

1991

"Thorough-Bass Accompaniment according to Johann David Heinichen." Rev. ed. by George Buelow

Philip Wade Russom

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Russom, Philip Wade (1991) ""Thorough-Bass Accompaniment according to Johann David Heinichen." Rev. ed. by George Buelow," *Performance Practice Review*. Vol. 4: No. 1, Article 10. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199104.01.10

Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol4/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Current Journals at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

George J. Buelow. *Thorough-Bass Accompaniment according to Johann David Heinichen*. Revised Edition. Studies in Musicology, 84. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986. xviii, 462p.

As we can see from his title, the subject of Professor Buelow's book is the particular style of thorough-bass accompaniment that was set down by Johann David Heinichen in his *Der General-Bass in der Composition* of 1728.¹ Heinichen's manual is one of the most rigorous and complete of its kind. It goes beyond the basics and treats in great detail advanced topics like unfigured basses, full-voiced styles of accompaniment, how to recognize nonharmonic tones in the bass, and the myriad free treatments of dissonance. Heinichen also gives us one of the most explicit summaries of how the concepts of rhetoric and "affect" are to be applied. Heinichen's book is formidable. His complex German fills nearly a thousand pages of poorly engraved *Fraktur*. Few sentences escape Latin terms and forgotten idioms, and digressions fill footnotes that often swell and take over the page. Buelow's account of Heinichen is remarkably complete, even though it represents a condensation of an enormous compendium. I am tempted to say that Buelow is better than Heinichen, but the truth is that Buelow gives us Heinichen's ideas in concise English, thus saving us from an arduous task. Indeed, this is one of the most valuable services of Buelow's work. I have long felt that performers and scholars alike would benefit from a complete English translation of Heinichen's megalithic tome. Until the day that we receive that blessed gift, Buelow's commentary will more than suffice.

The edition under review is a reprint of a work that first appeared in 1966. The original edition was based on the author's doctoral dissertation,² and the current edition is part of a series of which the author is the general editor. The original edition was scrutinized thoroughly by a dozen reviewers. Hence, I shall focus my remarks on those features that are new to the revised edition, as well as on some aspects of Professor Buelow's book that keep it relevant today.

1. Early in the final chapter, Buelow explains the differences between Heinichen's two books on figured bass. *Der neu erfundene und gründliche Anweisung* of 1711 instructs the musical amateur who wishes to become functional as an accompanist, whereas *Der General-Bass in der Composition* of 1728 teaches the professional composer with principles that are derived from figured bass. Buelow takes the later publication as his source, since it is far more detailed and includes more advanced topics.

2. George J. Buelow, "Johann David Heinichen, 'Der General-Bass in der Composition': a Critical Study with Annotated Translation of Selected Chapters" (Ph.D. diss., New York Univ., 1961).

The numerous typographical errors and wrong notes of the original — well documented by its reviewers — have been corrected, and the revised edition contains few mistakes of its own. The bibliography has been updated to include recent publications, a necessary task since the original — though published in 1966 — referred to nothing past 1961. The new edition is more difficult to read than the original since it is reset with a shorter line height, and it is printed on bright white paper that tends to make the print swim. However, the most quantitative change between the two editions involves the appendices. The single appendix of the original (containing a realization of a cantata by Scarlatti) has been joined by two more: one an English translation of the introduction to *Der General-Bass in der Composition*, the other an article that recounts Heinichen's explanations of "theatrical resolutions" of dissonance.

Buelow's translation of Heinichen's ninety-four-page introduction appears as Appendix B without any commentary save a two-paragraph preface. Even so, most of Buelow's final chapter is devoted to elucidating certain issues of this "manual for composers that emphasizes musical rhetoric and the expression of affections" (p. 277). The introduction reveals Heinichen's ambivalence toward counterpoint, his concepts of good taste and the *galant* in music, as well as what traits he feels are required of the successful composer. Furthermore, he gives us a practical demonstration of how rhetoric is to be applied by the composer. He illustrates (with numerous music examples) how various oratorical devices — known as *loci topici* — can be used in texted music to express an affect.³ Clearly, these are matters that pertain to the baroque composer, matters which are also of interest to contemporary scholars concerned with the aesthetics of the baroque. However, if we read Heinichen and Buelow creatively, we can also imagine how ideas of rhetoric have their place in the thorough-bass accompanist's responsibilities for evoking an affect.

Appendix C of the revised edition reproduces an article by Professor Buelow on Heinichen's free treatment of dissonance in the theatrical style. This material was excluded from the original edition, presumably because it was published in a journal.⁴ This advanced topic is too important to be relegated to an appendix; it should be within the book proper, immediately preceding the chapter on unfigured basses, thus

3. For a detailed study of Heinichen's *loci topici*, see George Buelow, "The *loci topici* and Affect in Late Baroque Music: Heinichen's Practical Demonstration," *Music Review* 27 (1966): 161-76. For a broader study, see George Buelow, "Music, Rhetoric, and the Concept of the Affections: A Selective Bibliography," *MLA Notes* 30 (1973): 250-59.

