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Continuo Accompaniment of Barbara Strozzi's Arias

**Thérèse de Goede
Conservatorium van Amsterdam**

For present day performers, both singers and continuo players, Barbara Strozzi's arias for solo voice and basso continuo contain many contrapuntally problematic passages. In these passages Strozzi seems to be bending the compositional rules of her time by transgressing the limits of what was possible and allowed, in order to achieve the utmost expression of the text. She was certainly not the only mid-seventeenth century composer to do this. Examples of audacious progressions between voice and bass part also occur in music by Monteverdi (Venice), Luigi Rossi, and Marc'Antonio Pasqualini (both in Rome), to mention just a few. But in Strozzi's music some of these progressions are so outlandish that singers wonder whether the notes are just wrong while for the continuo player it seems almost impossible to provide them with a sensible continuo realization. That Strozzi's arias are unfigured does not help either.

Another point is the accompaniment of the more conventional sections. Should they be accompanied according to late-seventeenth century tonal principles such as the Rule of the Octave? If we consider Strozzi as an avant garde composer this may be the most logical solution. If, on the other hand, we consider her bizar chord progressions rather as belonging to a 'seconda pratica' that is stretched to the limits then it would make more sense to apply the earlier rules for thorough bass harmonization.

In my presentation I want to discuss those theoretical sources that show a connection with the vocal solo music of the mid-seventeenth century. However, polyphonic material in music by other composers of the same period forms an equally important source of information. It is sources like these which show us the harmonic language that is "spoken" during a particular period, in a particular region, or by a particular composer.