

The accompaniment of Bacilly's Air 'Vous ne pouvez Iris', Or How to Enhance the Continuo Accompaniment of an Air by Our Choice of Harmony and Ornament.

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Having to play from a bass without figures usually does not make us continuo players very happy. It implies extra work: extra time to think about the harmony, especially in places with more than one harmonic possibility, and extra time to write the figures down. However, if a bass is unfigured there are also advantages. If we know how to work with the 17th-century rules for voice leading this will allow us to make choices that influence the color of a chord and, consequently, will influence the affects of the song, at least locally.

The rule most instrumental with regard to the quality of a chord is the one about the movement from imperfect to perfect consonances. It prescribes whether the interval of a 3rd or a 6th must be major or minor when moving to a 5th or an octave. This rule, already prescribed in the earliest Italian basso continuo treatises, is also formulated in the French 17th-century treatises on composition. Considering the scarcity of French basso continuo treatises published at the time of Bacilly's song we need to look at these sources for guidance in matters concerning harmony. The rule is given in the following treatises:

Salomon de Caus, *Institution harmonique* (1615)

Antoine Parran, *Traité de la musique* (1639)

La Voye Mignot, *Traité de musique* (1656)

Gabriel-Guillaume Nivers, *Traité de la composition* (1667).

Here is how it has been formulated by Antoine Parran (1639, p. 80).

<p><i>Quand les parties du contrepoint passent d'une consonance imparfaite a une parfaite, soit par mouvement semblables, ou par contraires: il se faut servir de l'imparfaite plus voisine de la parfaite.</i></p> <p><i>Par exemple, s'il faut passer de la sexte a l'octave, ce doit estre la majeure [sext], comme son vrai et naturel effét, et rarement la mineure [sext].</i></p> <p><i>De cette regle il ny a qu'une exception, a savoir quand on passe de la tierce a la quinte: car alors ce ne doit point estre la majeure, ains la mineure, a cause de la fausse relation.</i></p> <p><i>On ne doit point faire scrupule d'aller par fois de la dixieme, ou tierce majeure a l'octave, ou a l'unisson, quoy qu'ordinairement ce doive estre la mineure par mouvement contraire.</i></p>	<p>When parts of the counterpoint move from an imperfect consonance to a perfect one, by parallel or contrary motion: it must move from the nearest imperfect to the perfect [consonance].</p> <p>For example, if we move from the sixth to the octave, it must be the majeur [sixth], since that is its most true and natural motion, and rarely the minor [sixth].</p> <p>Of this rule there is but one exception: when going from the third to the fifth, for then it must not be major, but minor, because of the false relationship.</p> <p>We don't need to worry about the movement from the tenth to the octave, or a major third to the unison, although it commonly should be minor, by contrary motion.</p>
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In the earliest Italian continuo primers the rules about interval regulation are now 'translated' into bass progressions. Instead of talking about the motion of an interval one would now say:

if the bass leaps down a 5th or up a 4th, we play the major 3rd;

If the bass leaps down a 4th, or ascends a 5th, we play the minor 3rd.

if the bass descends a step we play the major 6th if this 6th moves to an octave.

The imperfect interval may move in three different ways: contrary, parallel, and oblique:

Ex. 1. Imperfect consonances progress to the nearest perfect ones

Musical notation for Example 1. The staff shows four pairs of notes representing imperfect consonances resolving to perfect ones. The notes and their intervals are: $\sharp 3$ and 8, $\sharp 6$ and 8, $\flat 3$ and 5, $\flat 6$ and 5, $\flat 10$ and 8.

These rules were slowly relaxed in the course of the 17th century, and of course there have always been exceptions to it, but, as demonstrated by the following example in Nivers's basso continuo treatise *L'Art de accompagner* of 1689, they were still valid in the second half of the seventeenth century.

Ex. 2. Nivers, *L'Art de accompagner* (1689), bass ascending a 4th, p. 163

Musical notation for Example 2. The bass line shows a sequence of notes: \sharp , \flat , \flat , \sharp , \sharp , \flat , \sharp , \sharp . The chords above are: \sharp , \flat , \flat , \sharp , \sharp , \flat , \sharp , \sharp . The final chord is \flat 4 \sharp .

The example also shows exceptions to the rule. On the third beat we find a minor 3rd although the bass ascends a 4th. The reason for this exception is that the 3rd descends, to D. On the fourth beat we find a major 3rd although the bass now descends a 4th, here the 3rd upon the first bass note ascends. These exceptions illustrate another (still quite essential) rule, that a sharpened note must be followed by a higher, and a flattened note by a lower one.¹ Another rule had to prevent the playing of a diminished 5th, by saying that if the bass ascends a semitone, the 6th must be played upon the first of the two. This is shown in the next example.

