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## Comparing Secco Recitative Accompaniment by Contemporary Cellists and Cellists in the 19th Century: A Study of Social and Cultural Assumptions

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# Comparing Secco Recitative Accompaniment by Contemporary Cellists and Cellists in the 19th Century: A Study of Social and Cultural Assumptions

Hilary Metzger

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The *recitativo secco*, those sung/spoken places in cantatas or operas where so much of the action and dialogue take place and where only occasional, single bass notes, with or without figures, are written in support of the vocal line.

Much research over the past 25 years has documented that, in earlier times, accompanying cellists often realized bass lines - in other words, they played the notes implicit in the harmonies - and that this practice was particularly frequent in the context of secco recitative accompaniment.<sup>1</sup> Until now, however, no comprehensive study had been undertaken documenting how cellists actually accompany secco recitatives today. Thanks to a residency research grant from the Orpheus Institute in Ghent Belgium, during the Spring of 2020, I launched an online questionnaire comprising 77 closed and open-ended questions concerning recitative continuo playing to over 249 professional continuo-playing cellists around the world.<sup>2</sup> The survey touched on all aspects of secco

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<sup>1</sup> Such as: David Watkin, "Corelli's Op.5 Sonatas: 'Violino e violone o cimbalò?'" *Early Music*, 24, No. 4 (Nov., 1996): 645–663; Valerie Walden *One Hundred years of Violoncello: a History of Technique and Performance Practice 1740-1840* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Claudio Bacciagaluppi, 'Die Pflicht des Cellisten und der General Bass in der Romantik' *Spielpraxis der Saiteninstrumente in der Romantik* Brotbeck, Roman and Gerhard, Anselm eds. (Bericht des Symposiums in Bern, 18.–19. November 2006): 138-155; Robert Smith, *Basso Continuo Realization on the Cello and the Viol* (Master's thesis, Amsterdam Conservatory, Feb. 2009), <https://baroquebass.com/portfolio/basso-continuo-realisation/>; Nathan H. Whittaker, *Chordal Cello Accompaniment: The Proof and Practice of Figured Bass Realization on the Cello (1660-1850)* (DMA dissertation, University of Washington, 2012); Christopher Andrew Suckling, *The Realization of Recitative in Handellian Opera: Current and Historical Practices*, (DMA dissertation, City University of London, 2015); John Lutterman, "Cet Art est la Perfection du Talent: Chordal Thorough Bass Realization and Improvised Solo Performance on the Viol and the Cello in the eighteenth century," in *Beyond Notes, Improvisation in Western Music of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. R. Rasch (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011): 111–128; Giovanna Barbati "Il n'exécute jamais la Basse telle qu'elle est écrite' The Use of Improvisation in Teaching Low Strings" in *Musical Improvisation in the Baroque Era*, ed. Fulvia Morabito (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019): 117–149 ; Marc Vanscheeuwijck 'The Violoncello of the Bonocini Brothers' in *I Bononcini: da Modena all'Europa (1666-1747)*, ed. M. Vanscheeuwijck (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2020): 85-10.

<sup>2</sup> This is the number of known recipients. As some respondents forwarded the form directly to other colleagues, I do not know the exact number of cellists who received this survey. My heartfelt thanks to the following people for various roles: Etienne Parizet from INSA Lyon for his invaluable statistical help in interpreting the data; Joseph Tan, my second coder; Daphne Rosne; Christina Stabourlos; Tom Beghin and his research cluster at the Orpheus Institute in helping to devise and process the questionnaire; Joseph Carver, Carla Babelegoto, Marilou de Croock, and Servaes Dewispelaere for helping the author experiment with, perform, and record secco recitative accompaniment during the residency; and to Marc Vanscheeuwijck, George Kennaway, Kate Bennet Wadsworth, Agnes Klingenberg, Marilyn Smith, and Robert Brager for their critical readings of this article.



recitative accompaniment practice, including instrumentation, bass line articulation, harmonic realization, rehearsal protocol, seating plans, leadership roles, feedback from others, and (self-)evaluation. This article summarizes the results of this inquiry and compares current assumptions about appropriate instrumental roles and implied levels of social dominance within the continuo group with the expectations that were generally prevalent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

The 105 questionnaire respondents (52 men and 53 women) were from 18 countries and well distributed by age. Most were experienced continuo players: 62 percent had already accompanied secco recitatives in over 40 different productions, and an additional 20 percent of respondents had played in at least 20. While all respondents were guaranteed anonymity, some chose to write to me after completing the survey.

The list of questionnaire recipients initially comprised professional continuo-playing cellists I knew either from my concert career in Europe, the United States and Australia, or from their reputation. I then asked these colleagues, as well as other non-cellist musicians in different countries, to forward me the contact information of cellists I did not know. Those players themselves frequently proposed new names. Given the highly specialized requirements for my respondent pool, this ‘snowball’ recruiting method was the best way to ensure a diverse and relatively random sample of continuo cellists. Just as importantly, it also created a group of participants large enough to permit meaningful statistical analysis.

### METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Though the questions were asked in English, respondents were encouraged to answer in the language of their choice. Nine responses were at least partially in French, one in Dutch, and one in German. All other respondents answered only in English. The fact that English was often not the respondents’ native tongue occasionally created misunderstandings or false responses, but most of the time, the answers were vivid, generous, personal, and informative.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information concerning earlier lower string recitative accompaniment practice, see Hilary Metzger, ‘National Styles in Lower String Accompaniment of Secco Recitatives in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries’ in ed. Livio Ticli, *Figured Bass Accompaniment in Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2024): 139-164.

Self-reporting constituted another potential methodological weakness. Self-reported behavior has been proven to be inaccurate in measuring things such as people's eating and drinking habits or their cell-phone use, especially when participants believe their behavior is not admirable.<sup>4</sup> As researchers who study early recordings know all too well, often the words that early twentieth-century performers used to describe good performance techniques in their instrumental methods or in other written instructions were radically at odds with the playing they left us on recordings, at least for twenty-first-century readers and listeners.<sup>5</sup> It is certainly possible, therefore, that even when respondents knew their words were anonymous, they might not have been completely and objectively accurate in their responses, particularly since they were describing their playing to a colleague.<sup>6</sup>

Arguably, it would have been more precise to document the practice of contemporary recitative accompaniment performance by examining commercially released and archived recordings, postings on social media, photos, and reviews. I did not choose that path because basing conclusions on available recordings and public documentation would probably be incomplete and would likely under-represent less well-known or under-funded groups. Furthermore, analyzing the words artists chose to describe their playing can give us more information about their aesthetic values than just the sound recording. Intent, preference, (self-)criticism, regret, pride, and resentment can all be ascertained from words used in responses but not as easily from the playing itself. Additionally, the degree to which chance or compromise play a role in any given recording process can never be fully known, but these factors can often be quite significant. Analyzing the cellists' self-reported behavior, therefore, allows for a more complete understanding and for greater sociological insights. The subjectivity of the performer's perception not only depicts a certain reality but also plays a significant role in shaping the objective outcome as well.

The most important limitation of my research involves the time periods of the recitative repertoire most frequently played by the questionnaire respondents.

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<sup>4</sup> Lars T. Fadnes, Adam Taube, and Thorkild Tylleskär, "How to identify information bias due to self-reporting in epidemiological research," *The Internet Journal of Epidemiology* 7, no. 2 (2009): 28-38; Hanley Paul F. and Nikhil Sikka, "Bias caused by self-reporting distraction and its impact on crash estimates," *Accident Analysis & Prevention* 49 (November 2012): 360-365. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aap.2012.02.008>.

<sup>5</sup> Neal Peres Da Costa, *Off the Record: Performing Practice in Romantic Piano Playing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> I had identified myself as a fellow continuo cellist in my introductory email attached to the survey.

Some 91 percent of respondents reported that music written between 1700 and 1760 represented 50 or more percent of their secco recitative accompaniment practice, whereas a mere 5 percent described late eighteenth- and -nineteenth-century repertoire as representing at least half of their recitative work. One could argue that the sample size playing this later repertoire is too small to engage in any comparative analysis between contemporary practice (as documented through the questionnaire) and recitative accompaniment in this later repertoire (as documented in the plethora of methods, reviews, orchestral material, seating plans, and other documents that describe this practice during this later time).

In terms of the broader examination of the cultural and sociological issues that influence our performative choices, however, it does not matter which period we choose. My point here is not to imply that cellists today are being a-historical if they do not imitate nineteenth-century recitative practice in a Bach cantata. Rather, I hope to show how the acceptable roles and the implied levels of prestige attributed to different instruments and to their players are crucial to a complete understanding of performance practice for any period. These assumptions changed over time and varied across different geographical areas, but they are always present and surreptitiously shape our performance decisions. When assumptions of dominance within the continuo group from other time periods (indeed, from any time-period), are shown to be quite different from those of our own era, it allows us to see our own prejudices as less immutable or inherently normative.

