

*Rethinking Bach Performance*

In recent years musicological research, beginning with the work of David Watkin, has affirmed a body of evidence that during the Baroque period (and well into the Classical) the cello often rendered fully-realized thoroughbass accompaniments for vocal and instrumental soloists. Its harmonic and contrapuntal capabilities, as a sort of bowed lute with fuller sounds and greater intonation flexibility than the viol, appear to have been exploited by composers without the supplemental use of instruments we more commonly associate with harmonic functions today (these include the various keyboard instruments, lute, archlute, theorbo and others, which it had been assumed until recently the cello reinforced in a purely melodic manner). This harmonic use for the cello runs counter to our modern perception of it as a melodic instrument (paradoxically, modern solo compositions make extensive use of its harmonic possibilities).

Implicit in this knowledge is the responsibility that cellists specializing in the performance of early music learn to improvise stylistically appropriate harmony and counterpoint. This challenge opens up extraordinary musical possibilities for performance practice in general, and for cellists in particular. Given that Johann Sebastian Bach almost certainly wrote the six cello suites for Linigke, the continuo cellist in his orchestra, it is important we understand as much as possible what Bach expected in general from that cellist. What skill sets did he bring to the table? We know he was a composer in his own right; possibly that he was associated with the Bononcini school (sonatas by the two men were published under Bononcini's name in Amsterdam during the first decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century).

Historical context must inform the interpretation of these musical texts if we are to render them as Bach intended them to sound. Written descriptions of Bach's teachings, his treatise on the art of continuo realization (reprinted affordably in Spitta; less so in facsimile), his interest in the extended harmonic range of the five-stringed violoncello piccolo, and extant continuo and solo parts for it in his handwriting collectively document many of his *a priori* assumptions.

These assumptions point to very different musical interpretation from the post-Kantian interpretative principles that are retroactively and anachronistically applied to early music today. In short, Bach expected his texts to be embellished, both melodically and harmonically, by the performer in ways considered unacceptably cavalier now. But this does not imply greater freedom, merely a different sort of rigor and a different understanding of the text. Although applying historicist principles determinatively in performance raises the level of technical and musical difficulty, sometimes several fold, it changes the actual sounds and alters our perception of meaning in Baroque music, just as knowledge of iconological symbolism transforms the understanding of Baroque painting.

*Development and Use of the Cello during the German Baroque:*

Using the cello as a means of fully realizing continuo parts immediately raises two questions: how, and whether, to transcend what appear to be this instrument's intrinsic harmonic and contrapuntal limitations. Principles of harmony, counterpoint, and continuo realization as Bach taught them eliminate many problems, more disappear with the use of the five-stringed violoncello piccolo. With even the most complex of Bach's figured basses (BWV 1023, etc.) it is in fact possible to play every harmony indicated, together with melodic embellishments, on the cello.

Bach did not specify the number of string courses on the instruments for which he wrote the Lute Suites (some were actually conceived for the *Lautenwerk*, a keyboard instrument strung with gut), nor the number of strings on the instrument(s) for which he conceived the sonatas for viola da gamba. Nor did he specify for four out of the six cello suites any particular variant or tuning of the cello. He did specify that the sixth be played upon an instrument with five strings, and that the fifth be played upon one with four, tuned in one of the more popular *scordature* of his time. However, like both the lute and da gamba works, all the Suites are conceived with the possibility in mind of being performed on either four- or five-stringed variants (indeed all of them, including the sixth suite, have been done successfully over the past century almost exclusively on the four-stringed cello). Moreover, the supplementary improvised counterpoint and harmony we know Bach expected of the small circle of musicians he trained and with whom he worked daily is a much more grateful task for the five- than the four-stringed cello. Sometimes the solo violoncello piccolo is Bach's continuo instrument of choice in small ensembles (an original continuo part in Bach's hand of the *A Major Mass* BWV 234 contains a figured bass labeled "*Violoncello Piccolo*." It possibly represents the largest grouping for which he considered the cello feasible as a full basso continuo. The manuscript was considered until recently to be an anomaly, demanding the organist crane his neck awkwardly around to read figured bass from the cello part; the modern realization that the cello played it without organ, harpsichord, or lute is largely owing to the Watkin's work). This continuo part is of great importance in determining how far the composer expected the cellist in particular to go in rendering figures. It proves the violoncello piccolo may be considered a viable option for his smaller ensembles even such as, for example, his violin sonatas BWV 1021 or 1023, which display extraordinary density of figuration.

