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Embellishing lute music: Using the Renaissance Italian *passaggi* practice as a model and pedagogical tool for an increased improvisation vocabulary in the French Baroque style

Introduction

Early seventeenth century lute improvisation — a phrase that by its mere utterance may cause debates full of uncertainties, fears and fantasies. What is proper improvisation? How did they do it 360 years ago? Even, how can we research what is non-existent, that is, not recorded, not clearly written down or captured by any other means? The discourse of historic improvisation practices clearly gives rise to many problems and it is a complex subject to treat. An understanding of improvisation practice, no matter what period of time the scholar or performer seeks to address, must be bound to a thorough understanding of cultural practice and musical ideologies, an understanding reaching a level of artistic expression not possible without actually being there learning from the masters. It concerns a level of musical expertise that is very difficult to explain in writing. How, then, can we teach the student, or even ourselves, to improvise in the styles of Early Modern music? In this article I seek to revive a systematic practice of teaching ornamentation and improvisation from the Renaissance scholars — that is, the *passaggi* practice — and adopt it to function as a methodology for Baroque music. This is done in order to present a practice that can be used in tuition, to have new generations of musicians improvise in a comfortable manner using a broad vocabulary.

Before any discussion on sources can be presented, however, we must acknowledge some key features to consider during a study of this character. First, that any improvisation attempting to follow a historic practice must exist through a dialogue between past and present. If, for instance, the French lutenist, educator and composer Charles Mouton (1617 - between 1700 and 1710) improvised playing whatever chord, string or technique (provided it could be expressed through a medium enabling us to perceive

it), we would today probably come to label it 'proper baroque improvisation.' Mouton would then have made musical decisions based on the contemporary practice that his musical mind was brought up with and accustomed to. But when *we* improvise in this style of music ourselves we are often left with a feeling of uncertainty, asking ourselves if this is 'correctly executed.'

Second, improvisation differs from composition in that it is not fully scheduled before the performance, nor is it only pure fantasy at the present moment. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that when we are speaking of non-notated improvisation we must also assume that precomposed versions of a musical work could be transmitted audibly — non-written music does not necessarily equal improvised music.¹ It is thus necessary to establish 'improvisation' as terminology before the study can proceed, as well as to present the perspective from which I will address it. According to Oxford's *Grove Music Online*, improvisation is:

The creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed. It may involve the work's immediate composition by its performers, or the elaboration or adjustment of an existing framework, or anything in between. To some extent every performance involves elements of improvisation, although its degree varies according to period and place, and to some extent every improvisation rests on a series of conventions or implicit rules. The term 'extemporization' is used more or less interchangeably with 'improvisation'. By its very nature — in that improvisation is essentially evanescent — it is one of the subjects least amenable to historical research.²

Note the statement: '[I]t is one of the subjects least amenable to historical research.' This, I think, is true, but the fact that it is not greatly amenable should not discourage scholarly interest. It should rather increase scholarly interest as it truly is a field of research in need of further investigation; hence the present study. Dolan and colleagues write:

Improvisation is rarely associated with western contemporary classical music making, either in terms of educational curricula or mainstream classical music performance [...] Indeed, classical musicians often report anxiety and/or uncertainty when faced with the prospect of improvising [...] However, improvisation has played a pivotal role in the education and practice of many of the most commonly performed classical composers, many of whom were known to their contemporaries as great improvisers. Composers such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt and Chopin were known to showcase their musical virtuosity by producing works spontaneously in performance.³

1 Mattes, R., 'Ornamentation & improvisation after 1300.' In Duffin, R. W. (Ed.) *A performer's guide to Medieval music*. (USA: Indiana University Press, 2000): 470–481, 470.

2 Bruno Nettl, et al., 'Improvisation.' *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed October 7, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/13738>.

3 Dolan, D., Sloboda, J., Jensen, H. J., Crüts, and Feygelson, E., 'The improvisatory approach to classical music performance: An empirical investigation into its characteristics and impact.' *Music Performance Research* 6 (2013): 1–38, 2.

‘[I]mprovisation has played a pivotal role in the education and practice of many of the most commonly performed classical composers’ they write.⁴ This would suggest that we need to attempt reaching an understanding of Early Modern improvisatory practices in order to better understand contemporary music performance and that, by seeking to revive these traditions, we may be able to interact with the music in a manner that is more true to the nature in which it once was brought to life than merely playing the music as it is written on the paper. Within Early Modern scholarly circles, statements like these are widely accepted theoretically but few directions have been given on how to teach it to students. It goes without saying that the modern performer must learn as much as possible about the specific cultural practice he or she wishes to perform and create his or her own conception of what that practice is.