### INSTRUMENTATION

According to the questionnaire responses, virtually all cellists nowadays frequently accompany recitatives in groups that contain a keyboard instrument and 85 percent of respondents often play in continuo combinations consisting only of the cello and one keyboard instrument.<sup>7</sup>

The other ‘typical’ continuo instruments (such as double bass, lute, or bassoon) are rather frequently ‘added on’ to this cello-keyboard core. Some non-keyboard combinations were listed as possible frequent options, such as the cello-lute duo (19 percent of respondents frequently accompany recitatives this way) and cello alone (7 percent). Crucially for this study, 56 percent of continuo cellists today do not regularly accompany recitatives in a group that includes a double bass and only one cellist accompanies regularly in a duo formation with only a double bass partner.

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<sup>7</sup> Respondents could choose more than one frequent instrumental combination.

This insignificant role for the double bass in recitative accompaniment was certainly not true in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sources from Prague<sup>8</sup> and Vienna<sup>9</sup> show how the cellist was instructed to omit the printed note, leaving it for the double bass alone, thus permitting the higher instrument to play other chordal voicings. In Germany, cello-double bass recitative accompaniment, without a keyboard instrument but with harmonic cello playing, was common during the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> In Italy, the two instruments even had special and equivalent titles: *violoncello al cembalo* and *contrabasso al cembalo*. Several Italian sources, even well into the twentieth century, discuss how the two players accompanied recitatives, though often also in combination with a keyboard instrument during the first part of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> And of course, in London, starting in 1794 and lasting for nearly half a century, the cellist, Robert Lindley, and the bassist, Domenico Dragonetti, accompanied operatic recitatives, without a keyboard instrument, to international acclaim.

In fact, in Italy particularly, where the secco recitative genre continued for a longer time, the double bass was perhaps viewed as more indispensable or important than the cello. Nineteenth-century Italian orchestras often had twice as many basses as cellos, and in ballet orchestras the cellos were sometimes absent altogether.<sup>12</sup> This libretto from a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at La Fenice in 1836, lists the principal string players from highest to lowest,

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard Stiasny *Violoncell-Schule* (Schott: Mainz, c. 1829): 21-50. Stiasny was principal cellist at the Prague Opera.

<sup>9</sup> Ferdinand Kauer, *Kurzgefasste Anweisung das Violoncell zu spielen* (Vienna: Artaria, 1788), 12; Franz Simandl *Neueste Methode des Contrabass-Spiels*, Teil I: *Vorbereitung zum Orchesterspiel* (Heilbrun: C. F. Schmidt, 1890): 120-26. Simandl was principal bass at the Vienna Court Opera.

<sup>10</sup> Franz Joseph Fröhlich, *Violoncell-Schule, nach den Grundsätzen der besten über dieses Instrument bereits erschienenen Schriften* (Bonn: Simrock, c. 1810): 89; Ferdinand S. Gassner, *Dirigent und Ripienist, für angehende Musikdirigenten, Musiker und Musikfreunde Karlsruhe* (C.T. Groos, 1844, re-edited Straubenhardt: Antiquariat-Verlag Zimmermann, 1988): 118.

<sup>11</sup> Giuseppe Scaramelli, *Saggia sopra i doveri di un Primo Violino Direttore d'Orchestra*, (Trieste: 1811): 44; Francesco Galeazzi, *Elementi teorico-pratici di Musica*, second ed. (Ascoli: Francesco Cardi, 1817): 258; Guglielmo Quarenghi, *Metodo de Violoncello* (Milan: Editore Musicale, 1877), Part III section 1; Isaia Billè, *Nuovo Metodo per Contrabbasso* (Milan: Ricordi, 1922), Part I, iv: 54.

<sup>12</sup> Renato Meucci, "La trasformazione dell'orchestra in Italia al tempo di Rossini," in Paolo Fabbri, ed., *Gioachino Rossini 1792-1992. Il testo e la scena* (Pesaro: 1994): 431- 465, 438, 439.

but nonetheless places the principal double bassists ahead of the principal cellists.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 1** Libretto to *Lucia di Lammermoor*, La Fenice, 1836

**Professori d'Orchestra**

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*Direttore d'Orchestra e primo Violino*  
MARES GAETANO

*Spalla al Direttore*  
BALESTRA LUIGI

*Primo Violino de' Bailli*      *Spalla al primo Violino de' Bailli*  
CAPITANO GIROLAMO      OLIVIERI GIUSEPPE

*Primo Violino de' Secondi*  
MOZZETTI PIETRO

*Primo Viola*  
RICCI FRANCESCO

*Primo Contrabbasso dell' Opera*      *primo Contrabbasso per Bailli*  
FORLICO GIUSEPPE      LOTTI ANGELO

*primo Violoncello per l'Opera*      *primo Violoncello per Ballo*  
TONASSI PIETRO      FORAMITI NICOLÒ

*Primo Oboe e Corno Inglese*  
MACCHINETTI GIUSEPPE

*primo Flauto ed Ottavino*      *primo Clarino e Quartino*  
MANTORATTI GIOVANNI      PEZZANA LODOVICO

*primo Fagotto*      *primo Corno*  
D'AZZI VINCENZO      ZIFFRA ANTONIO

*primo Tromba da Tiro*  
PIERESCA GIOVANNI

*primo Trombe a chiave a sordina*  
MAJOLA ANGELO, FIDORA ADRIANO

*Timpanista*  
ROSSI CARLO

*Arpa*  
GOUJON CAROLINA

*pittura delle Scene*      *Musichista*  
BAGNARA FRANCESCO      FERRETTI DANIELE

*Membro dell' I. R. Accademia*      *Attraccista*  
*di Belle Arti*      GALLINA PIETRO

*Festiarlo*  
di proprietà dell'IMPRESA  
*Incestore e Direttore del Festiarlo*  
GUIDETTI GIOVANNI

*Iluminatore*  
POZZANA PIETRO

In analyzing the words that today's cellists use to describe how they change their playing when accompanying with different instruments, it appears that they try to compensate for the particularities or limitations of others. With a harpsichord, for example, respondents reported often opting to play 'longer' or 'more melodically'; with an organ, many cellists play shorter notes or with more articulation; and with a lute, they pay more attention to balance and often sustain the bass lines more loudly than usual. If several instruments are playing the harmonies, cellists will abstain from realizing in order 'to avoid havoc' or because 'it isn't necessary.'

These words demonstrate a team-oriented approach to accompanying; indeed, references to a 'continuo team' occurred 23 times by respondents in the open-ended questions. But one could also argue that these cellists are denying themselves a certain degree of autonomy or agency in their interpretative decisions because in each of the cases cited above, they are predominantly changing or restricting their playing in order to accommodate and compensate for the particularities or wishes of other continuo players.

<sup>13</sup> Donizetti, Gaetano. 'Lucia di Lammermoor' libretto (Venice : La Fenice, 1836).  
[http://archiviostorico.teatrolafenice.it/scheda\\_0a.php?ID=3464](http://archiviostorico.teatrolafenice.it/scheda_0a.php?ID=3464).

When a double bass is in the continuo group, however, the language used by cellists proves that the reverse is true. Here, cellists feel ‘free’ and able to dictate the terms themselves: ‘free to drop the bass note,’ free ‘to be more active,’ free to ‘fill out the chord,’ for examples. It is the *absence* of the double bass that places restrictions on the cellists’ behavior, as in those cases they are ‘obligated’ to play the bass notes themselves. When the double bass is present, cellists describe themselves as having greater agency.

Obviously, this difference in choice of words is due in part to an acoustical truth: a double bass is lower than a cello and when it ensures the lowest note of the chord, there are more choices in chord voicing available to the harmonizing cellist. But I would argue that this language also reveals a larger issue of perceived dominance within the continuo group.

In general, the harmonic instruments in a continuo group are assumed to have more prestige and authority than the instruments that play only the printed bass note. For example, three-quarters of all cellists who today play recitatives in opera productions say that the keyboard instrument is present for more recitative rehearsals than they are, proving that it is more ‘indispensable.’ But since the cello can be both a harmonic and a melodic instrument, it is ‘ranked’ somewhere in the middle in terms of prestige of instruments in the continuo group. This explains the instinctive deference toward some instruments and the assertion of autonomy (or even the derision) toward others.

As one respondent wrote:

*With harpsichord; less consonants and more shapes*  
*With lute, theorbo; ... adding more water colors like variations*  
*With “good” bassoons; same concept as keyboards ...*  
*With contrabass; forget [it]*

One can debate whether these comments are funny or offensive. But if one were to use ‘good’ (with its ironic quotation marks) to describe a keyboard player instead of a bassoonist, for example, or if one were to substitute the word ‘harpsichord’ for ‘contrabass,’ the responses would simply make no sense. The cellist here assumes (and the reader can understand, if not share) an implicit level of superiority over the instruments that do not play the harmonies.

