte; & sonar alla ottava bassa no fà buona riuscita."

2. Mirko Caffagni, "The Modena Tiorba Manuscript," *Journal of the Lute Society of America* 12 (1979): 25-42.

3. Sylvia Garnsey, "The Use of Hand-Plucked Instruments in the Continuo Body: Nicola Matteis," *Music and Letters* 47 (1966): 135-40.

Library, MS n-4/42, containing songs with chordal accompaniment for a thirteen-course theorbo and/or archlute, possibly in the hand of Cesare Morelli, guitar teacher to Samuel Pepys, ca. 1680.<sup>4</sup> A thorough survey of seventeenth-century Italian theorbo manuscripts, which is the doctoral project of Victor Coehlo (UCLA), will undoubtedly show more evidence of a continuing practical interest in chordal continuo realization on theorbos and archlutes in Italy during the second half of the century. Certainly that interest is manifest in Northern Europe, e.g., in Perrine's *Et une table pour apprendre à toucher le lut sur la basse continue pour accompagner la voix* (Paris, 1682) and in Ernst Gottlieb Baron, *Historisch-theoretisch und practische Untersuchung des Instruments der Lauten* (Nürnberg: Rüdiger, 1727), both of which contain instructions for chordal realization of continuo parts on extended lutes but neither of which are cited by Borgir. Borgir also does not cite Hans Neeman, who mentions manuscript parts, presumably preserved in Dresden before World War II, for Italian operas by Giuseppe Maria Orlandini (1675-1760) and Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783) that include intabulated chordal realizations of continuo parts for lute-family instrument(s).<sup>5</sup> And after all, one or two extended lutes, together with string basses, formed a part of practically every orchestra or ensemble that accompanied operas or oratorios in Italy during the entire seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries, as almost any relevant orchestral roster will show. It is hard to believe that mere reinforcement by these instruments, which had a relatively weak bass, of a line already doubled by cellos and contrabasses would be thought to be so important. My own hypothesis, consonant with Borgir's Chapter 15, on ornamentation on extended lutes, is that lute-family instruments normally played the motivically active version of the bass, rather than the simplified keyboard version, with full chords, sparse consonances, figural obbligato, or nothing at all added, according to the tempo, rhythm, character, and key of the passage and the technical limitations of the individual theorbist. That such instruments could not, by themselves, reliably sustain the complete burden of a full, chordal continuo realization, seems evident from the descriptions cited by Borgir and from the fact that they were used always together with harpsichord(s) in opera and oratorio ensembles, even in the smallest of them.

Part 4 is devoted to realization of the continuo bass. The first section, Chapter 17, on the early seventeenth century, summarizes the earliest

4. Nigel North, *Continuo Playing on the Lute, Archlute and Theorbo* (London: Faber, 1987).

5. Hans Neeman, "Laute und Theorbe als Generalbassinstrumente im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert," *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 16 (1934): 532.

figured bass treatises by Agazzari (1607), Bianciardi (1607), and Banchieri (1605/1611). Borgir, however, makes little use of early written-out continuo parts, neither the printed intabulations described by Stanley Buetens,<sup>6</sup> nor the more numerous, earlier manuscript intabulations and keyboard harmonizations of the same period, as reported by myself.<sup>7</sup>

Chapter 18, concerning sources and approaches after 1650, offers a brief summary of Lorenzo Penna's (1672) and Francesco Gasparini's (1708) instructions before devoting inordinate space to exposing a Venetian manuscript treatise, dated 1664 according to Borgir, as a partial copy, with alterations and additions, of Vincenzo Manfredini, *Regole armoniche, o sieno precetti ragionati per apprendere i principij della musica* (Venice, 1775).

Likewise irrelevant is Chapter 19, on Neapolitan *partimenti*, a topic interesting of itself but of little use to guiding continuo players today. *Partimenti* are figured basses written or collected for teaching accompaniment and composition. A collection of them might contain exercises incorporating standard progressions, cadential suspensions, and ordinary cadences in many keys. Bass-line scales in ascending and descending motion with figures are found in almost all of them. Diminution exercises and fugues are frequently given as advanced studies. Although some of these advanced pieces contain passages written out in treble clef and others have figures so extensive as to suggest melodic motion, no extensive commentary or sample realizations are included. Many pieces are obviously meant as solo pieces and not as accompaniments at all. In them imitation and motivic exchange are often suggested by various means, or a sample of the florid motion of the right hand is offered, which is to be continued by the student. In the end, however, the basses that have the character of an accompaniment are precisely those for which few if any special indications are given with respect to a proper style of realization.

Chapter 20, on written-out keyboard parts, begins with written-out obbligato keyboard accompaniments, which are wisely rejected as models for continuo realization. The full-voiced realization given in the anonymous "Regole per accompagnar sopra la parte," Bologna, Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale, MS I.25, is rejected without, I believe,

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6. Stanley Buetens, "Theorbo Accompaniments of Early Seventeenth-Century Italian Monody," *Journal of the Lute Society of America* 6 (1973): 37-45.

7. John Walter Hill, "Realized Continuo Accompaniments from Florence, c 1600," *Early Music* 11 (1983): 194-208.

sufficient consideration. The best summary of this type of continuo realization, by George J. Buelow, is not even cited in Borgir's bibliography.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Borgir completely ignores an extremely valuable written-out continuo realization for all twelve sonatas of Corelli's Op. 5, made for performance in or near Modena about 1725 by organist and *maestro di cappella* Antonio Tonelli. Excerpts from these manuscript realizations, found in the Estense library of Modena, were published by Alceo Toni in 1919 and in the *MGG* entry on "Generalbass," both authors ascribing them incorrectly to Torelli. Proper identification was made, however, in Adriano Cavicchi's entry on Tonelli in *MGG*, and further information is provided by a Communication from Imogene Horsley, who describes Tonelli's shifts between full-voiced and thin texture, depending on the character of the passage.<sup>9</sup> Borgir endorses the realization in four parts of an aria from Alessandro Scarlatti's cantata *Da sventura a sventura*, with passing notes and slight ornamentation (Ex. 4.15 on p. 154), although he points out that this bass is unusually inactive for Scarlatti. A sonata for viola da gamba and cembalo concertato by Handel contains figuration like that advocated by Gasparini and suggests to Borgir (also in Chapter 21) that accompaniment was quite elaborate at times (I would say at times and places where the string-accompanied keyboard sonata was replacing the continuo-accompanied string sonata in the chamber repertoire).

Borgir has treated a large subject in a short book. Oversights and omissions are understandable. But one senses that often his method is not to gather as much relevant evidence as possible, assess it dispassionately, and arrive at balanced judgments. Rather, one suspects that evidence is selected and presented in order to support a particular thesis. This method, more appropriate to advocacy than to scholarship, is unfortunately too common in writings on the history of performing practices.

John Walter Hill

8. George J. Buelow, "The Full-Voiced Style of Thorough-Bass Realization," *Acta Musicologica* 35 (1963): 159-71.

9. Imogene Horsley, "Communication," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 23 (1970): 545-46.