As an active practising performer of this music myself, I acknowledge that my approach to the subject is pragmatic rather than theoretical. Therefore, in this article I do not wish to propose any bold statement saying this is what was being improvised, because I do not think that answer even exists. What I would like to present, however, is a platform from which a practising artist can develop his or her own approach towards improvisatory elements, at different levels, focusing on late seventeenth century French lute music. Clearly, improvisation is a large subject; I will therefore focus on the elaboration, or adjustment, of an existing framework in order to restrict this present discussion to a manageable format. To present my argument I will first devote myself to compare historical sources on improvisation, followed by a presentation of the *passagi* practice as presented by Giovanni Luca Conforto (1560–1608), since his publication stands out as a good example of the methodology I wish to develop. Having established the methodology, I will proceed to present thoughts on how the Renaissance practice can be translated into a Baroque lute aesthetics by drawing attention to a few selected seventeenth century sources on lute performance. Versions of the methodology I am presenting are indeed already in use by some esteemed performers today, but there is still a need for putting this practice into writing, making it available for new generations of musicians seeking to expand their vocabulary.

In order to learn a musical performance practice we can interact with three sorts of information. The first is a literary corpora of scholarship and primary sources that we can read, reflect upon and use to form our own ideologies. The second is to listen to modern performers and analyse what they are doing with the musical material. Musicians such as Hopkinson Smith, Rolf Lislevand, Xavier Diaz LaTorre, and so forth all take more liberty in their interpretation of the musical work in their recorded and live performances than what the original manuscripts and publications state. These decisions again follow their own approach to the music based on literary and audible investigations and learning. Third, is the instrument itself, that is, what is idiomatic, *sounds* good

4 Ralf Mattes, for one, writes about medieval music practice: ‘These sources [i.e. organ treatises such as Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, ms. Clm 775 and ms. Cgm 811] shows us that medieval music teaching was mostly teaching by example. The student could memorize a great variety of patterns that later could be used to elaborate a given tenor.’ Mattes, R., *Improvisation*, 478–479.

(to our present ears) and what makes the instrument audible in a given context (a solo performance allows for a softer, more subtle technique than does a continuo-setting).

For the practising performer today, the performance must not only relate to historical sources, but also satisfy the appreciation or expectation of the modern audience; otherwise there would be no audience there to enjoy the concert. There is always a balance between how we interpret music according to how we interpret sources and what we today think sounds good. This dialogue between present and past can be formalised into a five-level structure, where each feature can interact across the levels in multiple combinations and overlap each other depending on the present context:

1. Historical evidence
2. Interpretation and performance of that evidence
3. Compared to other specialized performers
4. Compared to modern day musical practices
5. Adopted to modern ears and taste.⁵

Improvisation as a general practice in the Early Modern period

Again in Oxford Music Online, we read: 'A common feature of improvised music is a point of departure used as the basis of performance. No improvised performance is totally without stylistic or compositional basis. The number and kinds of obligatory features (referred to here as the 'model') vary by culture and genre.'⁶ Considered in a historical context, this statement is true indeed. Michael Collins and Stewart A. Carter⁷ write that, although the emphasis shifted from the horizontal (linear, melodic) in the Renaissance to the vertical (harmonic) in the Baroque around the seventeenth century following the introduction of basso continuo and the newer emphasis of emotional qualities, we can still see how earlier practices are present in the seventeenth century. Howard Mayer Brown performs a study of improvisation in his *Embellishing 16th century music* (1976).⁸

5 By 'modern taste' in this sense, I mean something a performer needs to relate to in order to gain a dedicated audience. The 'momentum' of the actual performance situation, or recording, presents a range of perspectives related to cultural studies, psychology and other related topics, a range that turns the discourse into something else than what concerns me here. The process described relates to the formation of a musical presentation (i.e. something to be perceived) where 'modern taste' is a perceptual filter that governs musicians' understandings of historical and contemporary influences, rather than how something is actually perceived by an audience during a musical performance. All musicians relate to historical music through their own taste; their 'modern taste' and not a historically distant theoretical taste.