Harmonic improvisation has historically also been viewed as prestigious because it requires theoretical musical study and a combination of aural, intellectual, and technical gifts. We see this higher status of harmonic accompaniment in the language used to discuss accompaniment playing by cellists in earlier times. Cellists who were playing only the written bass note in an accompaniment were described in very different terms than those who realized the harmonies in the same role.



In the Paris Conservatory Method for Cello (or ‘basse’) from 1804, after many examples of solo playing, the authors refer to the accompanimental role of the cello in rather condescending language, claiming to “remind us of the instrument’s primitive functions, and viewing it as a simple accompanimental bass [instrument]”.<sup>14</sup> But the language is radically different in the next paragraph, when discussing cellists who do not just ‘accompany’ but who realize the chords in a recitative: “This art is the epitome of talent, because being able to execute it presumes all forms of acquired knowledge and the intelligence necessary to apply them.”<sup>15</sup>

An anonymous review from the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* from 1799-1800 reads: ‘The cellist who plays only the bass note in the recitative, either does not understand the obligations of his instrument, or is at best a fiddler, to whom figured bass is unchartered territory (*terra incognita*).’<sup>16</sup> The disdain from the author for a ‘fiddler,’ who plays just his written part, and the distinction between such a player and a true ‘cellist,’ a musician who has received theoretical training in music and demonstrates it in his execution on the instrument, is further accentuated by the author’s use of Latin. In case we had doubt, the writer is clearly placing himself in the group of the well-educated.

### PLACEMENT IN THE OPERA PIT

Seating an orchestra in an opera pit is a difficult enterprise: it is virtually impossible to please everyone. Questions of audibility, sight lines, freedom of movement, acoustics, and ‘historical accuracy’ form a quagmire of opposing and unsolvable demands. But our assumptions concerning social and instrumental prestige also play a large role.

In his analysis of modern orchestral seating plans in France, for example, Bernard Lehmann has noted that string players today, who are statistically more likely than the wind or percussion players to come from higher socio-economic

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<sup>14</sup> ‘... rappeler [sic] à ses fonctions primitives, et le regarder comme simple Basse d’Accompagnement’ Pierre Baillot, Jean-Henri Levasseur, Charles-Simon Catel, Charles Nicolas Baudiot, *Méthode de Violoncelle* (Paris: Imprimerie du Conservatoire, 1804): 137.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Cet art est la perfection du talent parce qu’il suppose toutes les connaissances acquises pour y parvenir, et en plus l’intelligence nécessaire pour en faire l’application.’ Baillot et al, *Méthode de Violoncelle*: 137.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Der Violoncellist, welcher im Recitativ nur die Bassnoten herunterstreicht, versteht die Pflicht seines Instrumentes nicht, oder ist höchstens ein Fiedler dem der Generalbass *terra incognita* ist’ *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* ii, 1799-1800: 35.

backgrounds, are always placed closer to the public. Also, the audience members seated in the expensive ground floor ‘orchestra’ section often have a good view of only soloists, conductors and string players, - i.e. the musicians most likely to share their socio-economic status. As the seats in the concert hall are higher and further away from the stage, they are not only less expensive, but the audience gains greater visibility of the instrumentalists who hail from less privileged families.<sup>17</sup> In most opera pit seatings today, only (a few) string players have a partial view of the stage.

When asked about their own preferences, continuo cellists today rank acoustics for the singers on stage as the most important factor in seating decisions (73 percent),<sup>18</sup> followed closely by being able to see the other members in the continuo group (61 percent). Historical accuracy and sight lines for the public (each at 28 percent) were the least important factors for my respondents.

About one-fifth of all cellists (22 of 104) read off the keyboard player’s part always or most of the time.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, the most important factor in determining this behavior was one’s country of education: cellists who studied continuo playing exclusively in Europe were much more likely to share a stand with a keyboard player than cellists who had studied elsewhere.<sup>20</sup>

It appears as if the continuo group is central, often geographically, and certainly conceptually, to our current understanding of good operatic execution. The keyboard instrument is in the middle of the pit for 64 percent of respondents. While 86 percent of respondents say that the continuo group members all sit close to one another always or most of the time, only 46 percent of continuo cellists are seated with the rest of the cello section always or most of the time.

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<sup>17</sup> Bernard Lehmann, *L’orchestre dans tous ses états : ethnographie des formations symphoniques* (Paris : Editions de la découverte, 2002), 223-224.

<sup>18</sup> From their words in other responses, many may have construed these words to mean the cellist must be able to hear the singers, not that the singers are able to hear the continuo group.

<sup>19</sup> One respondent did not answer the question making the n = 104, not 105.

<sup>20</sup> This test compared cellists trained exclusively in Europe compared to cellists trained exclusively outside of Europe. The sixteen cellists who trained in both European and non-European countries were excluded for the comparison. There was a 99.01% chance that the correlation with country of education was not a coincidence.

An exception is made for the double bass (what else?), however, which is never or usually not in the middle of the pit half of the time.<sup>21</sup> More than two-thirds (69 percent) of continuo cellists today are not seated next to the double bass most or some of the time that they accompany recitatives in operas.

Even among cellists who list the double bass as a member of their frequent continuo instrumental combinations, these figures are similar: 53 percent usually sit in the middle of the pit, and yet 44 percent of them say that the bass is rarely or never there. One respondent wrote, after saying that the bass is 'sometimes' in the middle of the pit next to him, 'but we had to fight for it.'

The fact that the double bass will obstruct the view of the stage is often given as a reason for its extraneous pit placement. The prominence of this large instrument bothers people. As one respondent amusingly described the quest to find a 'historically accurate' orchestral placement that works for everyone:

*Start with an attempt to reconstruct historical setup in the pit, then singers complain they can't hear a thing. Try and get used to it, change something. But it doesn't sound good in the hall, change again. The double bass scrolls/tympanist's head are annoying the stage director, change more. Musicians then try to fiddle chairs until they can both bow whole bows and see at least two key players... Historical accuracy of seating plan[s] is easier to try for on a big concert stage, in itself an anachronism.*

A reviewer of a recent opera production using historical orchestral placement wrote:

*There was also the scroll of the bass fiddle (and the bass player's head) blocking the view of the stage, with the prompter standing next to him. Now, this may have made sense to Crutchfield - and, as I mentioned, he said it was true to the opera's period - but to say the musician placement seemed odd would be an understatement.<sup>22</sup>*

For the readers who think that placing the double bass toward the extremities of the opera pit is normal or necessary, it should be noted that in the nineteenth century, there were several examples of middle-of-the-pit double bass placement that would have necessarily obstructed a view of the stage, including:

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<sup>21</sup> Again, this figure is calculated by subtracting the NA responses (19) from the total number of responses: 104 - 19 = 85. There were 12 'never' and 31 'rarely' middle-of-the-pit-placed double basses = 43. 43/85 = 50 %.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Sasanow, review of Teatro Nuovo's production of *Tancredi* by Rossini, in 'Broadway World,' August 1, 2018.

L'Académie Royale, (Paris, 1820),<sup>23</sup> the Kärtnertor Theater, (Vienna 1821-22),<sup>24</sup> La Scala, (Milan 1825),<sup>25</sup> and the Dresden Opera, (1844).<sup>26</sup>

Why might earlier opera goers have been less annoyed by the prominent placement of the double bass than concert goers are today? First, up until the mid-nineteenth century, going to the opera was not a silent, reverent affair with all one's attention directed to the stage.<sup>27</sup> Members of the public talked, played cards, ate, and drank, particularly during comic operas where the secco recitative genre continued for a longer time.<sup>28</sup> Also, the parterre section of the theater nowadays has very expensive seats whereas in earlier times, the boxes on the balconies were reserved for the wealthier patrons. From this higher level, the double bass's position anywhere in the pit would have posed less of a visual obstruction. In some of these theaters, like the Kärtnertor Theater, it was customary to stand in the parterre, perhaps making the double bass' obstruction less noticeable as well.<sup>29</sup>

But our current assumption that the 'lowly' double bass is not worthy of such central treatment is clearly also at cause here. No one today is up in arms when the conductor's gestures impede their view of the diva's toes.

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<sup>23</sup> Hervé Audéon, Damien Colas, and Alessandro Di Profio, "The Orchestras of the Paris Opera Houses in the Nineteenth Century" in ed. Niels Martin Jensen et Franco Piperno, *The Opera Orchestra in eighteenth- and nineteenth-Century Europe, I: The Orchestra in Society*, Vol. 1 (Berlin, Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag GmbH, 2008): 233.

