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Figured Bass in Forqueray [with Reply]

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In her fascinating article 'Forqueray *Pieces de viole* (Paris, 1747): an enigma of authorship between father and son' (*Early Music*, xxxiv/2, 2006), Lucy Robinson argues convincingly that these pieces were not composed by Forqueray père, but by his son Jean-Baptiste. Part of her argument rests on the use, in these compositions, of, what she rightly calls, the 'extraordinarily bold and imaginative' harmony.

While I do not intend to challenge her main thesis, nor disagree with her appreciation of the special character of the harmony, I do have doubts about the correctness of some of her harmonic analyses. To me these give the impression that Robinson not only mainly looked at the solo part for the *viole* but also that she may not have fully understood the information contained in the thoroughbass figures and the bass part. Moreover, in this music to approach the harmony in terms of the concepts of functional harmony, as she does here, sometimes leads to erroneous conclusions. An example of this can be seen in her ex.2 (bar 12–14 of *La Rameau*). Contrary to Robinson's explanation, the harmony is not moving to a cadence in C minor. Instead, by replacing the expected leading note  $F\sharp$  on the fourth beat of bar 13 by an  $F\flat$ , Forqueray is evading a cadence, in G, while, at the same time, he starts a long sequence of 7th chords of mixed nature, ending in a 'plagal' cadence in bar 16.

For a complete understanding of the harmony in Forqueray's compositions it is paramount to understand both his particular use of thoroughbass figures and the way some of these figures were generally realized in the 18th century. Without this understanding, Forqueray's intentions cannot become audible, for the richness of his use of harmony is not conveyed by the solo part alone, and it often needs the thoroughbass realization of his figures to fulfil and confirm it. This holds in particular for the application of the 6/4/3 chord.

According to Robinson, in bar 61 of *Jupiter* (her ex.6): 'a dominant chord is approached from an appoggiatura-laden French 6th (with the flattened 5th)' and also: 'the corresponding passage towards the end of that couplet (ex.7) uses an even more exotic augmented 6th, uniquely utilizing five notes of the whole-tone scale'.

It is indeed the augmented 6th in ex.7, preceded by the suspension chord of 7/#5/3, that defines the harmony above the repeated bass note  $ab$  in ex.7. The 'whole-tone scale' in the solo part (although striking indeed) is merely necessary to avoid an even more exotic augmented 2nd

between  $eb$  (now changed to  $e\flat$ ) and  $f\sharp$ . After all, Forqueray wrote already an augmented 2nd between the last note,  $b\flat$ , in the previous bar and the first note  $ab$ , so two augmented 2nds following each other so quickly would have created a fragment of real gypsy music! Moreover, it is important to observe that the bass notes  $d$  in bar 61 (ex.6) and  $ab$  in bar 71 (ex.7) are both figured with a slashed 6th. The slash through the stem of the 6th indicates that a 6/4/3 chord must be played. This signature is rarely used by Forqueray's contemporaries who mostly preferred to write the complete figures with accidentals where necessary. In ex.6 and 7, the slashed 6 is preceded by a sharp which means that the 6th must be major. However, a flattened 5th is certainly not a part of this note-combination, contrary to what Robinson writes.

The 6/4/3 chord, in 18th-century French treatises called *la petite sixte*, may consist of the minor or major 3rd, the perfect or augmented 4th and the minor or major 6th as long as these notes belong to the scale. When this is not the case, the chord will be written with the figures 6/4/3 with the necessary accidentals. If a flat is written before the slashed 6th, this 6th must be minor and in case of a sharp it must be major. If a sharp is written before the slashed 6th above a flattened bass note, as is the case in ex.7, the 6th will be augmented.

The addition of a 4th to the original 6/3 chord came into use in France in the first half of the 18th century.<sup>1</sup> It was not described or explained in treatises for composition or thoroughbass until the last decades of the 17th century and then only with some hesitation. D'Anglebert,<sup>2</sup> for example, demonstrates the resolution from the major 7th to the 6th in a so-called tenor cadence, which 'normally' consists of 7/3–6/3, in very full-voiced chords but initially without the 5th and 4th. Finally, in the last example of this progression he does insert these notes, resulting in the note combinations 7/5/3 and 6/4/3, without any further comment or explanation. Denis Delair, in his *Traité d'accompagnement pour le théorbe et le clavecin* (1690), demonstrates the 6/4/3 chord in a musical example containing *des accompagnements extraordinaires*, with an explanation of their origins, after discussing rules for accompanying unfigured basses.