6 Nettle et al., *Improvisation*.

7 Nettle et al., *Improvisation*.

8 Brown, H. M., *Embellishing 16th century music* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1976). Other useful resources include: Kite-Powell, J. (ed.) *A performer's guide to Renaissance music*. Second edition, revised and expanded by Kite-Powell, J. (USA: Indiana University Press, 2007); Carter, S. (ed.) *A performer's guide to seventeenth-century music*. Second edition, revised and expanded by Kite-Powell, J. (USA: Indiana University Press, 2012); Neumann, F. *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque music: With special emphasis on J. S. Bach* (USA: Princeton University Press, 1983); Atlas, A. W. *Renaissance music: Music in Western Europe 1400–1600* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

His well-founded inquiry, emphasising Italian sources, suggests that, in the renaissance (actually from the middle ages on), it was common to improvise not only ornaments, but also counterparts, imitations and even complete musical works. At the end of the book, Brown points out three kinds of improvised ornamentations in sixteenth century music: i) simple decoration; ii) virtuoso display; and iii) acoustical reinforcement. Although ornaments were not idiomatically designed, the nature and limitations of different instruments were recognised and acoustic shortcomings were no different. Ornamentation could make the sound of an instrument greater and more impressive to meet challenging acoustics or to attempt to keep the original spirit of a piece of music transposed from a larger ensemble to a weaker instrument perhaps playing alone. Agostino Agazzari (1607) speaks of invention and variety when focusing on the lute. According to him one must find a balance between displaying technical virtuosity and being reserved, all depending on the context:

Onde chi suona leuto, essendo stromento nobilissimo fra gl'altri, deve nobilmente suonarlo con molta inventione, e diversità; non come fanno alcuni, i quali per haver buona dispostezza di mano, non fanno altro chi tirare, e diminuire dal principio al fine, e massime in compagnia d'altri stromenti, che fanno il simile, dove non si sente altro che zappa, e confusione, cosa dispiacevole, et ingrata, à chi ascolta. Devesi dunque, hora con botte, ripercosse dolci; hor con passaggio largo, et hora stretto, e raddoppiate, poi cō qualche sbordonata, con belle gare e perfidie, repetendo, e cavando le medisime fuge in diverse corde, e luoghi; in somma con lunghi gruppi e trilli, et accenti à suo tempo, intrecciare le voci, che dia vaghezza al concerto, e gusto, e diletto all'uditori: guardando con giudizio di non offendersi l'un l'altro.⁹

(He who plays the lute, being the most noble of instruments, must play it nobly with much invention and variety; not as is done by those whom, because they have much grace in their hand, do nothing but play runs and divisions from beginning to end. Especially when playing with other instruments which do the same, where one hears nothing but babel and confusion, which displeases and disagrees with those who listen. Sometimes, therefore, he must use gentle strokes and repercussions; sometimes slow *passagio*; sometimes rapid and repeated ones; sometimes with some bass strings, sometimes with beautiful challenges and deceits; repeating and bringing out these figures on different strings and places; In short, with long groups, trills and accents, each in its turn, to interweave the voices so that he gives grace to the consort, and tastefulness and pleasure to the listeners, judiciously seeking not to offend one or the other.)

Agazzari categorises instruments into two categories, one of foundation and one of ornamentation; he placed the lute in both categories.¹⁰

9 Agazzari, A., *Del Sonare sopra'l basso con tutti stromenti e dell'uso loro nel concerto* (Siena: Domenico Falconi, 1607), 8.

10 Agazzari, *Sonare*, 3.

Following the *passaggi* tradition (i.e. diminution) nurtured by authors such as Bovicelli (1594), Dalla Casa (1584; 1584) and Conforto (1593)¹¹ — the latter whom presents various possible *passaggi* based on intervals, and speaks of a copy-paste methodology for diminutions¹² — it was still common in early Italian Baroque to embellish existing parts as well as creating or improvising entire counterparts.¹³ The differences invoked by the more modern emphasis of the vertical were 1) more elaborate dotted rhythms to suit the emotional value of the text (for instance sobbing or sighing) rather than smoothly flowing, linear movements; and 2) a new vocabulary of shorter embellishments that to some extent had a function of elaborating harmonies rather than solely re-inventing melodic lines. In Italy, especially, there was a tradition closely connected to the Viola Bastarda, having musicians improvising freely over a precomposed, polyphonic composition.¹⁴

Giovanni Luca Conforto, in his *Breve et facile maniera ... a far passaggi...* (1593),¹⁵ teaches us 'a far passaggi sopra tutte le note che si desidera per cantare [...] ma ancora per potere da se seria maestri scrivere ogni opera et aria passeggiata [...]'¹⁶ (to make passages over all the notes you want to sing [...] but still to be able to, as serious masters write, make passages in every work and air). This is a practice that is not only applicable to a specific genre or instrument, but rather to music in general:

Così mi son indotto à far la presente regola, & à mettere insieme questi Passaggi, che in molti & diversi modi si possono usare per far la dispositione cantando

11 Bovicelli, G. B., *Regole, passaggi di musica* (Venice: Giacomo Vincenti, 1594); Dalla Casa, G., *Il vero modo di diminuir*. Libro primo (Venice: Angelo Gardano, 1584); Dalla Casa, G., *Il vero modo di diminuir*. Libro seconda (Venice: Angelo Gardano, 1584); Conforto, G. L., *Breve et facile maniera d'essercitarsi ... a far passaggi ...* (Roma: s.n., 1593).