<sup>24</sup> Theodore Albrecht, "Picturing the Players in the Pit: The Orchestra of Vienna's Kärtnertor Theater, 1821-1822," *Music in Art*, 34, No. 1/2, 'Music, Body, and Stage: The Iconography of Music Theater and Opera' (Spring–Fall 2009): 208.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory Harwood, "Verdi's reform of the Italian Opera Orchestra," *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 10, no. 2 (University of California Press, 1986): 140.

<sup>26</sup> Ferdinand Simon Gassner, *Dirigent und Ripienist, für angehende Musikdirigenten, Musiker und Musikfreunde* (Karlsruhe: C. T. Groos, 1844) op cit. Daniel J. Koury, *Orchestral Performance in the Nineteenth Century: Size, Proportions, and Seatings* (University of Rochester Press, 1986): 250.

<sup>27</sup> James H Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Mary Hunter, *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna: A Poetics of Entertainment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999): 5.

<sup>29</sup> James van Horn Melton, "School, Stage, Salon: Musical Cultures in Haydn's Vienna" in eds., Tom Beghin and Sandor M Goldberg, *Haydn and the Performance of Rhetoric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007): 100.

## LEADERSHIP

Most cellists today accompany recitatives either with a keyboard-playing conductor, or with a keyboard player who is ‘just’ a member of the orchestra. Respondents were evenly split on which situation was preferable. The conductor/players have a clear, comprehensive vision of the work; playing with them can be interesting and easier to follow. They can, however, be distracted by all the other tasks and directing they must do. Sometimes, respondents felt that the conductor/player’s part is less well prepared instrumentally and they can tend to dictate to others how to play. Playing with a non-conductor keyboard player, on the other hand, was reported to be more collaborative; this musician is usually on top of the part and the cellist can take more initiative.

But all cellists say that the worst scenario occurs when ‘arm-waving’ conductors continue to make gestures during the recitatives, even when not playing themselves. In these cases, all cellists agree, conductors should leave the continuo group alone.

11 cellists mentioned situations in which the conductors rewrote their harmonies. Seven reported cases of conductors writing in melodic passages for them to play. An additional nine cellists say they have played in works where the conductor heavily rewrote or recomposed their entire part in the recitatives. In this category, five respondents mentioned specifically one conductor, who is known to write out elaborate cello parts that are expected to be respected note for note.

While not wanting to discuss here the musical value of this conductor’s contributions (which personally I have admired on recordings), I do want to raise the sociological implications of such an act. There is no other situation in classical music settings that I can think of, where the conductor would presume to rewrite and dictate every note that a professional performer must play. Even when conductors suggest cadenzas or da capo variations for soloists, it is usually accepted if the singer changes these embellishments somewhat, and the added notes never extend to the singer’s entire part. The underlying assumption here is that cellists are not capable of realizing well, nor are they capable of recomposing the part in advance themselves, as the conductor has done, to make it sound as if they are improvising.

It is certainly possible that conductors who indulge in this practice feel they have never encountered a principal cellist who was able to realize harmonically. As we will see, quite a few cellists describe themselves as lacking training and experience in this domain. But the conductor’s perception may well be a self-fulfilling prophecy: at least one realizing cellist in the survey was happy to be able to decline a production because he knew that the conductor would not allow him to improvise himself. Such behavior on the part of conductors, it could be

argued, both reinforces and is the consequence of our current image of the cello as merely a ‘melodic’ instrument.

### SHARED LEADERSHIP

Orchestras today usually have only one conductor or musical director. But some historically-informed or period-instrument ensembles function with shared leadership in certain repertoire, i.e. in an environment where more than one musician directs the ensemble and makes the artistic decisions. Frequently, this sharing is simultaneous, such that at any given moment in rehearsals or in the concert there is not one clear leader, but rather two or even three.

In the survey, only 31 cellists (29.5 percent) reported playing at least occasionally with shared leadership, and slightly over half of these situations involved the first violinist as one of the leaders. Only one-third of these shared-leadership examples involved combinations with the continuo cellist as one of the leaders. Interestingly, half of the respondents who sometimes play under shared leadership say that it has no impact on how they play.

But even more surprisingly, among those cellists who did report a difference under shared as opposed to single leadership, there was no distinction if they were one of the leaders or not. Just the fact that the authority was shared was enough to make a difference to them. These differences typically included being ‘more active,’ having ‘more responsibility’ or ‘more freedom.’ Two cellists claimed to realize more under shared leadership than under the leadership of one director.

Nineteenth-century opera ensembles also shared leadership roles, but often in a more rotational fashion so that at any given point, only one musician was in charge. In Italy during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, the composer was present at the keyboard for the first few performances, after which direction went to the first violinist.<sup>30</sup> The new keyboard player, the regularly employed *maestro al cembalo* for the opera house, had a much less important role and was paid accordingly.<sup>31</sup> In 1811,

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<sup>30</sup> Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars: Performing Italian Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 72; Renato Meucci, ‘Changing in the role of the leader in nineteenth-century Italian orchestras’ *Spielpraxis der Saiteninstrumente in der Romantik* eds. Claudio Bacciagaluppi, Roman Brotbeck and Anselm Gerhard (Bericht des Symposiums in Bern, 18.–19. November 2006): 122-137.

<sup>31</sup> Claudio Bacciagaluppi, “ ‘Primo Violoncello al cembalo’ L’Accompagnamento del recitativo semplice nell’ottocento” *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia*, 41, No. 1 (2006): 115.

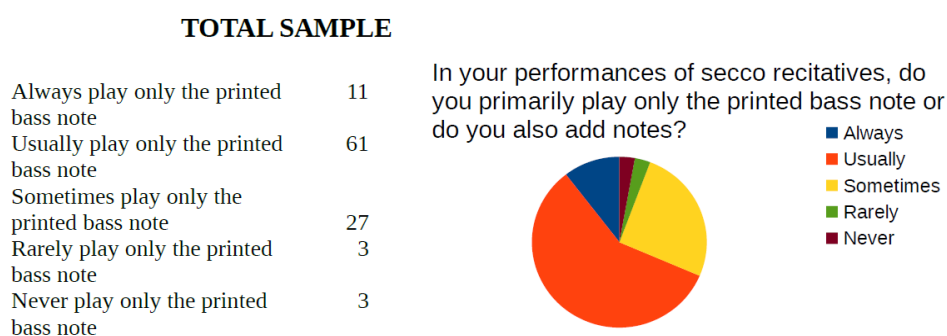
Giuseppe Scaramelli, the *primo violino* for the opera orchestra in Trieste, bitterly made fun of musicians who try to direct the opera from the keyboard.<sup>32</sup> Some written reports from the time state that while the keyboard player played with the first cellist and first bassist during the recitatives, he otherwise merely turned the pages of the score, ready to intervene only if the performers were terribly lost.<sup>33</sup>

## HARMONIC REALIZATION

Even in recordings with ‘historically-informed’ ensembles, it is still relatively rare to hear operatic secco recitatives accompanied with harmonic realization by cellists. This is especially true in later repertoire with such recitatives, like the operas by Mozart, Rossini, or Donizetti, that were composed at a time when written documentation of this practice by cellists is quite extensive. Despite the excellent research and publications cited previously, many performing musicians, including many continuo players, are still unaware of the historical evidence that documents accompanimental chordal playing by cellists.

The survey documented that 69 percent of continuo cellists (72 out of 105) claim ‘always’ or ‘usually’ to play only the printed bass note when accompanying recitatives. A mere 6 percent of the sample deviate from the printed bass note often or all the time.

**Figure 2 Realization tendencies by contemporary continuo cellists**



<sup>32</sup> Giuseppe Scaramelli, *Saggia sopra i doveri di un Primo Violino Direttore d'Orchestra*. (Trieste, 1811): 8, 37.

<sup>33</sup> Harwood, ‘Verdi’: 122.

Several cellists, however, add notes occasionally or some of the time. When cellists do add notes, 59 percent are ‘always’ or ‘usually’ choosing notes from the harmony, that is, not ornamental notes or melodic passages. About half of the sample is more likely to strike these harmonic notes simultaneously and half is more likely to arpeggiate their chords somewhat. When playing harmonies, cellists today are significantly more likely to choose notes that lie across strings (open-voicing); no cellist reported ‘always’ or ‘often’ realizing the chords with notes that lie on one string (closed-voicing).

Only 5 percent of cellists improvise these added notes all the time; 43 percent fix most or all of their added notes in advance.

Only 10 percent of the cellists who realize the harmonies in recitatives often realize the harmonies in other settings (e.g. in chamber music repertoire). Half of all cellists who might add harmonic notes in recitative situations, never or rarely do so in any other musical genre.