### *Figured Bass Performance*

The cellist is still forced to admit it proves inadvisable, for two reasons, to play all the figures Bach wrote when performing these basses without auxiliary harmonic support: (1) the density of the improvised counterpoint affects the soloist's freedom to phrase and, (2) the cello's natural advantage, in sustaining the bass, is lost.

Before attempting their realization it is essential to do a preliminary scan of his figured basses to assess Bach's intent. In the case of the violin sonatas BWV 1021 and 1023, the sheer number of figures below the bass line is indicative of an extraordinarily detailed harmonic conception. But in rendering all these figures much time must be taken breaking chords in the cello part, creating ensemble difficulties that delay the music in ways not justifiable for the soloist. There is no historical indication that the phrasing

of a solo line should ever be determined by its accompaniment; certainly there is no musical justification in creating a Procrustean bed for instrumental reasons. And unless it is possible to play all the voices indicated by the figures without distorting the solo line there must be some adjustment. Most often this takes the form, as we will see below, of dispensing with those harmonies whose functions are more ornamental than structural.

The full texture is conceived to allow for both bass and realization to sound simultaneously. This is easily possible at the keyboard. But real simultaneity of sound is limited to two voices at the cello. Although it has other strengths and advantages, and can also fill out all the indicated harmonies melodically, playing all the figures at the cello often forces the bass line to disappear. The greatest idiomatic value of the cello lies in the inflection of the bass line in ways impossible at the keyboard. Sounding all the figures therefore precludes allowing the greatest strength of the cello to be used to full advantage – neutralizing the reason for using this instrument in the first place. Therefore one must selectively apply principles of figure elimination. Fortunately these principles are both historically and practically based.

### *Harmony*

To begin with, a certain amount of redundancy is built into Bach's continuo lines. Niedt (Hamburg, 1700) observed that when thoroughbass figures double the notes of the solo line (as happens throughout BWV 1023) these figures are intended to be left out, which already frees up at least one string for harmonic work (Friedrich Erhard Niedt: *Musikalische Handleitung*: "When the singer or instrumentalist sounds the numbers that are over [sic] the thorough bass, it is not necessary for the organist [instrumentalist] to play them as well. Rather he can play merely simple thirds such as will be fitting, or he can do something more artful with it, if he should wish."). And both Werckmeister (1702) and Heinichen (1728) observe that under certain conditions figured harmonies are not expected to be played at all, such as when *Tasto Solo* is marked in the music.

The range of possible double stops on the cello effectively narrows the possibilities of sustaining sound to one of seven notes at a time above the bass, which in combination with the solo line almost always proves sufficient. Wherever the bass line itself outlines the harmony it is technically unnecessary to add anything, unless a contrapuntal opportunity proves irresistible; this allows the listener a clear understanding of the harmony while maintaining the integrity of the bass.

There appear to be inherent contradictions in the practice of continuo realizations at the cello. If Bach wrote figures that could not be played effectively on the cello, is that not evidence he had another instrument or instruments in mind?

The answer is yes, and no. The solo cello was considered a lovely accompaniment option, though not in every situation where the music might be performed. Bach's decisions depended to a certain extent upon the size of ensemble and even the scheduled availability of certain players. The figured bass

represents the fullest graphic approximation of his harmonic intent, but how extensively it is realized is the very essence of the continuo player's art.