12 It is interesting to note that Simpson also presents this sort of methodology in Simpson, C., *The division-viol, or, the art of playing ex tempore upon a ground*. Editio secunda (London: W. Godbid for Henry Brome at the Gun in Ivy-lane, 1665), 53–55.

13 A related phenomenon is the *partimento* tradition, evolving around the late seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, where a musician is given a bass line from which he or she improvises a composition. Although, this was also used as a pedagogical tool, it differs from the *passaggi* practice in its foundation. The *partimento* practice only presents the bassline (with or without figures) leaving the performer to solve the rest of the equation guided by the rules of counterpoint, but in the *passaggi* practice the student is given a directly useable vocabulary (*pigliarne copia*; seize and copy) to bind together two already present notes; i.e. bridging from point A to B and thus being less occupied with inventing or re-inventing counterpoint. This makes the latter more easily grasped and more supportive in the process of building a vocabulary, while the first serves well as exercises for more advanced improvisers. Also, given that the *passaggi* practice seeks to embellish already existing musical material, where the counterpoint has already been established according to the tradition of the composition, it is better suited to learning how to improvise over already composed pieces of music. The *partimento* is better suited to learning completely free improvisation or the foundations for continuo playing. Grove Music Online writes: 'more likely it [i.e. partimento] reflects the common Italian practice c1700 of writing bass lines for keyboard players to work into fully-fledged pieces;' see Williams, P. and Caferio, R. 'Partimento.' *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed 24 May 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/20981>.

14 Nettle et al., *Improvisation*.

15 Conforto, *Breve*.

16 Conforto, *Breve*, 1.

sopra tutte le note ferme: & per compiacere à gl'amici, & per giovare à chi desidera di cantar bene [...].¹⁷

(So I am inclined to make this rule, and putting together these passages, which in many & various ways you can use to make the disposition to sing above all fixed notes: & to please friends, and for those who want to benefit to sing well)

This is further exemplified by: '[...] non solamente li passaggi per passaggiare madrigali & arie, ma anco le cadenze per cantare solo, ò accompagnato'¹⁸ (not only for those passages made in madrigals & arias, but also cadences when singing alone, or accompanied).¹⁹ His method is very simple as he provides multiple possible passages over various intervals, that are also of different lengths, that a musician can learn, memorise and, so-to-say, copy-paste into their own musical situation:

[...] li quali in nove giorni si possono imparare, & tenerli in memoria, & in venti ò poco più essercitandoli si possono fare, cantando sicuramente in ogni libro all'improvviso // Et per voler passaggiare qual si voglia opera, basterà solo considerare la qualita delle note, & il sito atto ad essere passaggiato, & poi secondo il loro valore, di essi pigliarne copia.²⁰

(you can learn them in nine days, and keep them in memory, and in twenty or a little more you can exercise them, certainly singing from any book without delay. // And to choose what passages you want to work with you only have to consider the quality of the notes, and the suitability of the place to make passages, and according to their value, [and] seize them [from my examples] and copy [them to your performance]).

At the end of his instruction, he also draws attention to the benefits of this practice, as well as further clarifying the improvisatory aspects of the methodology:

Possono ancora quelli che si diletano di passaggiare, pigliarne quattro, ò più note alla volta di quelle che fanno il soggetto, & ponerle l'una appresso all'altra [...], & essercitandosi cantandoli alla mente, diventeranno con prezza agili di dispositione.

Servono anco per quelli che vogliono essercitarsi con la viola, ò altri strumenti da fiato, con sonarli spesso, ó scriverli con la maniera già detta; che usandoli,

17 Conforto, *Breve*, 34.

18 Conforto, *Breve*, 36.

19 In comparison, Adriano Banchieri, in his *Cartella ovvero regole utilissime*, comments that 'Altri Fioretti si puol fare, ma tenēdo questi alla memoria serviranno in molte occasioni, & se bene gli habbiamo posti alle Cadenze sole del Soprano niente di meno servono a tutte le altre parte eccetto il Basso' (You can do other figures [lit. flowers], but taking these into memory will serve on many occasions, and if we have the good places in the cadences [we can place them both in] the soprano as well as any other party except in the bass); Banchieri, A., *Cartella ovvero regole utilissime à quelli che desiderano imparare il Canto Figurato*, prima edizione (Venetia: Giacomo Vincenti, 1601).