Ex. 3. Nivers, *L'Art de accompagner* (1689), bass ascending a semitone, p. 164

Musical notation for Example 3. The bass line shows a sequence of notes: \flat , \flat . The chords above are: \flat , \flat . The final chord is \sharp 4 \sharp .

The rule that a sharpened note must be followed by a higher, and a flattened one by a lower note, as well as the possibility to choose between a perfect chord or a 6/3-chord allows us to influence the

¹ Le Voyer Mignot (1656), p.45, *Il faut pour l'ordinaire monter par degré conjoint apres la note audevant de laquelle il y a un diesis ou B quarre* (Ordinarily one should ascend stepwise after a note preceded by a sharp or a B quarre).

affect of a song. I will demonstrate this now with some fragments of Bacilly's Air 'Vous ne pouvez Iris'. The song is in two vocal parts and has a texted bass line.

Ex. 4. Bacilly, V'ous ne pouvez Iris b. 1 – 5, first version

Bar 1. In the first bar, the second chord may be a #6/3 chord if one considers it as a anticipation of the chord on the first bass note in b. 2.

Bar 2. In the second bar we find the semitone step from the first to the next bass note, so we must play 6/3, but 6/5/3 is possible too. The chord must be followed by 5/3 on the next bass note C but since this C leaps down a 4th, to G the 3rd should be minor.

Bar 3. In the third bar we may play a major 3rd on the first beat (if we want to give in to our tonal feeling). As a consequence we must play a 6/4/2 on the second beat, which in its turn will resolve in a 6/3 on B-flat.

This progression over three successive descending bass notes will be established later-on in the Rule of the Octave.

Here is an alternative version:

Ex. 5. Bacilly, 'Vous ne pouvez Iris b. 1 – 5, second version

Now we will play perfect chords on all bass notes of the first bar. In bar 3, on the first beat, we will let the part that has the 3rd descend, so this 3rd must now be minor. This will lead to a minor 3rd upon C, in order to avoid a tritone with the B-flat in the bass on the third beat, followed by a perfect chord on that B flat. More than one option also occurs in bars 15 – 17 of the same song.

Ex. 6. Bacilly, Vous ne pouvez Iris b. 15-17 first version

tes me de - fen - dre de jus - tes plain - tes

Ex. 7. Bacilly, Vous ne pouvez Iris b. 15-17 second version

tes me de - fen - dre de jus - tes plain - tes

[5 3 6]

The bass passage following the chord on D in the last bar may be realized in different ways as well, for example with 7-6 (in Ex. 6), or with 5-6 (in Ex. 7) and the last possibility brings us now to the melodic elements of the realization represented by melodic figures.

Melodic Continuo Figures

In many continuo bases of *Airs* in this period, figures occur which at first seem to be superfluous, because why would one indicate a 5th, 3rd, or 8th? Such figures, however, are used to indicate melodic motion rather than chords. Here is an example taken from the *Airs spirituels* (1678) by Nicolas Fleury.²

Ex. 8. Nicolas Fleury 'Ha! C'en est fait, Jesus vient d'expirer'

fait. Iesus vient d'expirer. Et son trépas est le cruel ouvrage Des

In the last bar of this example a series of double figures at first suggests some kind of pedal point

² *Airs spirituels a deux parties avec la basse-continue par le sieur Fleury* (Paris, 1678), p. 19.

harmonization. The first combination, a flat with a 2nd' is intriguing, but that flat does not refer to the 2nd. It indicates a minor 3rd and needs to be combined with an 8th, in order to give rise to a progression of parallel 3rds with the vocal part.

Some composers, notably Michel Lambert and Nicolas Fleury, even include small notes above the figures in the way it is done in lute tablatures, to indicate the value of the notes to be played in the realization. In bar 4, above the figures in the bass staff, we find a dotted minim followed by a crotchet. Here is the transcription with a possible realization for the relevant bass notes.

Ex. 9. Fleury, realization of melodic figures in 'Ha! C'en est fait, Jesus vient d'expirer'

fait Je - sus vient d'ex - pi - rer. Et son tré - pas est le cru - el ou - vra - ge Des

b b #6 5 6 7 # # 7 b # [8] 7 6 5 / 2 8 7

A similar approach occurs in Michel Lambert's *Les airs de Monsieur Lambert* (1660). As in Bacilly's *Airs*, the vocal bass is doubled by the continuo bass. I removed the text of the vocal bass part in Ex. 10 in order to make the small notes and figures combination more visible.