I know that these rules cannot be completely universal. There will be some situations which do not conform to the rules, as, for example, when one finds the major third with the minor sixth, the tritone with the minor sixth, diminished or augmented octaves, and several other accompaniments

## Exemple des accompagnemens extraordinaires.

Ex. 2 Avertissement of the *Premier Livre de sonates a violon seul* by Leclair (1723)

# Avertissement

*Le chiffre 6 designe l'accord de la Sixte accompagnée de la Tierce et de la Quarte, et nullement la Sixte Majeure; par ce que cette Sixte se trouve quelquefois naturellement mineure: mais lors qu'elle devient accidentellement Majeure ou Mineure, on trouve pour lors un # ou un b a côté de ce chiffre 6.*

*Le # ou le b se trouve toujours avant le chiffre au quel il est censé estre joint; de même qu'on le met avant la Note.*

which are found in Italian music. Since these accompaniments or chords are based on caprice, not being established according to the rules, I did not believe I should give them as principles.<sup>3</sup>

Ex.1 shows the first system of his example. By playing through the entire example one will probably realize that the 'extraordinarily bold and imaginative' harmony, as described by Robinson, is Italian by origin (as already stated by Delair), having made its way into French music relatively early.

To the best of my knowledge, the 6/4/3 chord was given both a name and a description for the first time by François Couperin in his *Regle pour L'accompagnement*<sup>4</sup> (c.1690), in which he gives four types of 6th chords, saying: 'La quatrieme 6e s'appelle petite 6e ou 6e comme une dissonance, elle s'accompagne de la 3e et de la quarte ou de la tierce et du triton' (the fourth 6th is called the 'little 6th' or the 6th as a dissonance, it occurs with the 3rd and the 4th or the 3rd and the tritone). Perhaps ten years later, in his *Nouveau traité de l'accompagnement* (1707), St Lambert explains why exactly it is called *la petite sixte*: 'Finally,

the fourth [type of 6th chord] composed of the Third, Fourth, & Sixth will be called the little chord [*le petit accord*], because in fact this chord is closely-spaced [*peu étendu*].<sup>5</sup> Still, both Couperin and St Lambert did not yet use a particular signature for this chord but indicated the intervals only by the figures 6/4/3 with accidentals if necessary. Jean-Marie Leclair may have been one of the first composers who indicated the *petite sixte* with a slash through the stem of the figure 6. He gives an explanation, which might serve as a proof of the novelty of the signature, in the *avertissement* of his *Premier livre de sonates a violon seul* (1723).

Leclair emphasizes that a 6 with a slash is *not* indicating a major 6th and that an extra accidental is required to denote the exact nature of the 6th. Leclair was followed on this path by Laurent Gervais<sup>6</sup> who, in a way similar to that of St Lambert, describes four types of 6th chords (exx.2 and 3), with the additional remark that two of them are consonant and two dissonant. According to St Lambert and Gervais the two consonant 6th chords, the 6/3 together with the octave of the bass, must be called the

Ex. 3 Demonstration of the four 6th chords by Gervais

Les Quatre Accords de Sixtes

6.<sup>e</sup> Simple Grande Sixte ou 5.<sup>e</sup> et 6.<sup>e</sup> Petite 6.<sup>e</sup> Acc. doublé.

Ex. 4 *La Portugaise* by Forqueray (bars 23–31), with realization

(a)

(b)

bars 23-31

*sixte simple* and the  $6/3/6$  or  $3/6/3$  the *accord doublé*, the choice for either one depending on the position of the right hand. The two dissonant versions are  $6/5/3$ , called the *grande sixte*,<sup>7</sup> and  $6/4/3$ , called the *petite sixte*.

Nevertheless, most continuo players—not only in the 21st century but in the 18th century as well as becomes clear by Lecair’s warning—interpret the 6th with a slash as an indication of a simple 6th chord with a major 6th ( $\#6/3$ ), which is why the *petite sixte* is often not recognized. This will be even more the case when the  $4/3$  combination, or the 4th alone, is not integrated in the solo part, as is shown in the fragment of Forqueray’s *La Portugaise* (bar 23–31) (ex.4).

Without understanding the slashed 6th as the representation of the  $6/4/3$  note combination, this signature turns out as quite a puzzle for continuo players when a

sharp or a flat is notated in front of it as can be seen in bars 28 and 30. However, if this fragment is realized according to the rules and examples in the contemporary treatises,<sup>8</sup> as demonstrated in my own suggestion of an realization in ex.3b, the result is full with 4ths rubbing against 3rds and 7ths rubbing against eights, a treatment of dissonances for which French composers, such as F. Couperin, Rameau and Forqueray had a taste as can be seen in their compositions for harpsichord solo as well.