20 Conforto, *Breve*, 38.

gioverà à far la mano leggiadra, l'arcata dolce, conoscere il genere del passaggio, come si scrivono, & reterà nella memoria la diversità de essi: & havendo sopra ciò fatta bona pratica, si possono poi dimostrare, sonandoli in compagnia all'improvviso.²¹

(Those who can further take delight in making passages seizing four or more notes at a time of those who make the subject, and put on one and then the other [...], and practicing by singing them in the mind, will soon be at a praised disposition.

They also serve those who want to execute them with the viola, or other wind instruments, often having them sound, or writing them in the manner already mentioned; by using them, it will benefit to make the hand graceful, and the bow soft, to know the kind of passage, as you write, and the diversity of them will remain in the memory: and having the good practice above, you can then demonstrate them, having them sound together at the spur of the moment.)

Giovanni Battista Bovicelli, in his *Regole, passaggi di musica* (1594),²² also treats the art of *passagi* and focuses even more on features related to the voice than Conforto. Bovicelli starts his treatise by providing specific cases from which he presents proper performance of *passagi*. In these examples he focuses much on matters closely related to singing and how one is to place syllables correctly when performing passages. He emphasises that a singer cannot only think of the notes, but must also carefully treat the text, even when improvising, in a manner that serves the music well: 'Cosi anco nel cantare, e particolarmente nel formare i Passaggi, non solo si deve por mente alle note, ma anco alle parole; poi che si ricerca gran giuditio nel compartirle bene'²³ (So also when singing, and particularly in forming *passagi*, you must not only mind the notes, but also the words; which you then search great judgment in dividing them well [i.e. the syllables of the words]). He further draws a connection between the *passagi* practices for voices and instruments, writing that voices can attempt the same approach as the instruments if they know how to do it well: 'Et ancora che la continuatione di molti salti insieme sia più proprio delli Stromenti, che della Voce, ad ogni modo, se si sanno accommodar ben con le parole, riescono anco nella Voce [...]'²⁴ (And even if the continuation of several jumps together is more proper for instruments than for the voice. They can also, however, if you know how to place the words well, be successful for the voice ...).

A similar practice of embellishing and varying melodic lines as that described by the Italians above is also presented by Englishman Christopher Simpson in his *The Division-Viol* (1665).²⁵ When presenting his argument he appears to follow a similar discourse as, for instance, Bovicelli and Ortiz, displaying many examples and in-

21 Conforto, *Breve*, 39–40.

22 Bovicelli, *Regole*.

23 Bovicelli, *Regole*, 7.

24 Bovicelli, *Regole*, 15.

25 Simpson, *Division-viol*, 27–61.

structions following the same model found in Italian sources such as Conforto and Rogniono.²⁶ We can take notice of comments such as: 'In this manner of Play, which is the perfection of the *Viol*, or any other Instrument, if it be exactly performed, a man may shew the Excellency both of his Hand and Invention, to the delight of those that hear him,'²⁷ and:

True it is, that Invention is a gift of Nature, but much improved by Exercise and Practice. He that hath it not in so high a measure as to play *ex tempore* to a *Ground*, may, notwithstanding give both himself and hearers sufficient satisfaction in playing such Divisions as himself or others have made for that purpose [...].²⁸

What makes Simpson's treatise somewhat different from previous sources is that it is rich in both practical examples and text explaining these practices. In his book we find many practical suggestions, such as:

The Rules of *Descant-Division* are the same I gave you in joyning another Part to your *Bass*; That is, you may begin with a Third, Fifth or Eighth to the *Ground-Note*; passing on to meet the next note also in Third, Fifth, or Eighth: provided you avoyd the consecution of Perfects of the same kind, as hath been delivered. [...] A *Discord* is never used to the Beginning of the *Ground-Note*, unless in *Syncope* [...].²⁹

Here he emphasises the connection between composition and descant-division, that is, the addition of *ex tempore* play by the musician himself. However, an even more revealing passage can be found stating that:

IN Playing to a *Ground* we exercise the whole Compass of the *Viol*, acting therein sometimes the Part of a *Bass*, sometimes a *Treble* or some other Part. From hence proceed Two kinds of Division, viz. a *Breaking of the Ground*, and a *Descanting upon it*: Out of which two, is generated a Third sort of Division; to wit a *Mixture* of Those, one with the other; which Third or last sort, is expressed in a two fold Manner; that is, either in Single or in Double Notes.

