Late Baroque Ornamentation: Philosophy and Guidelines

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In the preceding article, Betty Bang Mather has set out with admirable simplicity a highly effective method by which a recorder player can learn to ornament a slow movement of a late Baroque sonata, using a vocabulary found in Telemann's "methodical" sonatas (in which the composer has written out ornamentation for the slow movements to serve as models). The appeal of this method is that a performer can learn to play something creditable in a short time. The difficulty is that ultimately the performer is forced to rely on his or her (largely intuitive) sense of late Baroque style, and so, without further background or preparation, cannot improve beyond the merely creditable.

In an attempt to give readers more guidance, I am supplementing Professor Mather’s article in two ways. First, the present article explores the philosophy of late Baroque ornamentation and offers guidelines to performers on learning to improvise it stylishly. Second, a further article (to be published shortly) will tackle Mather’s article in two ways. First, the solo sonatas of George Frideric Handel, with mordents, slides, turns, etc.—generally added verve to the performance. The second important purpose is that ornamentation, as the great flutist Johann Joachim Quantz noted, gave the performer “an opportunity to demonstrate his judgment, inventiveness, and insight.” The castrato singer Pier Francesco Tosi wrote that through ornamentation “the judicious may hear that the ability of the singers is greater; and in repeating the air, he that does not vary it for the better, is no great master.”

One of the main differences between the Baroque performance situation and ours is that musicians of that time were often composers or were at least trained in composition. Ornamentation was a type of composition, or rather, recomposition. The performer recomposed the work on the spur of the moment according to his own taste and invention. The greatest composers—Bach and Handel, for example—were also great improvisers, able to devise well-thought-out works apparently without effort. Lesser composers could be inspired by a skeletal composition left by another composer—a slow movement, say, in a simple melodic style. The compositional style of the movement could be changed in the process. Geminiani’s ornamentations of Corelli’s violin sonatas, for example, are in the style of the generation after the composer’s. Geminiani renewed these works for himself by recomposing them in his own style.

Not that these creative efforts always met with the composers’ approval. Witness those who voiced their belief that performers lacked the qualities of judgment, inventiveness, and insight that Quantz specified. As Birnbaum expressed it when defending J.S. Bach for writing out all his ornamentation, “only the fewest [performers] have a sufficient knowledge [of the style of ornamenting]. The rest, by an inappropriate application of the manner, spoil the principal melody, and indeed often introduce such passages as might easily be attributed to an error of the composer by those who do not know the true state of affairs.” In other words, Birnbaum believed that composers needed to defend themselves against the performer’s imposition of something incompatible, in taste or invention, with the composer’s work. An attraction, but also a danger, of ornamentation—at least, from the composer’s viewpoint—was that it could effect “a reinforcement of the expressive power of a text [or melody], or a more or less radical change of orientation in its expressive quality.”

Third, ornamentation seems to have filled a need for performers at that time. Like jazz musicians in our own century, they evidently were, by training and temperament, incapable of playing the music exactly as written. Fourth, ornamentation added verve to the performance. Nothing fresh was imparted to the work in its spontaneous recomposition.

Fifth, ornamentation added variety to multiple performances of a work. Tosi wrote: “Let a student...accustom himself to repeat [his ornaments] always differently... A singer is lazy who, on the stage, from night to night, teaches all his songs to the audience, who, by hearing them always without the least variation, have no difficulty to learn them by heart.”

Sixth, ornamentation was expected. Whether performers had the ability to improvise or not, they must have felt obliged to try to satisfy their colleagues and audiences. That this was a fairly common problem is suggested by the written-out
The purposes of ornamentation today

Next, let us examine our own reasons for ornamenting late Baroque music. The usual motive, the most respectable but also the most problematical, is that we are trying to perform the music "authentically"—to restore period style as closely as we can. The principal difficulties with this approach, as Richard Taruskin has recently set out, are that 1. we do not have enough performance practice documents to be able to know with certainty how the music was performed; 2. even if we did know, we might not actually like the performance styles of that period; and 3. our concept of Baroque style—or should we say "concepts," since our ideas change every few years—has been shaped by modern attitudes to performance and is in fact a product of our own times. Taruskin has argued persuasively that it can be just as legitimate to perform in modern styles that owe more to the conservatory tradition of performance (e.g., at modern pitch, with smooth articulation and no metrical accents, with few or no ornaments, etc.). For him, the only touchstone is whether the performance is convincing. An "authentic" performance will be convincing only if it succeeds in renewing the Baroque work, rather than merely attempting to restore it. This is not the place to go into these ideas any further, but they should give us pause for thought. It only needs to be said here that we may freely choose to adopt as many of the Baroque attitudes to ornamentation as we see fit for our own purposes.