Ex. 10. Michel Lambert 'D'un feu secret'

ger le mal qui me pos-se = de, de, Je pourrais bien guerir si ie

3 3/6 8/6 6/6 3 4 4/3 3 4 5 3 8/7 b3 5/6 8/5

In the second bar of the example the figures 3/6 and 8/6 create a series of parallel 3rds, which are to be played above the solo part. In the fifth bar the figures represent a motif to be imitated in both vocal parts. In the last bar another typical example of melodic figuring with 8-5 occurs. Here is a possible realization (Ex. 11).

Ex. 11. Lambert, realization of the melodic figures in 'D'un feu secret'

8

S. ger le mal qui me pos - sè - de, Je pour rois bien gué - rir si je

B.

3 8 6 6 6 5 3 4 4 3 3 4 5 3 8 7 5 6 8 5

Another example, taken from Lambert's song 'O Dieux comment se peut il faire' (b.8), shows a stepwise melodic line:

Ex. 12 Lambert, 'O Dieux comment se peut il faire' (b.8)

doux Philis puisse ca - cher un

doux Philis Philis puisse cach

3 3 5 1 2 3 4 3 5 1 2 3 4

The stepwise passage in the realization adds to the rather dissonant nature of the second half of this bar. While it is already unusual to emphasize a 4th between the bass and the vocal part (with the word 'puisse'), considering that this 4th essentially is a passing dissonance, the effect is made still stronger by playing the F in the realization against the dotted G of the vocal part. Of course the tempo of the crotchets will prevent to make the dissonances offensive.

If the figures and note indications by Fleury and Lambert are followed closely, the resulting realization will resemble many of the written-out lute accompaniments of the earlier seventeenth-century *Airs de cour*. Would, then, a realization on the harpsichord be much different? At this point I know only of two French written-out accompaniments for keyboard from this period: a song included in Mersenne's *L'Harmonie universelle* and an Allemande by Henri Du Mont included in his *Cantica sacra* (1652). The song is composed by King Louis XIII and provided with an accompaniment by 'Le Sieur de la Barre'.³

³ Marin Mersenne *Harmonie universelle* (Paris, 1636, Bk III, p. 391)
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Ex. 13. Louis XIII/de la Barre, 'Tu crois à beau Soleil'

Chançon composée par le Roy, & mise en tablature par le Sieur de la Barre, Epinette
& Organiste du Roy & de la Reyne.

V crois à beau So-leil Qu'a ton es-clat rien n'est pa-reil, En cet symble

temps Que tu fais le Printemps; Mais quoy tu pas-lis Aupres d'Ama-ril-

lis. lis.

Ex. 14. Transcription of Louis XIII/de la Barre, 'Tu crois à beau Soleil'

Tu crois à beau So-leil Qu'a ton es-clat rien n'est pa-reil, En cet ay-ma-ble

temps Que tu fais le Prin-temps; Mais quoy tu pas-sis Au-pres d'A-ma-ril-lis. lis.

We see a striking resemblance to the realizations of Fleury and Lambert, which suggests, at least to me, that while the format changed the playing style remained essentially the same. We see parallel motion, elegant passing notes and few trills.

This talk on French 17th-century accompaniment will be concluded with an Allemande by Henri Du Mont included in his *Cantica sacra* (1652). It can be played as a solo keyboard piece but, according to Du Mont, it may also serve as accompaniment of the version for viols in which case all viol parts are doubled in the keyboard version. Doubling of vocal or instrumental solo part(s) in the accompaniment was a common sixteenth-century practice, which did not end with the advent of basso continuo. There are only slight differences between the keyboard solo (Ex. 10) and the parts for the viols (Ex. 11), in particular in the last three bars of the example. The first half of the Allemande is shown below.

Ex. 10. Henri Du Mont, *Allemanda gravis*, keyboard version

à 4. Viol. B. T. A. C. XL. Mot. BASSVS-CONTINVVVS.

ALLEMANDA GRAVIS.

Ex. 11. Henri Du Mont, *Allemanda gravis* for viols

Conclusion

With regard to playing style: the style of either lute or keyboard accompaniments are in accordance with the requirements of Nivers in his 1689 continuo treatise. Nivers asks us to refrain from what he calls, 'chant recherchez', i.e. extended melodic movement. Actually, almost every author in the entire thoroughbass period asks for this type of accompaniment and allows us only to be more of a soloist if the principal part is silent.

With regard to harmony: when realizing seventeenth-century continuo basses, whether figured or not, one needs to know the rules of interval regulation, in particular the rule about the motion from imperfect to perfect consonances. In addition one needs to take in account the progression of the bass notes i.e. the intervals from one bass note to the following AND one needs to decide whether a bass note is to be treated as an ornamental, or as a fundamental note.

Thank you.