

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

Basso continuo performance, its teaching, and practice informs and reflects the wealth of musical styles that characterize Italian music from the end of the sixteenth century to the last decades of the eighteenth century. In this book rare and less accessible sources are considered, as well as some of the most famous and well-known texts, bringing the playing of basso continuo in the Italian style into a focus that displays it in all its complexity and diversity. Rules and instructions in the published books and treatises are considered alongside the manuscript sources on basso continuo and, most importantly, emphasis is placed on the music itself in order to interpret and illuminate the printed treatises.

Beginning with a consideration of various forms of accompaniment in use in the most musically influential Italian cities in the sixteenth century, it will be seen how and why basso continuo came to be the most widely adopted system of accompaniment until the beginning of the Classical period.

Indications and clues on the performance of seventeenth-century music must be sought in the introductions to the first operas and songbooks, in the early treatises, in accounts of musical performances, and through comparisons of practices used in the solo repertoire. Issues of instrumentation are also addressed and systems of notation applicable to lutes, guitars and theorboes are touched upon for their implication in the execution of the accompaniment.

Later, in the 1700s, practical exercises that rehearse the skills needed for basso continuo performance on keyboard instruments in particular begin to appear. These are considered alongside indications for continuo playing found in scores; the solo repertoire of the period is drawn upon also.

Basso continuo brought an innovative feature to performance: the capacity to respond to each and every interpretation of a work through improvisation. This system of accompaniment was developed specifically for lutes, theorboes, harps, harpsichords and organs, to name the most commonly used; its influence corresponds exactly to the historical period in which these instruments were in vogue. So perfectly did it respond to their capacities and limitations that, once established, it displaced any other means of notation for the accompaniment of any work, from solo to orchestral. It allowed dynamics and expressiveness on keyboard instruments: accompanists could choose whether to play *tasto solo*, or large loud chords, and could adapt their realization of the accompaniment according to what was being sung.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is further and more detailed discussion of the reasons for the introduction of basso continuo at the beginning of Chapter 3.

As early as 1568, Vincenzo Galilei wrote:

Ma se noi volessimo per il contrario discorrere l'imperfettione, e mancamenti de sopraddetti strumenti, e particolarmente quelle del meno imperfetto, che è l'Organo; ... non per difetto del'Arte e saper loro ma della natura dello strumento, [gli organisti] non hanno possuto, non possano, ne potranno mai, esprimere gli effetti delle Armonie come la durezza, mollezza, asprezza, e dolcezza; e consequentemente i gridi, i lamenti, gli stridi, i pianti, e ultimamente la quiete e 'l furore, con tanta grazia, e maraviglia, come gli Eccellenti Sonatori nel Liuto fanno, e forse che queste non sono annoverate tra le principali cagioni le quali la Musica è sempre stata ed è in pregio.<sup>2</sup>

[But if we want to talk about the defects and deficiencies of the aforementioned instruments and, particularly those of the least imperfect, which is the organ, ... not for lack of their Art or knowledge but because of the nature of the instrument [organists] have been unable, cannot, could never, express the effects of the harmonies such as the harshness, melodiousness, tartness and sweetness; and, subsequently, the yells, the wails, the shrieks, the laments and, lastly, the calm and the fury, with such charm and wonder as do the first-rate lute players; and are these not counted among the main reasons why Music is and always has been held in high esteem.]

Already he was recognizing that while lutes were able to accompany with more sensitivity and dynamics than keyboard instruments, more was required of both; the written out *intavolature* of the time did not allow the accompanist to respond to the 'calm and the fury' for the very reason that these *were* written out.

### **Writing about Improvisation**

Writings on basso continuo illustrate with what difficulty practice in music was diffused. Very few of the early printed treatises speak of how to realize basso continuo in a practical situation, tending instead to concentrate on describing harmonic principles. Performance skills were taught aurally; those instructions that have reached us have done so in great part through contemporary documents and letters, manuscripts, the introductions to music books and, only much later, in the systematization of information embodied in the printed treatises of the eighteenth century.

