

Agazzari about continuo in 1607

Updated 17.3.1995

Agostino Agazzari (1578-1640) wrote important views about continuo practice in early Italian baroque music in his book 'Del sonare sopra il basso' 1607. The text is very, very useful also today!

Oliver Strunk published English edition in 1952 in his 'Source Readings in Music History'. My quotes are from his book.

[Comment in 30 March 2004: *There is an excellent version of Agazzari's article by [Bernhard Lang in the Werner Icking Music Archive!](#) All the text is in Italian, English and German!*]

I quote and comment some parts, which I consider important for us, who are learning the early basso continuo tradition. My own comments inside the text are between '[' and ']'. The headers are mine.

1. Two types of instruments

"... I must first ... classify them [instruments] ... into instruments like a foundation and instruments like ornaments. Like foundation are those which guide and support the whole body of of the voices and instruments of the consort; such are the the organ, harpsichord, etc., and similarly when there are few voices, the lute, theorbo, harp, etc. Like ornaments are those which, in playful and contrapuntal fashion, make the harmony more agreeable and sonorous, namely the lute, theorbo, harp, lirone, cithern, spinet, chitarrino, violin, pandora, and the like."

So lute, theorbo and harp are suitable in both roles! Also, it is expected that there are 'ornament' instruments, which play 'contrapuntal fashion' and make the harmony 'more agreeable and sonorous'. This means orchestral improvisation! More of this later.

2. The abilities needed

"... I say, then, that he who wishes to play well should understand three things. First he must know counterpoint (or at least sing with assurance, understand proportions and tempora, read in clefs) and must know how to resolve dissonances with consonances, how to distinguish the major and minor thirds and sixths, and other similar matters. Second he must know how to play his instrument well, understanding the tabulature or score, and must be very familiar with its keyboard or finger board in order not to have search painfully for the consonances and the beats during the music, knowing that his eye is busy watching the parts before him. Third, he must have a good ear in order to perceive the movements of the parts in their relation to one another. Of this I do not speak, for I could not say anything that would help those poor in nature."

There is not much to add! Agazzari's addition in parantheses is worth of noting. Already practical understanding of counterpoint may be enough 'at least'. Understanding voice leadings from dissonance to consonance and the nature of 3ths and 6th are important.

3. Text rules!

"But to come to the point, I conclude that no definite rule can be laid down for playing works where there are no signs of any sort [these are the numbers and other signs like #], it being necessary to be guided in these by the intention of the composer, who is free and can, if he sees fit, place on the first half of a note a fifth or sixth, or vice versa, and this a major or a minor one, as seems more suitable to him or as may be necessiated by the words."

So here we can see how Agazzari belongs to the 'seconda prattica' group. The text to be sung defines the affect and the

harmony depends on that, not on some abstract compositional procedures! And what follows says that even stronger:

"And even though some writers who treat of counterpoint have defined the order of progression from one consonance to another as though there were but one way, they are in the wrong; they will pardon me for saying this, for they show that they have not understood that the consonances and the harmony as a whole are subject and subordinate to the words, and not vice versa, and this I shall defend, if need be, with all the reasons I can."

One important matter to be taken into account is, I think, that also applying LATER practices to the continuo of early baroque may lead to inappropriate solutions. The importance of text clearly diminished later; Bach and Handel for example wrote their arias quite 'instrumentally' compared to the style of early monodists.

4. Cadences in major

Then Agazzari describes the numbers and accidentals. I do not repeat that here, but there is an important sentence, which clarifies one thing that quite often is played in later style (wrongly, I think):

"Since all cadences [!], whether medial or final, require the major third [!], some musicians do not indicate it; to be on the safe side, however, I advise writing the accidental, especially in medial cadences."

And also later in the book:

"... I take for granted certain number of principles ... cadences require the major third, ..."

I made a [small 'research'](#) of the type of cadences in Italian baroque lute music.

5. Richness of continuo

Agazzari goes on to the style of accompanying. He starts by talking about the organ, and then continues:

"...I say the same [as he said above about the organ] of the lute, harp, theorbo, harpsichord, etc., when they serve as foundation with one or more voices singing above them, for in this case, to support the voice, they must maintain a solid, sonorous, sustained harmony, playing now piano, now forte, according to the quality and quantity of the voices, the place, and the work, while, to avoid interfering with the singer, they must not restrike the strings too often, when he executes a passage or expresses a passion."

This is very important paragraph!