### **REASONS NOT TO REALIZE HARMONIES**

The breakdown of motivations for choosing to play only the printed bass note indicate that both individual preference and issues beyond the cellist’s control factor into this decision. (Note: some cellists chose more than one response.)

- Four cellists say it would not occur to them to do otherwise.
- 29 like the way their bass line sounds when no other notes are added.
- 18 say they lack the training or experience to be able to add other notes.
- 22 claim not to have enough rehearsal time to be able to add notes.
- 21 report that conductors or colleagues ask them not to add extra notes.

Clearly, some cellists do not find any additions to the printed bass line appropriate or pleasing. But if we add together the respondents who chose lack of training, lack of rehearsal and injunction from others, it is striking that *over half of this sample of non-realizing cellists would like to ornament or realize bass lines more amply or more often than they actually do.*<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> 55 different participants picked at least one of these three categories; as some cellists chose more than one response, the numbers for each category do not add up to 55.



### DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN OF HEAVY REALIZERS vs NON-REALIZERS

No statistical correlation exists between the age of the cellist and the degree of realization.

Nor does realization correlate with experience: cellists with a great deal of experience in accompanying recitatives (as documented by the number of productions in which they have accompanied recitatives and the percentage of their professional activity that involves recitative accompaniment) are just as likely to realize or not to realize.

The one issue that correlates with the propensity to realize is the country of education. Cellists who studied continuo playing exclusively in European countries are significantly more likely to realize harmonically than those cellists who were educated exclusively outside of Europe.<sup>35</sup>

**Table 1 Realization tendencies by country of education**

Q: In your performance of secco recitatives, do you primarily play only the printed bass note, or do you also add notes?

	Europe	Other
Always plays only the printed bass note	3	5
Usually plays only the printed bass note	44	8
Sometimes plays only the printed bass note	21	2
Rarely plays only the printed bass note	3	0
Never plays only the printed bass note	2	0

$$n = 88; p = .0047$$

*There is a 99.53% chance that the correlation with country of education is not a coincidence.*

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<sup>35</sup> To perform this correlation, I eliminated the cellists who were educated in both European and non-European countries, which left 73 exclusively European and 15 exclusively non-European trained cellists. For all correlations in my analyses, in order to be considered 'significant,' there must be a greater than 95 percent probability that the variance between two populations not be by chance. In this case a Mann-Whitney U test was used. There was a greater than 99 percent chance that the divergence between these two populations was not coincidental. The small sample sizes and the fact that so many cellists studied in more than one country did not permit a more detailed breakdown by individual country of education (see below). Here, and in all other geographical comparisons, the correlation with country of concert venue was less pronounced than the correlation with country of education.

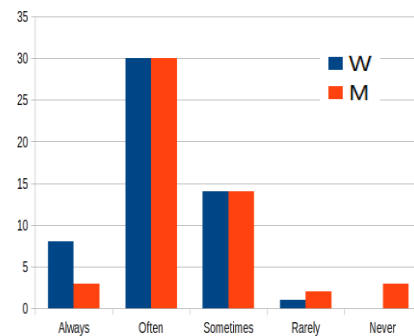
And gender matters as well. While there is no strong statistical correlation between gender and how often the cellist plays only the printed bass note, women and men are likely to realize the harmonies in two fundamentally different ways:

1. Women are significantly less likely to improvise their notes on the spot; they prefer to fix these added notes in advance. (99.2% chance that this behavior correlates with gender and is not coincidental.)
2. Women are significantly less likely to be the only realizing instrument in the continuo group. (There was a 99.5% chance that the divergence by gender was not just coincidental.)

**Figure 3 Realization tendencies by gender**

Q: In your performance of secco recitatives, do you primarily play only the printed bass note or do you also add notes?

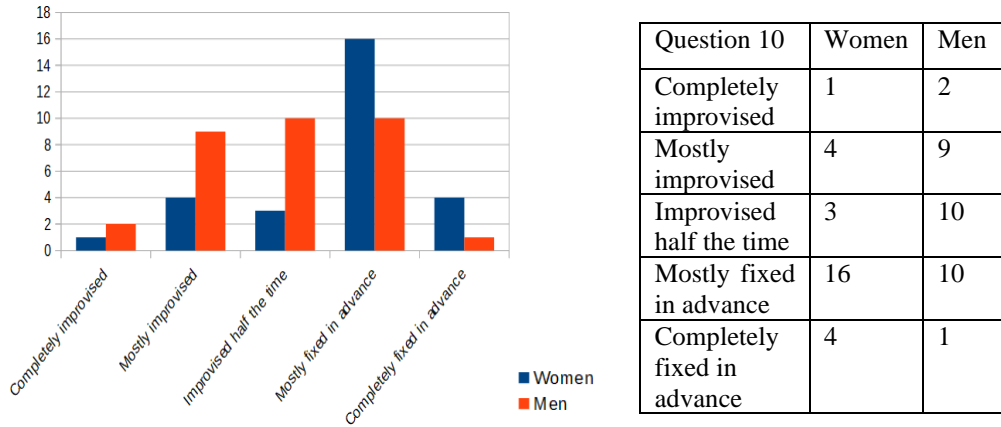
Q4	Women	Men
Always play only the printed bass note	8	3
Often play only the printed bass note	30	30
Sometimes play only the printed bass note	14	14
Rarely play only the printed bass note	1	2
Never play only the printed bass note	0	3



*There is no significant correlation with the self-reported tendency to realize and gender.  $n = 105$ ;  $p = .118$ . The differences seen on the extreme ends of the responses are not statistically significant due to the small sample size and the large correlation of the intermediate responses.*

**Figure 4 Spontaneous improvisation by gender**

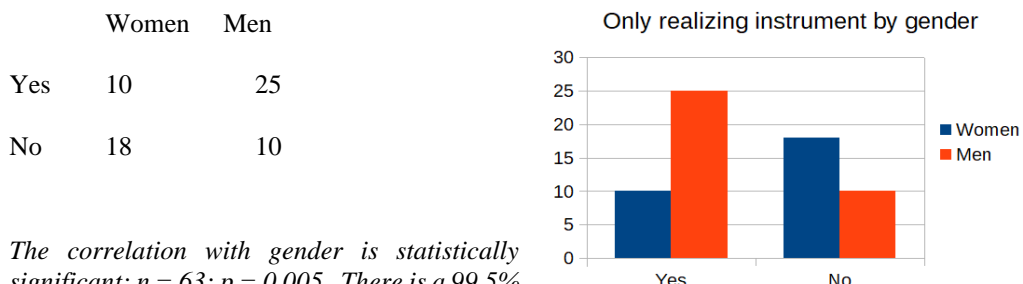
Q 10: Which number between 1 and 5 would you say most accurately reflects your continuo playing of recitatives, with 1 = completely improvised, spontaneous and likely to change from performance to performance and 5 = memorized or written-in and basically fixed from performance to performance?



The correlation of spontaneous improvisation with gender is statistically significant:  $n = 60$ ;  $p = 0.008$ . There is a 99.2% chance that the gender discrepancy is not a coincidence.

**Figure 4 Solo Realizing by Gender**

Q 15: Have you ever been the only realizing instrument in the continuo group for recitatives?



The correlation with gender is statistically significant:  $n = 63$ ;  $p = 0.005$ . There is a 99.5% chance that the gender discrepancy is not a coincidence

**INFLUENCE OF COUNTRY OF EDUCATION ON RECITATIVE PERFORMANCE PRACTICE**

The questionnaire showed that two issues of continuo practice correlated significantly with country of education: adding notes to the printed bass line

(here above) and sharing a stand with the keyboard player (shown earlier). These are typically ‘historically-informed performance practice’ techniques and they are significantly more common among European trained cellists than they are among cellists who studied exclusively outside of Europe. It may be that European conservatories place more emphasis on such ‘historical’ continuo training techniques, or perhaps that cellists who have not received much ‘historically-informed’ training are more prevalent in the professional continuo-playing circuit in non-European countries.<sup>36</sup>

During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although virtually all cellists realized the harmonies in their recitative accompaniments, there were also different national styles of accompaniment. For example, Italian trained cellists probably tended to play fuller chords in a quasi-simultaneous stroke,<sup>37</sup> whereas English cellists were more likely to separate each note, even at times arpeggiating along one string.<sup>38</sup> French cellists may have mixed these two approaches, separating the lower notes and playing the upper two notes simultaneously.<sup>39</sup> The recitative accompaniment examples given by cellists in German-speaking countries privileged placing the singer’s opening note as the highest pitch in the chord. These cellists were willing to break the rules of good voice leading significantly more often than their French or Italian counterparts, though virtually all written-out examples of harmonic realization from cellists in the nineteenth century broke such rules to a certain extent.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Since the comparison eliminated those cellists who studied in both European and non-European countries, most cellists in the comparison were living and working in the continent where they had studied. Because of the relatively small sample size for individual countries and the fact that many cellists studied in more than one place, it was not possible with this questionnaire to come to statistically valid conclusions regarding continuo practice teaching within specific European countries.