If we consciously choose to ornament as closely as possible in Baroque style, then our purposes in doing so will incorporate most of the purposes of that period. We will want to add verve and variety to our performances, to train our temperament so as to preserve the taste of that era. We may perform music late in that period was performed many times by the same performer, and listeners know and expect that any performance of a Baroque work, by amateur or professional, should include ornamentation. Indeed, they would be disappointed, perhaps even scandalized, if it did not. Such ornamentation, moreover, is often taken as a measure of the performer's skill, not necessarily in providing something appropriate, but in creating something novel.

The problem has been compounded by the change in performance conditions and repertory since the Baroque era. Although some music late in that period was performed many times by the same performers for the same audiences—and, as we have seen, variety in multiple performances was one of the purposes of ornamentation—the vast majority of the music was not intended for repeated hearing. Parallels between Baroque ornamentation and jazz improvisation

Some public performance situation in particular was not even dreamed of by Baroque composers: the modern recording, in which exactly the same performance of the music—even if the ornamentation is improvised in the studio—is heard indefinitely. How Tosci would have thrown up his hands in dismay! Should we, pandering to the expectations of our colleagues and audiences, ornament in order to satisfy their thirst for novelty? If we pander to them, do we always give them fireworks, or can we combine novelty with appropriateness? Each performer must answer such questions for himself or herself, but I believe the questions need to be posed.

Parallels between Baroque ornamentation and jazz improvisation

We have, of course, lost touch with the living tradition of improvisation in serious music. But in the twentieth century we have a tradition of improvisation in jazz, readily observable in live performance and on disc, that has many important parallels with that in Baroque music. I encourage readers to explore the common ground between the two traditions. In jazz, the musician is also a composer: every performance is a renewal of the composition being performed. The jazz musician takes a "standard" tune (usually a popular song or melody by another jazz musician) or a tune of his own composition and plays it in his own style. The improvised solos he inserts...
between statements of the tune constitute a new composition based on the tune, and especially its chord sequence. The effectiveness of the performance stems from the musician's technical skill, his inventiveness, and, above all, his sense of (his own) style.

The amount of actual improvising that occurs varies from performer to performer. Some of the greatest jazz musicians are always creating anew, albeit from melodic fragments worked out in advance. Listen, for example, to those recordings Charlie Parker made for the Dial and Savoy labels in which he needed several takes to find a version he could approve for release: minutes after playing one version of a solo on a piece he had composed for the recording session (albeit on a "standard" chord sequence), he could turn round and play it more or less the same every time. Even in following this potentially unspontaneous procedure, however, the musician will change his solo over time, and a version of a year or five years later will be significantly different.

Jazz musicians train by listening as much as possible to other musicians; by practicing scales and arpeggios, melodic fragments they can use in many situations, and improvisation on standard chord sequences; and by performing often in public with the most experienced musicians they can find. Should our training for ornamentation be any less intense?

Guidelines for modern players

If I achieve no other purpose in this article, I would like to stimulate us to make more conscious decisions about ornamentation. Accordingly, I propose several guidelines for the modern player:

1. First and foremost, we should be aware of the passion, or affect, of the movement. Regrettably little has been written on the passions for the modern reader, but since they reflect the period's attitude to the emotional side of music, we cannot afford to ignore them. You may wish to look at my article "Quanz and the Passions: Theory and Practice," which summarizes and discusses the composer's statements on the passions and considers their application to the performance of his trio sonata in C major for alto recorder, flute, and basso continuo. In any case, steep yourself in the music of the Baroque, especially the vocal music, and try to feel its passions. Once we are familiar with them, we can decide whether we want to intensify the passion of our sonata movement or change it (and learn when it would be legitimate to change it), and we can develop the musical means for doing so.

2. Closely related to this, we should be aware of the style of the composer. Give yourself an intensive course in style by playing and listening to as much of his music as possible within a short span of time. Do you want to ornament a Handel sonata? Play all your Handel sonatas. Listen to recordings of Handel sonatas. Then broaden your horizons by reading scores of other music by Handel, especially operas and cantatas, and listening to such works, with and without a score.