#### *Contemporary Written-out Accompaniments*

There are three types of contemporary written-out accompaniments – none of these can be taken as a thorough and complete testimony to basso continuo realization in any style because it is, by definition, impossible to fully notate

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<sup>2</sup> Vincenzo Galilei, *Fronimo dialogo di Vincenzo Galilei fiorentino* (Venice, 1568), p. 51.

an improvisation. The first type is made up of the most simple, harmonic accompaniments to the songs of the early 1600s; however, these are out of keeping with the style of accompaniment described and taught at the time (discussed on pp. 33–4). The second consists of harmonic realizations of the early 1700s; these are an attempt to annotate the complex harmonies and ornamentation intrinsic to performance and confirm in music many of the rules explained in the treatises of the time. Unfortunately, none is written by a master; rather, they are produced by minor composers and unknown authors keen on demonstrating every variation of the rules, producing realizations that overemphasize extravagance and break the first rule of accompaniment – the exercise of judgement and good taste (pp. 92–4). The third type of composed accompaniment is intended as an integral part of a work in the form of an accompaniment – the function of this type is wholly different from that of a basso continuo accompaniment (pp. 79–81). While accompaniments of this last type certainly are indicative of the view of one person at one time, there is no spontaneity of elaboration or response to whatever is being accompanied.

The information to be gained from treatises is mostly theoretical and must be evaluated, indeed can only be evaluated, in conjunction with musical sources. It is vital to emphasize the importance of the musical sources themselves as they provide the most secure performance guidance in showing what composers implicitly required, or even sometimes instructed a performer to do, rather than consisting of advice from musicians who were not necessarily composers or performers but theoreticians who may not have wished to reveal all the information needed to understand or evaluate their statements.

‘Professional secrets’ are another reason, and an important one, why so many printed treatises are inadequately descriptive of performance; this applies to all treatises of the seventeenth century. Zacconi, writing of Costanzo Porta addressing his students, notes this attitude: ‘Per mille Ducati, io non haverei dato fuori i secreti ch’è dato questo frate’ [‘Not for a thousand ducats would I [Porta] have revealed the secrets given away by this friar [Zacconi]’].<sup>3</sup>

While some of the most valuable instruction is often illustrated in the music itself, the intrinsically improvisatory nature of basso continuo provides a further reason why this is such a difficult subject to explain in words alone, as Alessandro Scarlatti confirms in a manuscript source, advising the scholar to consult him directly:

Altre circostanze accidentali richieste dall’armonia dello stile di questo presente scrittore da lui trovate nel più nobile modo di sonare, non ponno darsi in scritto, mà à voce, colle varie maniere de’ movimenti della mano nel sonare; al che si riserba.<sup>4</sup>

[Other accidentals dictated by the harmony of the style of the present writer, which he has found to be in the most beautiful manner of playing, cannot be given in writing,

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<sup>3</sup> Ludovico Zacconi, *Prattica di musica* (Venice, 1596), vol. 2, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Alessandro Scarlatti (GBLb1, MS Add. 14244), p. 40.

but only verbally, with the various ways of moving the hand when playing, which he finds indispensable.]

For the same reason not only performance, but composition too, is poorly represented in the writings of the time. At the beginning of the 1600s the new style of composition, the *genere rappresentativo*, is established; however, typically of the period, there is no contemporary text on composition that explains how to write in the new genre. Monteverdi wished to remedy the lack of texts on how to compose in *genere rappresentativo*; having found himself without a guide he hoped to write a guide for others:

Vado credendo che non sarà discaro al mondo, posciachè ho provato in pratica che quando fui per scrivere il pianto del Arianna, non trovando libro che mi aprisse la via naturale alla immaginazione nè meno che mi illuminasse che dovessi essere immitatore, altri che platone per via di un suo lume rinchiuso così che appena potevo di lontano con la mia debil vista quel poco che mi mostrava; ho provato dico la gran fatica che mi bisognò fare in far quel poco ch'io feci d'immitatione, et perciò spero sij per non dispiacere ma rieschi come si voglia che alla fine son per contentarmi d'essere più tosto poco lodato nel novo, che molto nel ordinario scrivere.<sup>5</sup>

[I believe that it will not be displeasing to the world, for I found in practice that when I was about to compose the Lament of Arianna – finding no book that could guide my imagination intuitively, nor one that would enlighten me as to whom I ought to be imitating (other than [as in] Plato, [but with] a light so hidden that I could hardly discern from afar with my feeble sight what little he showed me) – I found, I was saying, what hard work I had to do in order to achieve the little I did do through imitation, and I therefore hope it is not going to be displeasing, whatever the result may be, as in the end I would sooner be praised for innovation in the new style than greatly praised for the re-presentation of the known.]

His book *Melodia, ovvero seconda pratica musicale* was never written.

It is as hard today as it was then to write a book about the nature of the improvisation that is basso continuo, and it is to be expected that it should be hard; Italian composers relied on the thorough professionalism, technical competence and good taste of their musicians when explaining how their music should be performed, or when writing of style, and did not intend or hope to communicate all in words alone.

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<sup>5</sup> Claudio Monteverdi, *Lettere*, from Venice, 22 October 1633, ed. Domenico De' Paoli (Rome, 1973).