<sup>37</sup> A quasi-simultaneous chordal execution in recitative accompaniment is advocated in the cello methods by Pietro Rachele (1825), Gaetano Braga (1873), and Guglielmo Quarenghi (1877), and is very audible in an anonymous recording of Rossini’s *Barber of Seville* from Milan, ca. 1915: <https://youtu.be/8CiaAiCAOq0>.

<sup>38</sup> The English technique of separating the notes of the chord individually in recitative accompaniment is documented in the cello method by J. G. C. Schetky (c. 1811): 38; in concert reviews by Edward Holmes (1828): 129; by G. A. Mcfadden in *The Musical Times* (December, 1872): 688; as well as in W. S. Rockstro’s article on ‘Secco Recitative’ in Grove’s *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1883, vol III: 455.

<sup>39</sup> This technique was particularly insisted on by Charles Baudiot, first cellist at the Italian opera under Napoleon and professor at the Paris Conservatory. It is mentioned in both the Paris Conservatory Cello Method from 1804 and in Baudiot’s own cello method from 1826.

<sup>40</sup> Poor voice leading in the chordal recitative accompaniment is particularly noticeable in Jean Baumgartner’s cello method from 1774 (he trained in Germany) and in Bernard Stiasny’s method from 1829 (he was principal cellist at the opera in Prague). Cellists Baudiot (1826), Quarenghi (1877), and especially John Gunn (London, Scotland, 1802) all pay much more

## INFLUENCE OF GENDER ON RECITATIVE REALIZATION PRACTICE

The gender correlation is more nuanced. It is important to remember that the questionnaire documented that women are just as likely as men to add notes to the bass line, but they are less likely to do so in solo situations and less likely to improvise their harmonies on the spot. Studies on jazz musicians have shown that women are also underrepresented in roles requiring spontaneous improvisation: though 39 percent of all professional ‘classical’ musical performers in France during the first decade of the twenty-first century were women, only 4 percent of all professional jazz instrumentalists in France were female.<sup>41</sup> Other studies have shown that while girls and women are evaluated by others as being as competent as boys and men in jazz improvising skills in secondary school and in University settings, the female jazz students are less confident and more anxious about improvising than males.<sup>42</sup>

But comparing improvisation in continuo practice with the same skill in jazz performance may not be entirely fair. Unlike improvisation in jazz playing, realization by continuo cellists is still a somewhat rare event; audiences and colleagues do not usually expect to hear more than the printed bass note from cellists. Many cellists have not been taught realization techniques at all during their studies. Furthermore, the cello is generally louder than a lute or a harpsichord, so any false note or inappropriate harmony from the cellist is very audible. It takes a certain amount of *chutzpah* for a cellist to deviate from the norms in such a situation, as the risks of being perceived as pretentious, arrogant, or just bad are rather high. It might be that the fear of being seen in such a negative light by others tends to weigh more heavily on female psyches than on male ones, so women tend more often to prepare their harmonic realizations in advance or prefer to avoid being the only realizing instrument. Many studies on risk aversion since the 1980s in non-musical situations have shown that women tend to be more risk averse than men, although recent research on this subject often shows a more nuanced or occasionally less strong correlation.<sup>43</sup>

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attention to voice leading in their harmonic accompaniments, though they too break these rules at times. See also, Bacciagaluppi, ‘Die Pflicht des Cellisten’ 2006: 147-151.

<sup>41</sup> Hyacinthe Ravet, *Musiciennes : Enquête sur les femmes et la musique* (Paris: Editions autrement, 2011): 31.

<sup>42</sup> Erin Wehr-Flowers, “Differences between Male and Female Students' Confidence, Anxiety, and Attitude toward Learning Jazz Improvisation,” *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 54, No. 4 (Winter, 2006): 337-349.

<sup>43</sup> See for example, James P. Byrnes, David C. Miller, and William D. Schafer. "Gender differences in risk taking: A meta-analysis." *Psychological bulletin* 125, no. 3 (1999), 367-383; Sylvia Maxfield, Mary Shapiro, Vipin Gupta, and Susan Hass. "Gender and risk: women, risk taking and risk aversion." *Gender in Management: An International Journal* 25, no. 7

Hyacinthe Ravet, in her excellent examination of gender in modern French orchestras, has shown that women who become soloists in wind sections feel that they are held to higher standards of perfection than their male colleagues, and that they have no right to make a mistake without professional consequences.<sup>44</sup> If so, perhaps women who are principal cellists in continuo situations are simply deciding (consciously or not) that taking the risk to realize the bass line is not to their professional advantage.

Alternatively, it may be true, for solo realizing at least, that other colleagues or conductors are less likely to give the responsibility of realizing alone to a female cellist rather than to a male cellist or perhaps be less likely to hire female continuists in general. Male participants in my study were statistically more likely to have accompanied more secco recitatives productions than women had, whether or not they realized their accompaniments.<sup>45</sup> A recent study assessing automobile accident rates and gender showed that the greater number of male automobile accidents may be simply attributable to the fact that men drive much more often than women, and not necessarily to the fact that men take more risks while driving.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps lack of opportunity is the explanation of the behavioral differences we observe in female continuists as a group. This hypothesis is weakened, however, by the fact that for the group of respondents as a whole, there was no valid statistical correlation between harmonic realization and experience in recitative accompaniment.

Whatever the reason, the statistical record shows that social conditioning and cultural factors involving gender and national educational values are playing an important role in our current decisions about improvising and realizing in recitative accompaniment. To avoid raising these subjects in our study of recitative accompaniment by lower string players is to talk about the wallpaper when the elephant is the room.

Some historical facts could be interpreted as associating harmonic improvisatory instrumental playing more closely with male musicians in earlier times as well, although it is important to remember that correlation does not prove causation. Women started to play keyboard instruments in very large

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(2010), 586-604; Elsaid, Eahab, and Nancy D. Ursel. "CEO succession, gender and risk taking." *Gender in Management: An International Journal* (2011): 499-512.

<sup>44</sup> Ravet, 2011: 121.

<sup>45</sup> There was a 95.5 % chance that the number of recitative accompaniment productions correlated with gender.

<sup>46</sup> Mercedes Ayuso, Montserrat Guillen, and Ana María Pérez-Marín, "Telematics and Gender Discrimination : Some Usage-Based Evidence on Whether Men's Risk of Accidents Differs from Women's" (MDPI, Riskcenter, Universidad de Barcelona, April 2016).

numbers at the end of the eighteenth century when the repertoire for the instrument changed: the harmonies in the bass lines were no longer realized but were written out by the composer. Ornamental or cadential improvisation was still required from pianists but harmonic realizing was no longer necessary. Similarly, the cello was perceived as a more appropriate instrument for male performers until the early twentieth century, at which point famous female cellists became much more common.<sup>47</sup> The demands on cellists to be able to realize harmonically in orchestral situations, and the written and recorded practice of cello harmonic realization died out at just the moment when women started to play the instrument in greater numbers.

From the earliest days of the Paris Conservatory, women were able to enroll in piano studies,<sup>48</sup> some of whom became excellent virtuosos on the instrument. Yet the study of harmony was reserved for men. Only by 1841 were women allowed their own course in harmony, which differed in content from the purely masculine course: the female option was destined for the accompaniment of others.<sup>49</sup>

These synchronous events could well have other explanations and much more awareness is needed about nineteenth-century female improvisatory or even compositional output. Florence Launay, for example, has shown that many female composers had their works performed in France during the late nineteenth century, but we are largely unaware of their output today.<sup>50</sup> Further study of how gender plays a role in harmonic improvisatory practice, both historically and in contemporary settings, is clearly necessary.

### CONTINUISTS AS LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS

I was curious to know whether the gender-linked distinction concerning harmonic realization mirrors other gender-linked tendencies in how continuo cellists view themselves or whether these issues are simply related to realization techniques in recitative accompaniment. Are the female continuo cellists, for

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<sup>47</sup> George Kennaway, *Playing the Cello 1780–1930* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), Ch. 7, ‘The Manly Cello?’

<sup>48</sup> Frédéric de La Granville, *Une Histoire du piano au Conservatoire de musique de Paris 1795 – 1850* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014): 34.

<sup>49</sup> Constant Pierre, *Règlementation de 1841 CCCLXXXIV* Titre II, Article V: 251.

<sup>50</sup> Florence Launay, “Les Musiciennes : De la pionnière adulée à la concurrente : Bref historique d’une longue professionnalisation,” *La Découverte: Travail, genre, et sociétés* N° 19 (2008/1): 41–63.

example, as likely as male cellists to see themselves as leaders? as competent? as appreciated by others in this role?