The exact extent to which the violoncello piccolo should render figurations must be extrapolated from a broad range of documents, including examples such as the continuo part of BWV 234. In those instances when the composer has written a bass line in the range of the topmost string, it then becomes impossible to build any harmonies over it at all unless either the bass is moved up an octave or the harmonies are moved down. The fact that this appears in Bach seems to indicate the possibility that judicious octave transpositions, providing they affect neither the inversion of the chord nor the motion of the bass line, are acceptable (this is analogous in effect to the usual doubling between eight- and sixteen-foot bass instruments, for example cello and double bass).

According to Johann Christian Kittel's description in *Der angehende praktische Organist* (Erfurt: 1801-1808) it appears that, as far as Bach was concerned, more continuo seems to have been better continuo: "One of his most capable pupils always had to accompany on the harpsichord. It will easily be guessed that no one dared to put forward a meager thorough-bass accompaniment. Nevertheless, one always had to be prepared to have Bach's hands and fingers intervene among the hands and fingers of the player and, without getting in the way of the latter, furnish the accompaniment with masses of harmonies." (*New Bach Reader*, 323)

This, of course, is a description of keyboard accompaniment, but conveys clearly that leaner is not always better for Bach, probably regardless of the instrument. Although the exact extent of harmonic improvisation he expected at the cello is not determinable, the density of texture is fairly clear from extant examples, notably the unaccompanied works for strings. And although "masses of harmonies" may be impossible at the cello, the illusion of them is not. Since harmonic and contrapuntal limits are predetermined, as we have seen, by the nature of the cello it seems likely Bach would have preferred the continuo player give as much as possible within those limits.

### *Counterpoint*

It may be debated whether Baroque voice-leading laws eliminating parallel fifths and octaves, which severely limit the freedom to construct sequential chords at the cello, were intended to apply to improvised music where the number of figures under bass lines – and thus the number of voices sounding at any given time – fluctuated. Obviously, voice-leading rules cannot apply in music written for an inconsistent number of voices as stringently as they do in chorale writing. But it is clear that any superimposed melodic construction – be it fragmentary or complete – must be based on the same rhythmic and melodic cells that characterize the rest of the motion.

Bach's keyboard writing is often in one voice, just as his writing for solo strings is, with broken arpeggios eliminating the necessity for full chords. Since Bach evidently worked out all his musical conceptions at the keyboard the question remains how or whether a broken, single-voiced approach or the unbroken chord should be employed in a given situation. It appears in the cello suites that voice-leading rules are

occasionally broken in the interest of fuller harmonies; this, within reason, should be at least as acceptable in improvised continuo realization as in worked counterpoint. Again, to avoid obvious parallel motion the best course of action is to keep the number of voices to a minimum.

### *Recapitulation*

To summarize: three problems arise with harmonic and contrapuntal realization at the cello: the time required to break chords constantly holds up the solo line; whenever the cellist is breaking harmonies the bass line is momentarily lost; and therefore while the individual cello realization may even stand autonomously as a piece of music, it may not function stylistically as a continuo part. (To be fair, arguments may be made either way. Was the rhythmic direction of the solo line that important, or did Bach perhaps intend this time to break each chord beneath it – whether at the keyboard or the cello – as part of an aesthetic that musicians of the German Baroque would have taken for granted? Pianists recorded in the late-nineteenth century still, as a matter of inherited style that was later dispensed with, broke chords far more than we do today. Is this *Bassbrechung* a relic of much earlier practices, possibly stemming originally from continuo, was it an early approach to rubato, or perhaps both?)

But given the validity of the argument that sounding notes in the solo part should correspond to their written rhythmic values, and assuming that even before the invention of the metronome the concept of a consistent tempo was important to Bach, then the question necessarily becomes one of selecting one or occasionally two figures from the thoroughbass to sound over the written line, especially when harmonies modulate, and according to a structurally-determined hierarchy of each figure's importance. The final step is to form melodic lines or fragments from those selected figures mirroring the texture of the rest of the movement. Based on practical experience it is this writer's recommendation to reconstruct harmonies and counterpoint sparingly, eliminating many of Bach's figures but in practice creating a much clearer continuo texture so that the great strength of the cello, its ability to sustain the bass, is not lost.