These several sorts of Division are used upon the *Bass-Viol* very promiscuously, according to the Fancy of the Player or Composer [...].³⁰

Another earlier Englishman, Thomas Morley (1557/58-1602), speaks of sophisticated vocal performances incorporating imitations, canons, double counterpoints and inversions in his *Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (1597).³¹ Many of the main values given in this book resembles those of Simpson (although the aesthetic is more modern in the latter), but it is difficult sometimes to clearly understand if Morley is indeed speaking of improvisation (i.e. on the spur of the moment) or composition (creat-

26 This is very clear in for instance Simpson, *Division-viol*, 41.

27 Simpson, *Division-viol*, 27.

28 Simpson, *Division-viol*, 27.

29 Simpson, *Division-viol*, 35

30 Simpson, *Division-viol*, 28.

31 Nettl et al., *Improvisation*.

ing the music before performing it). In his examples, written as a dialogue between two or three persons, there are no obvious indicators of time proportions between performance examples and instructions; nor if they recall true events or simply are the products of pure imagination in order to make a point. Perhaps this is because improvisation and composition are so closely linked — that is, that they follow the very same principles of harmony, voice leading and aesthetics — that a distinction is not necessary at all: 'I [sic] will set downe those rules which may serve him both for descant and voluntary.'³²

Variation is clearly demanded in all instances: 'Ma. [i.e. Master says to scholar] You have maintained your point indeed, but after such a manner as no bodie will commend: for the latter halfe of your lesson is the same that your first was, without any alteration;³³ and 'Likewise the more varietie of points bee shewed in one song, the more is the *Madrigal* esteemed.'³⁴ When the third person, *Polymathes*, is introduced in the third part of the book, he is asked to sing upon a given ground ('Here is one sing upon it'); and, during the course of the tuition, he performs another three different melodies or basses upon the same ground:

for we must not thinke but hee that can formally and artificially put there foure, five, six or more parts together, may at his ease sing one part upon a ground without great studie, for that singing extempore upon a plainsong is indeede a peece of cunning, and very necessarie [...].³⁵

There are however some exceptions from proper voice leading and harmony to consider:

And even as one with a quick hand playing upon an instrument, shewing in voluntarie the agilitie of his fingers, will by the hast of his conveniencie cloke many faultes, which if they were stode upon would mightilie offend the eare, so theose musicians because the faultes are quickly overpast, as being in short notes, thinke them no faultes but yet wee must learne to distinguish betwixt an instrument playing division, and a voice expressing a dittie [...].³⁶

32 Morley, T., *A plaine and easie introduction to practical music*. First edition (London: Peter Short, 1597), 126. Consider this in relation to Simpson: 'The chief Myserie of Division to a Ground may be referred to these three Heads. First, That is be harmonious to the holding Note. Secondly, That it come off so, as to meet the next Note of the Ground in a smooth and natural passage. Thirdly, Or if it pass into Discords, that they be such as are aptly used in composition;' Simpson *Division-viol*, 30.

33 Morley, *Plaine and easie*, 84. This can be seen in line with Giulio Caccini's remark in 1601: '[...] oltre che usando anco tal volta or l'una, & or l'altra si potrà variare, essendo molto necessaria la variazione in quest'arte [...]' (in addition to using also this time, or one or the other, you can vary it, variation is very necessary in this art); Caccini, G., *Le nuove musiche* (Firenze: I Marescotti, 1601), 6.

34 Morley, *Plaine and easie*, 172.

35 Morley, *Plaine and easie*, 117–121.

36 Morley, *Plaine and easie*, 150. Simpson writes similarly about mistakes in live performances: 'I cannot but take notice of an error which I have observed in some reputed excellent Violists; who in playing a *Consort-Bass*, would sometimes at the very *Close*, run down by degrees to the Concluding-Note; than which nothing is more improper: for, if any *upper Part* do fall from a Fifth to an Eighth (a thing most frequent) the *Bass*, by such a Running down by degrees, doth make two prohibited Eighths to the said Part'; Simpson, *Division-viol*, 34.