The results are somewhat mixed.

First the ‘good’ news: despite the fact that English was not the first language for most of the participants in my survey, I conducted searches on all the open-ended question responses for the following words: ‘lead,’ ‘direct,’ ‘authority,’ ‘follow,’ ‘support,’ ‘emotion,’ ‘feel,’ ‘help,’ ‘try,’ ‘lack,’ and ‘(in)experience.’ Each search led to absolutely no correlation with gender. Women and men were equally likely to call themselves ‘leaders’ or ‘followers.’ They all ‘support’ and ‘help’ the singers, ‘feel’ an issue is important and ‘try’ to play together with colleagues in equal proportions. Just as importantly, these words occurred in the same grammatical context, that is, women and men will use the first person singular, as in, ‘I led the entrance’ or ‘I follow the singer’ in similar numbers, and both groups used the third or second person with the same verbs: ‘the cellist must support’ or ‘you try to blend in with the continuo team.’ As has been shown elsewhere, the use of the first-person singular in performance instructions, combined with other rhetorical and grammatical choices, can be a significant indication of the reliability and the true meaning of those words.<sup>51</sup>

When asked if conductors (or singers or keyboard players) stopped the cellists from realizing as often as they wished, there also was no statistically relevant difference between the male and female responses. 46 percent of the men and 42 percent of the women feel that their realizations are sometimes impeded by colleagues.

However, with respect to figures of authority, and particularly with subjects related to improvising, issues of self-doubt or self-effacement appear to be more common among female cellists than among male cellists:

- Question 38 asked the cellists if conductors or keyboard players ever suggested (or dictated) what notes they should play.
- Question 39 asked if the cellist ever did the same for them.

In each instance, the respondent was asked if this situation happened: always, often, sometimes, rarely or never.

Women and men report receiving suggestions about added notes from their colleagues in equal amounts.

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<sup>51</sup> Hilary Metzger, ‘Their Tone of Voice: a literary analysis of the words of performers close to Brahms,’ presentation at *Performing Brahms in the 21st century*, Leeds University, June 30-July 2, 2015.



Male cellists are slightly more likely to offer suggestions to conductors and keyboard players than female cellists are, but not to a statistically significant degree.

However, a significant gender distinction arises in the relationship between the two questions. Male cellists are more likely to give more suggestions of what notes to play than they receive, while female cellists report receiving such suggestions more often than they give them (with a 95.8 % chance that this is a valid gender-related issue). In other words, women report more deferential comportment with respect to colleagues in positions of authority in terms of invention or improvisation.<sup>52</sup>

Both men and women mention their lack of experience with realization in equal amounts in the open-ended responses, but female cellists were twice as likely as male cellists to choose their ‘lack of experience and lack of training’ as the reasons they do not realize.<sup>53</sup>

And although women and men report similar amounts of ‘annoyed,’ ‘surprised,’ and ‘condemning’ reactions to their realizations from conductors, critics/publics, and colleagues, the female cellists reported receiving significantly less praise than men for their recitative accompanying, especially from conductors: *male cellists reported positive feedback from conductors twice as often as women.*

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<sup>52</sup> The fact that these two questions immediately followed one another may have influenced the outcome. It is possible that women did not feel comfortable portraying themselves as more talkative or more directive than their colleagues, and therefore selected an equal or lesser amount of criticism in question 39 than they had selected in question 38, whereas men may have less difficulty in describing themselves as the more verbal figure within the continuo group. Another example where self-reporting may be objectively inaccurate but nonetheless yields important data to understanding continuo group dynamics.

<sup>53</sup> The small number of cellists electing this response, only 18 (12 women and six men), makes this conclusion statistically weak.

### Figure 5 Suggestions from and for Conductors and Keyboard players

Q 38: Have conductors or keyboard players ever suggested (or dictated) what notes you should play?

<u>Q38</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Always	1	1
Often	2	3
Sometimes	26	24
Rarely	14	12
Never	10	12

Q 39: Have you ever done the same for them?

<u>Q39</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Always	0	0
Often	3	3
Sometimes	13	23
Rarely	18	14
Never	19	12

Difference between the two questions

<u>Q38-Q39</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
-1	22	13
0	26	27
1	5	12

-1 = give fewer suggestions than receive  
 0 = give and receive the same amount of suggestions  
 1 = give more suggestions than receive

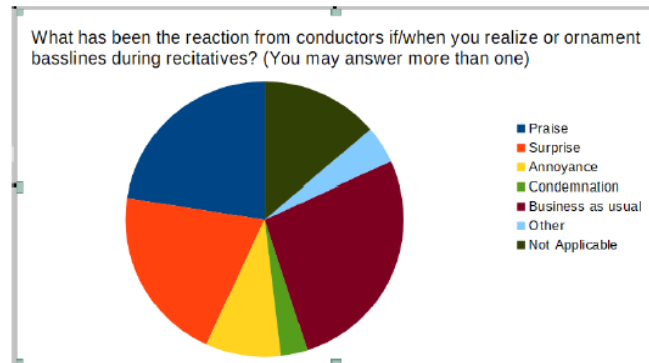
Mann-Whitney U test with continuity correction:  
 $n = 105$ ;  $p = 0.0265$ ;  $z = -2.2193$

*There is a 97.35% chance that this tendency correlates with gender.*

**Figure 6 Feedback from Conductors**

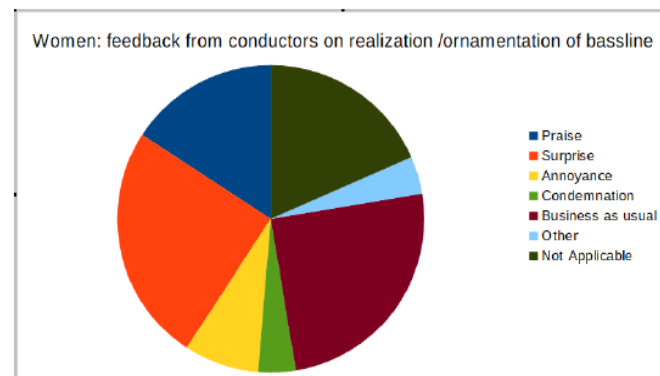
**ALL CELLISTS**

Praise	36
Surprise	33
Annoyance	14
Condemnation	5
Business as usual	43
Other	7
Not Applicable	22



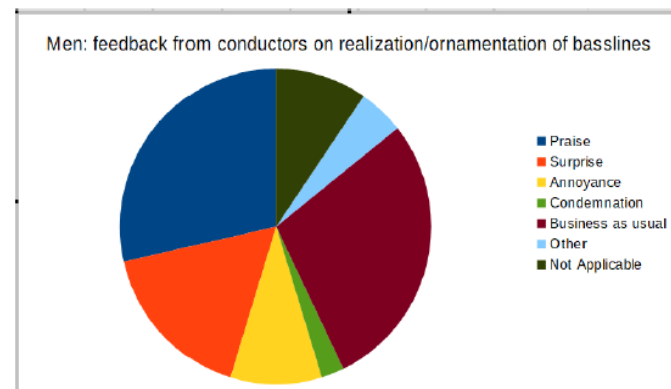
**WOMEN**

Praise	12
Surprise	19
Annoyance	6
Condemnation	3
Business as usual	19
Other	3
Not Applicable	14



**MEN**

Praise	24
Surprise	14
Annoyance	8
Condemnation	2
Business as usual	24
Other	4
Not Applicable	8



It is impossible to know whether all these self-reported results reflect truths in behavior or merely truths in our perception of behavior. (My apologies to the literary theorists out there who would claim they are one in the same.) Only the latter condition is actually documented here. This is particularly important in interpreting the difference reported in praiseworthy comments from conductors and critics, but the strong statistical discrepancy in this feedback makes us want to consider possible explanations.

Let us first assume that the participants are accurately reporting conductor feedback and that female cellists really are receiving less praise than men. Let us also leave aside the possibility that women as a group are simply less good in this role, which would be too professionally incriminating for this female, realizing-cellist author to examine here. Since we know that women are also more likely to fix their realizations in advance, could the lack of praise that they receive reflect the fact that their realizations are simply less surprising? Perhaps having heard the same added notes in each rehearsal, conductors are less likely to give positive feedback after concerts. Alternatively, could these (mostly male) conductors be offering less praise to female cellists because they are afraid that their positive comments might be misinterpreted?

If the reported accounts of praise are objectively inaccurate, why might that be? Are male cellists more inclined to report, remember, or exaggerate praise of their work? Or do women report fewer positive comments because, doubting themselves more, they seek outside confirmation of their abilities more often than men, and therefore they remember more acutely situations when positive confirmation from a person of authority could have been forthcoming but wasn't?

