



COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

The Figured Bass Accompaniment in Europe

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This conference, presented online by the Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini of Lucca, the Palma Choralis Research Group & Early Music Ensemble and the Dipartimento di Musica Antica ‘Città di Brescia’, came as manna from heaven for scholars of music theory. Organized during our Covid-scarred times, it allowed numerous academics and musicians from around the world to convene and shed new light on a variety of topics related to basso continuo.

How might we achieve a historically informed basso-continuo practice? To what extent does basso-continuo practice manifest geographical and regional differences? What was the role of basso continuo in the reworking of pre-existing music? What is the relationship between basso continuo, partimenti and music education? And between basso continuo and other instruments? Answers to these questions were offered by the large gathering of scholars and musicians, both emerging and experienced, who took part in the four-day event. In this report I will emphasize only the main issues that emerged. I apologize, both to the readers of this report and to the conference’s speakers, for not including all forty papers: the high quality and quantity of the presentations forced me to select only those that expanded on the conference’s main themes as listed above.

The first keynote lecture, by Thérèse de Goede (Conservatorium van Amsterdam), addressed the first of these issues: how should we achieve a historically informed basso-continuo practice according to the particular era of the piece that is being played? At the beginning of the seventeenth century, de Goede showed, continuo practice was ‘non-tonal’: in other words, it depended on counterpoint rather than on the *regola dell’ottava* or similar rules. Consequently, when realizing an early seventeenth-century continuo line, keyboard players should apply the same counterpoint-based mindset. Most interestingly, de Goede emphasized the fact that this ‘prima pratica’ continuo style does not allow the player to introduce as many dissonances as do other approaches from later periods. The contrapuntal mould of early continuo practice was also at the centre of the paper by Edoardo Bellotti (Hochschule für Künste Bremen).

The question of a historically informed continuo practice also involved a consideration of instruments. Massimiliano Guido (Università di Pavia) inaugurated this topic by rightly emphasizing that highly specialized research on basso continuo is often separate from the relevant organological knowledge. Naomi Matsumoto (Goldsmiths, University of London) supported Guido’s claim empirically by showing convincingly that early monodies (such as those by Monteverdi and others) were accompanied by consorts of viols, not by keyboards, as we might think, and that this particular instrumentation was linked to the newly born *stile rappresentativo*. Livio Ticli (University of Huddersfield) pursued Guido’s ideas further by illustrating the concept of playing basso continuo ‘in concerto’. In particular, a seventeenth-century ‘concertato’ practice involved the singer accompanying himself or herself with an instrument and elaborating alternately the vocal line and the continuo part.

Continuing this theme, Maria Christina Cleary (Conservatorio E. F. Dall’Abaco, Verona) offered a thorough examination of Michel Corrette’s *Méthode pour la harpe* (c1774), arguing that the pedal

exercises therein are actually founded upon a basso-continuo approach to harmony peculiar to the harp. Hilary Metzger (École Nationale de Musique de Danse et d'Art Dramatique de Villeurbanne) explored double-bass continuo practice during the nineteenth century in *recitativo secco*. She argued that whereas florid realizations of chords prevailed in England and France, in Italy a particular technique on the double bass, called 'strappata', resembling chords arpeggiated on the keyboard, held sway. Metzger offered historical evidence for this (including a rare 1915 Milanese recording of Gioachino Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*) and encouraged employment of the 'strappata' to realize continuo on the double bass when tackling the relevant repertory.

The second question that emerged from this conference concerned geographical differences in basso-continuo practice. In relation to France, David Chung (Hong Kong Baptist University) presented a previously unknown source, the preludes for figured bass that are included in an eighteenth-century manuscript preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Vm8 1139), and provided a possible realization based on Jean-François Dandrieu's *Principes de l'accompagnement du clavecin* (Paris, 1719). Marie Demeillez (Université Grenoble Alpes) examined the contribution that the basso-continuo articles in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (produced between 1751 and 1772) made to the history of accompaniment, and considered the acuteness with which they account for musical practice in France in the mid-eighteenth century, especially for Italian and Italianate repertory.