Now we can discern a number of different sorts and levels of improvisation (see Table 1 below), ranging from a very basic level (e.g. agogics, tempo and articulations) to high-risk improvisations such as diminutions, adding new melodic materials or counterparts and real time compositions. The latter is particularly evident through the improvisation of fantasias and preludes, but it was indeed not uncommon in contemporary operas to ask for entire movements to be improvised by the performers (sometimes only indicated by words; sometimes only presenting a melody with a bassline).³⁷

There are certainly some obvious differences in the aesthetic expressions of the Italian and English styles, but it is interesting to note the extent to which their respective theorists and instructors agree on the practical paths in which specific styles can develop. We have seen literature emphasising the importance of variation, division, the real time improvisation of counter parts and multi part harmony. We have seen various sources offering solutions to various situations that the performer can copy-paste into their own practice. Equally, we have seen that rules developed for composition also apply to improvisation, although it has been agreed upon that those rules are not always followed perfectly (often as a result of ignorance, rapid playing or due to what is idiomatic for the specific instrument). There are, of course, a number of aspects that need full attention; following Table 1 below, it is Level III that I will address in this paper, focusing on melodic variation and improvisation upon a given melodic line.³⁸


<p>Level III Least foreseeable High risk</p>	<p>diminutions altering harmony adding counterparts adding new melodic material changing register improvising over given bass-lines real-time composing etc.</p>	<p>Less close to original 'Not what is written'</p>
<hr/>		
<p>Level II Less foreseeable Higher risk</p>	<p>ornamenting stille brisée breaking and prolonging chords reducing or filling out chords and parts etc.</p>	
<hr/>		
<p>Level I Highly foreseeable Low risk</p>	<p>rhythmic flexibility and agogics dynamic flexibility flexible tempos altering articulations etc.</p>	<p>Close to original 'As it is written'</p>

Table 1. Different levels of improvisation.

37 Nettle, et al., *Improvisation*.

38 Because the act of embellishing an already existing melodic line presumes that there is a composition to begin with, a set structure that is to be embellished, I will not present any thoughts on counterpoint or more free composition (such as *partimento*). Focusing more on linear movement between points in an already established harmonisation and counterpoint, such matters are not in the scope of this present article.

Conforto's method

Among the methods mentioned earlier, Conforto stands out as the most pragmatic and clear methodology. This has to do with his examples being note-based rather than text-based and that it offers the easily grasped copy-paste mentality (*pigliarne copia*). In Example 1 below we see an excerpt from his book showing his suggested *passagi* for a major second interval; 50 examples in all. Similar examples are given for most intervals, both ascending and descending. According to his model then, one can identify an interval in the music one plays, find that in his book and copy-paste one of the examples into the given musical context (cf. 'you can learn them in nine days, and keep them in memory, and in twenty or a little more you can exercise them, certainly from singing from any book without delay' cited earlier). Tempo is to be adopted to the context. This shows a level of vocabulary use that is highly pragmatic and easily grasped by a student, which is why I have chosen his work as the foundation for my approach. Example 2 below, presents this method in practise upon a fictional melody, where all cells are directly copied from Conforto's book.

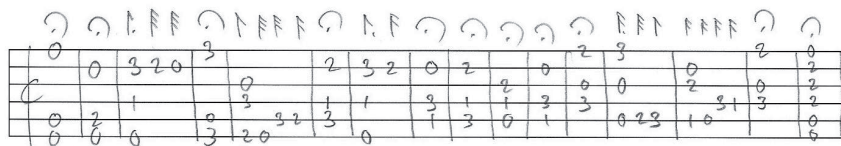
The image displays a series of seven musical staves in treble clef, each containing a sequence of notes and rests. The first staff shows a simple major second interval (two notes). The subsequent staves, labeled with measure numbers 6, 10, 14, 17, 20, and 24, show increasingly complex rhythmic and melodic patterns, representing the 'passagi' exercises for that interval. The patterns involve various note values, rests, and articulations, all designed to be copied and pasted into a musical context.

Example 1. The first interval and its *passagi* from Giovanni Luca Conforto's *Breve et facile maniera ... a far passagi...* (1593), 3-4.

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Original' and contains a simple melody of six notes. The middle staff is labeled 'Version 1' and shows a more complex, rhythmic pattern of notes. The bottom staff is labeled 'Version 2' and shows another complex, rhythmic pattern of notes. All three staves are in treble clef and common time (C).

Example 2. Conforto's (1593) *pigliarne copia* in practise.

This logic also explains some pieces found in the repertoire, which, in their original version, are not inspiring enough to be played at a concert because of uncomfortable harmonic progressions and lack of clear direction and logic. With the use of the *pigliarne copia* methodology however, copy-pasting from Conforto's book into a piece (in this case by Dalza; see Ex. 3 below), can glue the parts of the original structure together, creating a composition that, by itself, also functions as a work (see Ex. 4). It is this method that I wish to adopt to Baroque repertoire music.



Example 3. Joan Ambrosio Dalza (1508) 'Tastar de corde,' tablature.