As with the gender distinction connected to the level of spontaneous improvisation in harmonic realization, the real story may be a question of experience or opportunity. For questions involving feedback on realization practice from conductors, critics and colleagues there were a disproportionately large number of N/A responses from women. This means, despite their previous words to the contrary, that women are actually not adding notes to the bass line as often as men, (at least not in settings when a conductor or critics were present), and/or that female continuo players do not play continuo roles in highly visible situations as often as men do. In other words, men are perhaps asked more often to accompany recitatives in larger projects, like big opera productions, which are always conducted and which are more likely to receive reviews. As in the study with the more frequent male drivers, a greater amount of experience for male cellists could also explain the increased amount of positive feedback from others.

In any case, though all cellists tend to defer to those musicians who can understand and play the harmonies quickly, women are still even more

deferential, and certainly more self-doubting, than men, but only when improvisation and harmonic realization are involved. Women are more likely to offer fewer improvisatory suggestions than they receive, they report less praise for their improvisations (especially from conductors and critics), and they are more inclined to describe their reluctance to improvise as a ‘lack’ on their part, rather than a situational impediment. And yet these same performers are just as likely as their male counterparts to call themselves ‘leaders’ in the continuo setting generally when improvisation is not specifically mentioned. The continuo group situation, with its lack of a precisely notated musical text and its absence of clear rules of instrumentation and execution, can be viewed as a microcosm where our culturally inherited ideas about self-esteem and appropriate musical roles come to the fore.

### RELIGIOSITY AND THE ‘PREACHER’ TONE OF VOICE

Slightly over half of the continuo cellists in the survey claim to change their accompaniment execution for religious music, and these cellists often claimed that religious music demands what one could call a more ‘sober’ approach. Six cellists claimed that religious music requires less ornamentation, and five cellists would be tempted to use less (or no) harmonization. Some cellists specifically indicated that they would not realize much with an organ in any circumstances.

But the most varied rhetoric in the responses to this question involved the music of J. S. Bach, which was referred to 21 times in the open-ended questions.

Though a few cellists (four) claimed to play Bach ‘theatrically,’ especially in the Passions, a large number of respondents said that Bach requires an even higher degree of restraint and sobriety than the music of other composers, particularly with respect to harmonic realization and improvisation:

- One cellist realizes the harmonies in Handel oratorios but not in Bach cantatas;
- another writes that it is ‘*difficult to add notes in Bach.*’
- and yet another quips: *You can kind of go nuts in a Vivaldi concerto but if you did the same thing in a Bach cantata you'd feel like a bit of a dick.*

It is understandable that performers do not add many melodic passages and ornaments if their desire is to remain subdued or dignified. But it is fascinating that for many of us, the realization of the harmonies that Bach himself wished to hear is also regarded as inappropriate and distasteful. This is not due to the spiritual content of the work, for religious works by other composers do not

necessarily face the same censure. Rather, we seem to feel that a cellist who plays anything other than the printed bass note is insulting Bach's compositional genius. Other 'great' composers are subject to similar, self-imposed improvisatory restrictions: judging from recordings, few cellists change the notes to the *ad libitum* fermatas in Beethoven cello sonatas, for example (but adding one's own cadenza in a work by Hummel, on the other hand, might be a good idea).<sup>54</sup>

Sources from the nineteenth century, however, show that cellists realized the harmonies in both secular and religious recitatives.<sup>55</sup> Felix Mendelssohn found it perfectly acceptable to write out the harmonies in the recitatives of the *St. Matthew Passion* for two celli and a double bass for a performance in Leipzig in 1841<sup>56</sup>. Here too, we cellists should examine the prejudices that we bring to this performance situation more closely.

The emotional tone of the rhetoric in some questionnaire responses sheds light on this issue of 'morality' with respect to harmonic realization by cellists in contemporary settings. Many cellists who often choose not to realize or ornament the bass line, describe the behavior of those who do so in rather 'objective' language, not judging them harshly, but clearly confident with their own approach:

- *I basically [do] not appreciate much ornament[ation]. I think everyone/every instrument has its own strengths and function... If we are into ornamentation, we can do it on our solo activities "tastefully" according to the period, style etc.*
- *During the past years the performance of secco recitative has become much more elaborate, more instruments, great variety in lengths of notes etc. I often find that distracting.*

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<sup>54</sup> For more discussion of instrumental improvisation in Bach's works, see John Lutterman, 'Recreating Historical Improvisatory Solo Practices on the Cello: C. Simpson, F. Niedt, and J. S. Bach on the Pedagogy of Contrapunctis Extemporalis' in *Musical Improvisation in the Baroque Era*, ed. Fulvia Morabito (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019): 241-259.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Franz Simandl, *Neueste Methode des Contrabass-Spiels Teil I Vorbereitung zum Orchesterspiel* (Heilbronn: C.F. Schmidt, 1890), 120; Carl Fischer, *Method for the Violoncello* (New York: Fischer, 1891): 100.

<sup>56</sup> Klaus Winkler, in Bach, Johann Sebastian/Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Felix, *St. Matthew Passion BWV 244* (Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 2009), Preface: xiii-xiv.

But other ‘non-realizers’ criticized the improvisations of cellists in significantly more forceful language, implying that adding notes was almost morally reprehensible:

- *The basic issues remain basic ensemble, perfect intonation, beautiful tone and above all, the kind of integrity that comes from viewing this as service to a greater good. There are plenty of basso-players who think this is an opportunity to strut their stuff, show off, force an outcome, etc. What a shame. I think many of them simply don't get what it takes to be a really good BC player. It's creative teamwork. You are the power behind the throne, and when you get it right, it's effortless and beautiful and transparent in a way that is simply magical.*
- *We are servant of the music, not servant of our ego.*

The ‘realizers,’ however, were more prone to self-examination, self-doubt, and often open to advice from colleagues. While they sometimes were frustrated with those who prevented them from adding as many notes as they wished, they never criticized their cello colleagues who play only the printed bass note.

- *Only coming from a colleague that would encourage realizations but in a very, I would say, conservative way. So no ornamentation other than harmonic realization, not doubling notes with other instruments in the continuo setting... so finally only a couple notes were added in the whole piece. Very well chosen and powerful however I must say.*
- *As I mentioned before, like I shouldn't maybe not realize too much since it seems a bit tricky (more like in a compassionate way), and this question, why to do it since the keyboard is already doing it?*
- *It is a part of rehearsal...you try things out and if it doesn't work or if some people have a good idea but needed to be planned and worked out between different instruments, then they would ask me to play less notes, or even don't play at all. But that is not a bad thing.*
- *In the country I perform in there is a certain closed mindedness to experimentation. Ornamenting and realizing a continuo line is still off the radar here and unfortunately I am a slave to the people who pay my bills (and my own uncertainty about when it should and shouldn't be done).*
- *We always experiment with our continuo realizations, and of course the conductor has his ideas about how she or he wishes a passage to sound. Keyboardists and occasionally singers may also make suggestions.*

The emotional tone of these words serves as the best evidence of what is actually going on in this field: non-realizers can be quietly self-assured because

what they do is still what usually happens in recitative performance. Realizers still cast themselves as searching or learning how to play better. Perhaps the occasional outburst of strong criticism by non-realizers toward realizers is the best indication of all that this ‘threatening’ harmonic accompaniment practice by cellists is becoming somewhat more widespread.

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Performers in the field of historical performance traditionally focus on historical ‘objects’ such as instruments, manuscripts, methods, early editions, early recordings, paintings, letters, and reviews to draw conclusions about how musicians played music in earlier times. These discoveries have been crucial to more historically-informed performance. But the social, cultural, or literary contexts in which these objects existed has also been important to shaping our performance decisions. Currently, in secco recitative accompaniment settings, the double bass is viewed as less significant, or is even looked down upon. But in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, double basses were often essential in this role, allowing cellists to play more ample and varied harmonies. Sometimes these two instruments accompanied with no keyboard instrument present. (Here is a link to my exploration of such a possibility in a recitative excerpt from the first act of *La gazza ladra* by Rossini: <https://youtu.be/bYUW5GsefpQ>.)

The country of education has had an influence on recitative harmonic realization techniques of cellists throughout time. In contemporary settings, furthermore, the gender of the cellist is highly statistically predictive of harmonic realization practice, of rehearsal comportment related to improvisation, and of feedback received from others. Currently, European trained cellists are realizing more than those who trained elsewhere, and women are less spontaneous and less confident whenever they add any notes that are not printed on the page. These cultural distinctions are more predictive of a cellist’s behavior than many other criteria, such as the amount of professional experience or the cellist’s age. If performers continue to ignore cultural biases and social contexts in our historically-informed performance-practice research, our conclusions will be inaccurate and incomplete.

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