Northern Italy was at the centre of the paper by Marcello Mazzetti (University of Huddersfield), who focused on renaissance Brescia using a micro-historical approach. By emphasizing the presence of female monasteries in Brescia and the lack of male voices, and citing Brescian theorists Placidio Falconi and Floriano Canale (writing during the 1580s), Mazzetti convincingly argued that it was common there to transpose single vocal lines of polyphonic pieces to fit ensembles' needs, and that some of these lines could have been played by instruments. Seventeenth-century Rome was addressed by Galliano Ciliberti (Conservatorio di Monopoli), who used a vast store of unpublished primary sources to illustrate the influence of the instrumental practice of the chapel of San Luigi dei Francesi on continuo realizations. For instance, under the baton of Antonio Maria Abbatini (1595–1670), the musical ensemble reached the enormous proportions of eight choirs together with seven organs realizing the continuo. Another maestro of San Luigi dei Francesi, Vincenzo Ugolini (1578–1638), clearly specified the instruments that should realize the different continuo parts, thus testifying to the great attention that chapel masters of San Luigi dei Francesi paid to the timbre of the continuo.

The question of the relationship between basso continuo and the reworking of earlier music was at the centre of the paper by Bella Brover-Lubovsky and Carmel Curiel (both from the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance), as well as that by Thomas Neal (independent scholar, Oxford). Both papers explored how Palestrina's compositions were reworked through the addition of bass parts. Brover-Lubovsky and Curiel focused on the elaboration by Francesco Antonio Calegari (1656–1742) of Palestrina's music and his almost daring use of dissonances in the added continuo parts. Neal, meanwhile, shed new light on Alessandro Nuvoloni's 1609 adaptation of some of Palestrina's masses. The Nuvoloni source includes two interesting features: the presence of numbers above the bass referring to compound intervals, and numbers above the soprano line indicating intervals to be played below the same notes. The first testifies that this early 'pre-continuo' practice was concerned with texture, and, consequently, with organ fingering; the second has never been noted before. The presentations by Michael Fuerst (Hochschule für Künste Bremen) and Valeria Mannoia (Università di Pavia) focused on similar issues, albeit considering sources from northern and central Europe.

Discussion of the connections between basso continuo, partimento and music education was inaugurated by a beautiful paper from Peter van Tour (Örebro universitet). By challenging the aura of mystery that surrounds the Neapolitan maestro Francesco Feo (1691–1761), van Tour showed that the bass lines of sacred choral fugues by different Neapolitan composers included in

a manuscript preserved in the Santini collection in Münster coincide with those of other partimento sources, the exercises of which bear sacred titles. This makes it possible to establish convincing links between partimento practice and composition, and to suggest that choral fugues were sketched as partimenti. The same focus on pedagogy, albeit unrelated to composition, informed my own paper (Eric Boaro, Conservatorio di Musica Stanislao Giacomantonio, Cosenza), which concluded the session. This dealt with the finding of new Neapolitan partimento study material, including early examples of *partimenti diminuiti* from the 1720s that feature contributions by Francesco Durante (1684–1755). The material shows, with pristine clarity, the partimento pedagogical process that has already been highlighted by Giorgio Sanguinetti in his book *The Art of Partimento: History, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), and also suggests that partimento was taught in female monasteries in early eighteenth-century Naples. Marco Pollaci (Maynooth University) pursued the Neapolitan focus by illustrating the features of a newly discovered source that includes counterpoint exercises by Vincenzo Bellini written in 1819.

The conference's second keynote address came from Thomas Christensen (University of Chicago). Christensen asked a fundamental question: why is basso continuo so popular today? Apart from the growing number of musicians eager to study eighteenth-century music, the answer might be found in the upsurge of partimento scholarship. However, could it also be that we, both as scholars and as performers, are overemphasizing partimento and basso continuo? Historically, Christensen showed, notions of basso continuo and partimento were far from being uniform, and even included negative opinions. For Mattheson, the importance of basso continuo was overshadowed by that of melody, the parameter that governed music in general. For Reicha, a course focused on partimento left many issues unaddressed: orchestration, melodic conduct, score analysis, instrumental technique and so forth.

In conclusion, while it took place in the middle of the event, Christensen's profound and provocative lecture could be considered a perfect summation of the whole conference. Its numerous papers offered a kaleidoscopic variety of new perspectives on basso continuo, a topic which is, in our own times, experiencing a strong increase in interest.

Eric Boaro studied musicology at the Università di Milano Statale, from which he graduated in 2015 (highest honours). He subsequently graduated with honours in piano from the Conservatorio G. Puccini in Gallarate in Italy. In 2021 he was awarded a PhD in musicology by the University of Nottingham. His main research interest is Neapolitan music of the early eighteenth century, and his work has been published in journals such as *Eighteenth-Century Music* and *Early Music*. He teaches music history at the Conservatorio di Musica Stanislao Giacomantonio, Cosenza.