Of course, above this bass line, other chord positions are possible in which the  $4/3$  and  $8/7$  would be kept more apart but that would make the right-hand position relatively high and would conflict with Forqueray’s aesthetic ideal with regard to the thoroughbass realization. Indeed, in his preface to the *Pieces de viole avec la basse continue* we are asked to play our chords as close to the bass line as possible.<sup>9</sup>

Another example of the inadequacy of applying modern concepts for the harmonic analysis of early music is the use of the term 'modulation'. In the first half of the 18th century the term 'modulation' was not only used for modulation in the modern sense, but just as often associated with improvisation and preluding, and therefore with sudden shifts in the harmony and with small deviations from the key. These sudden shifts in harmony formed a typical element in 17th and 18th century preluding (think for instance of the *préludes non mesurés* by Louis Couperin) and they should be understood in this manner also in Forqueray's *pieces de viole*. Their function was to induce sudden strong emotions and they therefore had important dynamic consequences. To use the concept of 'modulation' exclusively in its modern sense, as Robinson seems to do in her harmonic analyses of Forqueray's music, is to miss these implications and thus to confuse rather than clarify the character of this music.

To summarize, Forqueray's compositions cannot be fully understood nor correctly performed, unless the player is familiar with this type of historical information. Though this letter focuses on thoroughbass harmony, I do not restrict my argument to *that* element of a composition. On the contrary, for me the essential knowledge also includes composition technique and even the composer's artistic ideals. All this knowledge would help a player to distinguish between primary and secondary concerns, i.e. to recognize the harmonic fundamentals of a composition as distinct from diminutions, with their usual licences, and thus it could aid him/her in shaping a piece more clearly in a performance.

I have used Robinson's paper as an excuse for shining some light on normally neglected details. My points of criticism do not, however, invalidate her findings.

*Thérèse de Goede, Amsterdam*

*Lucy Robinson replies:*

In my article on 'Forqueray Pieces de violes (Paris, 1747): an enigma of authorship between father and son'—in which I argued that the works were the compositions of the son and not the father—part of my argument rested on harmony. In her letter De Goede takes issue with my modern approach and thereby finds 'an excuse for shining some light on normally neglected details'. I find her introduction to a 17th- and 18th-century French approach to continuo playing entirely valid and well worth drawing attention to, but this was not what my article was about. (I should like to add that this is indeed material with which I am familiar—and on which I based my continuo realization for my *Le Pupitre* edition of

Couperin's *Pieces de violes*—and further that the analysis was done from the score not the viol part; indeed the figured score is given for all musical examples relating to harmony.) The article was to make a case to the modern reader, not necessarily *italics* with the niceties of French figuring, about authorship in a limited number of words, and to do this I felt the need to take into account the modern reader's expectations.

In analysis there are sometimes several ways of interpreting material and De Goede has taken one approach and I have taken another, the one which I felt would convey my thesis most clearly to my reader. For example, De Goede argues that two melodic augmented 2nds in quick succession (supposing the  $E^{\sharp}$  in bar 71 were an  $E^b$ ) would be *de trop* (ex.7). However, the figuring, rather than the bass viol part, makes it clear that the augmented 2nd straddling bars 70 and 71 ( $B^{\sharp}$  to  $G$ ) is an illusion. The two notes belong to different melodic lines, melody and bass respectively, and the  $B^{\sharp}$  in fact leads to  $C$ , not  $G$ . I still maintain that the  $E^{\sharp}$  in bar 71, masquerading as a raised 6th in  $G$  minor, is almost unheard of in this context. Only J. S. Bach might attempt this in an audacious moment.

De Goede's detailed proof of the slashed 6th being a shorthand invented by Leclair for the figure 6/4/3 is interesting but would have proved too long to be included in my article. All it does is to confirm that the 4th and 3rd above the bass in the melody in bars 62 and 71 are essential to the harmony, emphasizing Forqueray's boldness. The fact that Leclair felt it necessary to invent a shorthand for such four-note chords indicates that they were becoming absorbed into a conventional grammatical parlance, but still surely highly unusual in the context of an augmented 6th, for which De Goede gives no other example. But to split hairs too assiduously may lead us to neglect Ancelet's observation that it was characteristic of Forqueray himself to improvise on his given part: 'Il n'exécute jamais la Basse telle qu'elle est écrite; il prétend la rendre beaucoup meilleure par la grande quantité de traits brillans que lui fournit sa tête'.<sup>10</sup> ('He never played the Basse as it was written; he claims to make it much better by means of a large number of virtuoso flourishes that come out of his head.')