- Piano and forte (and everything between! (my opinion)) are to be used.
- The accompaniment and criteria of how and what to play is a living thing; it depends on the *"quality and quantity of the voices, the place, the work"*
- In the pervious paragraph, not presented here, Agazzari wrote more about not interfering with the singer: *"...one should take the greatest possible care to avoid touching or diminishing with a division the note which the soprano [or falsetto] sings ..."*
- The warning for not too often restriking the strings indicates that the strings were sometimes (too often?) restruck (!), perhaps to *"maintain solid, sonorous, sustained harmony"*. The warning points to giving room to the singer, when he has very important things to be expressed. (I think that the style of repeating chords under exiting text, perhaps with crescendo, introduced by Monteverdi ('stile concitato'), might come from this practice.)

6. Orchestral improvisation

"... I shall speak briefly of those which serve as ornaments. ... [they are] combined with voices in various ways ... for no other purpose than ornament and beautify, and indeed to season the consort."

"... these must make the melody flourishing and graceful, each according to its quality, with a variety of beautiful counterpoints. ... the instruments in the first class [foundation] ... require no great knowledge of counterpoint in the player, the second class [ornament] do require it, for the player must compose new parts above the bass and new and varied passages and counterpoints."

I just wonder, why this practice is not flourishing nowadays. We have had Agazzari's text already 388 years! What happened to the music? What diminished the role of the musician in favor of the composer hero?

I personally remember the joy and freedom, when I started continuo playing (well, some years after starting, starting is not so easy and not always joyful!). After having played 'ready made' pieces just as written, it was really something to be requested and allowed to make your own music! It somehow reminded me of the school days, when we had a blues band (not very good one, but anyway, we improvised).

7. "The noblest instrument of them all"

"... he who plays the lute (which is the noblest instrument of them all), must play it nobly, with much invention and variety, not as done by those who, because they have a ready hand, do nothing but play runs and make divisions from beginning to the end, especially when playing with other instruments which do the same, in all of which nothing is heard but babel and confusion, displeasing and disagreeable to the listener."

"Sometimes, therefore, he must use gentle strokes and repercussions, sometimes slow passages, sometimes rapid and repeated ones, sometimes something played on the bass strings, sometimes beautiful vyings and conceits, repeating and bringing out these figures at different pitches and in different places; he must in short, so weave the voices together with long groups, trills and accents, each in its turn, that he gives grace to the consort and enjoyment and delight to the listeners, judiciously preventing these embellishments from conflicting with one another and allowing time to each, especially when there are other similar instruments, a thing to be avoided, in my opinion, unless they play at great distance or are differently tuned or of different sizes."

The variety seems to be the key word! As I concluded my '[Basics of the basics of lute continuo](#)', only sky is the limit! And expressing the text is always there; also the variety must serve the text! Playing "runs and divisions from beginning to the end" doesn't serve any text.

And also here is the warning of conflicting; it is not enough to listen to the singer(-s), but you must hear and react to everything there happens.

8. Instruments generally

"And what I say of the lute, as the principal instrument, I wish understood of the others of their kind, for it would take a long time to discuss them all separately."

"But since each instrument has its own peculiar limitations, the player must take the advantage [!!] of them and be guided by them to produce a good result."

I think this is very important, even a philosophical remark. Limitations are not really limitations, they are possibilities, advantages, for expression!

This reminds me of the difference between studying modern and historical instruments: for example modern pianists and guitarists try to overcome the different lengths and strengths of their fingers, lutenists and harpsichordists take full advantage of the differences: strong notes are played with strong fingers, weak with weak fingers.

I just ask, which way is more natural?

"The player of lirone must bow with long, clear sonorous strokes, ... The violin requires beautiful passages, distinct and

long, with playful figures and little echoes and imitations repeated in several places, passionate accents, mute strokes of the bow, groups, trills, etc. The violone ... proceeds with gravity ... The theorbo, with its full and gentle consonances, reinforces the melody greatly, restriking and lightly passing over the bass strings, its special excellence, with trills and mute accents played with left hand. The arpa doppia, which is everywhere useful, as much so in the soprano as in the bass, explores its entire range with gentle plucked notes, echoes of the two hands, trills, etc.; in short, it aims good counterpoint."

"... if the instruments are alone in the consort, they must lead it and do everything; if they play in company, each must regard the other, giving it room and not conflicting with it; if there are many, they must each await their turn and not, chirping like sparrows, try to shout one another down. Let these few remarks serve to give some light to him, who seeks to learn."

Isn't it nice that there is no limit in what you can learn, even if you would play only music composed in 1600-1610!

Arto Wikla

My other pages: [Homepage](#) / [Music page](#) / [Finnish Page \(in Finnish!\)](#)