Ask yourself what would be an appropriate style of ornamentation for the sonata in question. If "inappropriate application of the manner" of ornamentation was common in the eighteenth century, how much harder it is for us today—relying, as we must, on written evidence of an improvisatory practice—to ornament the music of that age. We can consult the surviving models of ornamentation, as Professor Mather has done in applying Telemann to Handel. As we become immersed in Handel, however, we may find ourselves dissatisfied with the resulting clash of styles. We can then, as I shall do in my next article, search for other models—by the composer himself or one of his close contemporaries. But models may be lacking. Ultimately, modern performers must work out such stylistic questions for themselves and, to repeat a basic motive of this discussion, renew the work in their own image.

3. We should be conscious of the stylistic choice we have made in our approach to late Baroque music. Have we joined the "authentists" in an attempt, which must always ultimately be vain, to imitate the performance style—including ornamentation—of the Baroque era? If not, can we develop a style—again including ornamentation—that suits our own purposes?

4. We should analyze the movement and use our analysis as an aid to ornamentation. How much ornamentation does the music really need? In an earlier article, I showed how the first movement of Handel's F major recorder sonata was built up almost entirely from the opening motives of a rising minor third in the melody and a rising major third in the bass, and consequently suggested that "leave alone" could almost be the watchword for the whole movement. In very few places does the musical argument seem to me to justify any ornamentation at all, and those that...
do warrant ornamentation do not require very much. Let us enjoy Handel's 'noble melodic style' and leave our thirst for overdramatization to more appropriate theaters.'\textsuperscript{13}

I believe we need to be reminded constantly of the cautionary words of Quantz:

The graces should be introduced only where the simple air renders them necessary. \ldots In other respects I remain of the opinion \ldots [that] the more simply and correctly a \textit{slow} move, the more it charms the listeners, and the less it obscures or destroys the good ideas that the composer has created with care and reflection. For when you are playing, it is unlikely that you will, on the spur of the moment, improve upon the inventions of a composer who may have considered his work at length.\textsuperscript{14}

5. Finally, above all, we should make our performances fresh, vivacious, spontaneous, and adventurous—even in a recording session. Let's enjoy our field day as Baroque recomposers. Taruskin has written, with his customary intelligence and biting wit, of a modern group lacking this gift: '...their approach to the written \textit{agrément}s is timid and literalistic—do they think the mordent police are hiding behind a billboard?\textsuperscript{15}

Forget the mordent police, analyze the movement, ponder the necessity for ornamentation, immerse yourself in the style, lose yourself in the passion, let go, have fun.

\textbf{NOTES}

1. I am extremely grateful to Eva Legène for several inspiring discussions of ornamentation; this article owes a great deal to her.


3. \textit{Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni}, o sieno Osservazioni sopra il canto figurato (Bologna, 1723; reprint, New York: Broude, 1968); English translation as \textit{Observations on the Florid Song; or, Sentiments on the melodic style} and leave our thirst for theaters.'\textsuperscript{13}

4. \textit{Observations on the Florid Song; or, Sentiments on the melodic style} and leave our thirst for theaters.'\textsuperscript{13}


8. Charles Blanch has to go out of his way in his Son- ny Rolls, \textit{The Journey of a Jazzman} (Boston: Twayne, 1983), 95, to draw attention to an occasion when Rolls "even plays the melody intact—a rare gesture for any improvising jazz musician."


11. Taruskin's recent ideas are scattered through a variety of sources and have not yet been published in full. See, for example, his regular reviews and review articles in \textit{Opus}, but especially "The Crooked Straight, and the Rough Places Plain, Alas," II/12 (December 1986), 42–43; and "Bach on Cello and Piano: Throwback or Harbinger?" III/3 (April 1987), 22–23. The fullest statement of these ideas was contained in his lecture, "I Have Seen the God Pan: A Sketch of the Only Twentieth-Century Musical Aesthetic in the Western World," which I heard at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 20 March 1987. This lecture is due to be published soon by Eulenburg Books in a volume of essays on authenticity. For an earlier expression of Taruskin's views, see "The Authenticity Movement Can Become a Postivistic Purgatory, Literalistic and Dehumanizing," \textit{Early Music} XII/1 (February 1984), 3–12.

12. The complete Savoy sessions are available on Savoy Jazz SJL-5500 (five discs). The Dial sessions do not seem to be available in the United States at present.


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