I wholeheartedly agree with De Goede that these viol players were wonderful improvisers steeped in rhetoric (I did, for example, refer to the use of 'elliptical progression'); there is plenty of evidence to back this up, but for the modern reader this does not change the fact that Forqueray's works are modulating. The concluding paragraphs of De Goede's letter move on to

performance—not something that I was addressing in this instance. However I have a companion article entitled ‘Forqueray *Pieces de viole*: a rich source of mid-

eighteenth-century French string technique’ shortly to be published in the *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America*, xliii (2006), pp.5-31.

1 In Italian music it can already be found as a thoroughbass signature around 1650.

2 Jean-Henry D’Anglebert, *Principes de l’accompagnement*, included in *Pièces de clavecin* (1689) Le pupitre/Heugel, ed. K. Gilbert, p.145.

3 *Traité d’accompagnement pour le théorbe et le clavecin* (1690); trans. C. Mattax, *Accompaniment on theorbo & harpsichord: Denis Delair’s treatise of 1690* (Bloomington, 1991).

4 *Regle pour l’accompagnement par M<sup>r</sup>. Couperin organiste Du Roy &c<sup>a</sup>*, c.1690.

5 St Lambert, *Nouveau traité de l’accompagnement de clavecin, de l’orgue, et des autres instruments* (Paris, 1707); trans. J. S. Powell, *A new treatise on accompaniment* (Bloomington, 1991), p.30.

6 *Methode pour l’accompagnement du clavecin* (1733) facs. edn Minkoff.

7 Although François Couperin explains the 6/5/3 chord he does not yet call it the *grande sixte*!

8 Including Jean-François Dandrieu’s *Principes de l’accompagnement du clavecin* (1719)

and Michel Corrette’s *Le maître de clavecin pour l’accompagnement* (1753).

9 ‘On aura la bonté de faire attention qu’il faut raprocher l’accompagnement du Clavecin le plus près de la basse qu’il sera possible, afin qu’il ne se trouve point plus haut que la Pieces de Viole.’

10 Ancelet, *Observations sur la musique, les musiciens, et les instruments* (Amsterdam, 1757), p.24.

### Quite un-just—a response

In his review of *How equal temperament ruined harmony (and why you should care)* (‘Not quite just’, *Early Music*, xxxv/3, 2007, pp.452–4), Ibo Ortgies says many nice things about my book, and for that I am grateful. Any time someone with his specialized knowledge and experience finds something positive to say about a work in his field—especially a contentious field like tuning and temperament—it is a cause for celebration. However, his specific criticisms of my ‘approach’ seem to me so arbitrary that I cannot let them go without some sort of response.

He criticizes, first of all, my focus on 55-ET (or extended sixth-comma meantone) because the resulting system’s ‘major 3rds sound already audibly out of tune (though less so than in 12-ET)’ and its ‘5ths fare little better than in quarter-comma syntonic meantone temperament’. So, it is subjectively easy for me to beg to differ and say that its major 3rds are gratifyingly better than 12-ET and its 5ths are substantially better than in quarter-comma meantone—not at all ‘indiscernible’ as he characterizes them. If you accept, first of all, the principle that string players tune to the accompanying keyboard at least as far as their open strings are concerned (and that certainly seems to be the practice among early musicians today), then ask those string players why they do not like to play with a keyboard tuned in temperaments like Werckmeister or Kirnberger. It is because the approximately quarter-comma 5ths on the open string notes are excruciatingly narrow—too narrow for the tolerance of most string players. Sixth-comma 5ths, though narrower than ET, are better than

quarter-comma 5ths, and as I point out in the book, the major 3rds are half-way between ET and pure major 3rds. It is a compromise, but the justification (if I can use that word) is that the tritones and diminished 5ths of the system—the driving force of most complex harmonies in the tonal period—are acoustically pure.

Ortgies, in fact, says that non-keyboard players would have been and should be now trying to tune all of their chords—5ths and 3rds—pure above any bass note. I have been an outspoken advocate of Just Intonation in the performance of Renaissance music (see my article in *Music Theory Online*, xii/3 (2006)) but I simply do not think it works for much later music and I do not think that is what performers were doing, are doing or should be doing. Modern musicians, such as string quartet players and trombonists, for example, sometimes protest to me that they play in Just Intonation all the time. My guess is that they are probably simply tuning pure chords when the opportunity presents itself—not a bad thing, but not Just Intonation. So, my usual response is to ask them how they handle the large and small whole tones. If you play in Just Intonation, then you must have pure major thirds consisting of one large and one small whole tone. If you do not have that, then you are not playing in Just Intonation. If you have pure major 3rds throughout without the large and small whole tone, then you are averaging the size of the whole tone and you are playing in extended quarter-comma meantone (roughly 31-ET), which is basically what Ortgies is recommending, even though the 5ths are even narrower than they are in