4. George Buelow, "Heinichen's Treatment of Dissonance," *Journal of Music Theory* 6 (1962): 216-74.

maintaining Heinichen's order of topics. Buelow's article is essentially an account of Chapter 1, titled *Von Theatralischen Resolutionibus der Dissonantien*, from Part II of *Der General-Bass in der Composition*. Heinichen establishes eight categories of "theatrical resolutions" to show that the standard formula of "preparation, dissonance, and resolution" can be elaborated, abridged, and/or inverted to account for most of the voice-leading licenses found in the operatic literature of his time. No doubt his insights were inspired by his long-standing work with Italian opera, both in Venice and Dresden. Heinichen's view that seemingly elaborate and free musical surfaces are actually based on the principles of strict counterpoint has had a strong influence on music theorists since his time, culminating in the work of Heinrich Schenker. Again, these are matters that concern the composer and theorist more than the accompanist. Yet, for the advanced performer of thorough-bass, there is still much to be gleaned from Heinichen's instructions, especially when we consider the accompanist's responsibilities for extemporizing countermelodies and florid textures.

At this juncture, I would like to point out methodological features that make Professor Buelow's book of continued interest: first, his careful avoidance of terminology and theoretical notions that are alien to Heinichen, and second, his cognizance that Heinichen represents just one of many diverse accompanimental styles.

All too often, figured-bass instruction is adulterated with theoretical ideas drawn from our understanding of tonal harmony, namely, watered-down versions of Rameau's theories of chord inversion and progression.⁵ We could assert, on a philosophical level, that such notions are "not only post-Baroque in origin, but one might say, anti-Baroque in conception" (Buelow, p. 18), and therefore they misrepresent Heinichen and other pre-classic authors. On the most practical level, however, these theoretical notions are merely irrelevant, and, in the worst case, get in the way of the realization of a figured bass in real time. For instance, when we see the figure "6," why should we trouble ourselves to note that it could be considered as the first inversion of a triad? Or, even worse, why bother assigning the chord a roman numeral to represent its theoretical root? Neither of these analytical reflections will assist us in finding a hand position that fulfills the required intervals above the bass, with an appropriate doubling, and with voice leading suited to the context. Hence, Buelow's methodology is to be commended, and many

5. This is true of the way that figured bass is treated by most harmony textbooks and recently-written figured-bass manuals, especially Peter Williams, *Figured Bass Accompaniment*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970).

authors of textbooks and scholars of the "history of music theory" could learn a valuable lesson from his example.

Another problem in approaching figured bass has to do with style. Thorough-bass accompaniment changed dramatically during its two-century tenure, and it was applied diversely in various geographic locations, time periods, instrumental combinations, and by the individual personalities that realized it. Buelow makes it clear that he is reporting on the particular style of accompaniment that Heinichen developed in Dresden and Venice during the first quarter of the eighteenth century. This is a very different methodology than that of Franck T. Arnold, who in *The Art of Accompaniment from a Thorough-Bass* of 1931, synthesized a single, artificial style from the two hundred years of compositions and handbooks that he surveyed. I agree with Buelow when he says that "we are all very much scholarly infants when talking about musical style in precise terms, and for this reason we need fewer publications on the thorough-bass that attempt to describe the practice for its entire two-hundred-year duration and more that concentrate on individual periods, countries, and generational solidifications of style."⁶ Buelow's Chapter 4 is devoted to "specific aspects of style," and it champions the "full-voiced" style of accompaniment, which by its very nature encourages liberties with doublings, parallels, and voice leading. Heinichen takes the student well beyond the conservative four-voiced style that most other writers are content to promote. Another stylistic question regards the amount of elaboration that is appropriate to thorough-bass accompanying. Buelow (in chapter 6) rightly shows that imitation, ornaments, and countermelodies were the exception, not the rule. Many of Heinichen's examples are quite heavily ornamented, but he makes it clear where and in what concentration certain types of embellishments may be used without exceeding the bounds of good taste.

Since its appearance in 1966, *Thorough-Bass Accompaniment according to Johann David Heinichen* has become "required reading" for performers and historians of the figured bass. The new revised edition will continue to serve its established readership with clarity and thoughtful methodology; and, with the two new appendices, it will also serve scholars interested in compositional practice and theories of rhetoric and "affect."

Philip Russom

6. From George Buelow's review of Peter Williams's *Figured Bass Accompaniment*, *Musical Quarterly* 58 (1972): 313.