Original:

Possible *passaggi*-version:

Example 4. Dalza (1508) 'Tastar de corde,' transcription and possible *passaggi* version.

*Acquiring a French, lute-specific vocabulary*³⁹

French lute sources varied on the subject of improvisation. The sources that provide discussions on ornamentation in their *avertissement* only present legends of what specific signs mean. From these instructions, we may reach an understanding of the vocabulary; however, the more elaborate melodic excursions remain unclear. The lute music collections of Gallot, Gaultier, Mouton and Perrine⁴⁰ mention nothing directly on the subject of improvisation. Diminution practices were present in French music, through phenomena such as *air de cour* and the *double* (i.e. often composed variations), but instructions and effective pedagogical methodologies are scarce. Either improvisation was no issue, which is somewhat unlikely, or perhaps it was such an integrated part of musicianship that it needed no comment. Denis Gaultier writes in the introduction to his book that one of the reasons motivating him to publish his musical works is that he has come to understand that his pieces had been altered beyond recognition as they had been passed around the country.⁴¹ Did this comment perhaps imply that personal interpretation (a kind of improvisation) had morphed the music beyond recognition (cf. the earlier mentioned late Renaissance conflict between composer and virtuoso, expression and ornamentation)? Unfortunately, these publications, when dealing with improvisation, raise questions rather than answer them. To fully treat these questions, I would need a different context, and for that reason I will let them pass as rhetorical questions.

The lute instruction book by Rogers (*The Burwell lute tutor*; c. 1660–1672)⁴² provides us with more to work with. There are some vague indications at the early parts of the book, such as: ‘It is a gift of God and nature to be an excellent lutenist [as it] depend[s] upon the imagination;’ ‘fashions of playing and composing;’ and ‘all his [i.e. the lute] beauties are different according to the genius of the lute master that composes our plays, and dives in that spring of science and charms.’ What is truly interesting to notice here are the uses of words like ‘imagination,’ ‘fashion on playing and composing,’ and ‘different according to the genius’ which all may indicate that improvisation, of some kind, is part of a good performance. Rogers later points out the clear inconsistencies between tablature and performed work, also that the tutoring master may change his instructions upon playing from one day to another. It would

39 Portions of this section was previously published in my doctoral dissertation, but has been revised, edited and put into a new context here; Rolfhamre, R. *The popular lute: An Investigation of the Function and Performance of Music in France between 1650 and 1700* (PhD dissertation, University of Agder, 2014).

40 See for instance: Gallot, J., *Pièces de luth composés sur differens modes* (Paris: H. Bonneuil, s.n.); Gaultier, D., *Pièces de luth sur trois différents modes nouveaux / [Denis & Ennemond Gaultier:] Livre de tablature des pièces de luth sur plusieurs différents modes, avec quelques règles qu’il faut observer pour le bien toucher.* c. 1670/c.1680. (Genève: Minkoff Reprint, 1975); Mouton, C., *Pièces de luth sur different modes.* 1698 (Genève: Minkoff Reprint, 1978); Perrine, P., *Livre de musique pour le lut* (Paris: Perrine, 1679).

41 Gaultier, *Pièces*, Book 1: 2.

42 I have used Dart’s translation of the book into modern English when quoting Rogers, since the original can be difficult to read and understand. I have compared Dart’s translations with the original and I agree with his solutions; see: Dart, T., ‘Miss Mary Burwell’s Instruction Book for the Lute.’ *The Galpin Society Journal*, 11 (May, 1958). The original document can be found in: Rogers, J., *The Burwell lute tutor.* c. 1660–1672. Introductory study by Robert Spencer (England: Boethius Press, 1974).

appear as though he blames this phenomenon upon the master's ego, protecting his position among colleagues and students. The 'soul' of the lute, he points out, cannot be taught, but is better stolen by hearing the masters play. A musician must be well acquainted with the proper key in order to provide grace and sweetness 'without running into strange keys which have no affinity with the air of the song.' A lutenist may even vary a piece by beginning 'a tune upon any of the parts, then join one string to it, then two, then three [... etc.] Sometimes in a song or good air you make the bass or any other part sing instead of the treble.' Perhaps the clearest lead in the book on the subject of improvisation is provided when he further implies that if a lutenist is not a competent composer he must satisfy himself by playing music by other composers. He writes: 'In that also he must shake off self-love, in playing those lessons [i.e. pieces] as the author does, without altering or adding anything of his own.'⁴³

Thomas Mace, on the other hand, directs our attention to the very problem of the publications of his French contemporaries, in his *Musick's Monument* (1676):

The *French* (who were generally accounted *Great Masters*) seldom or never would *prick* [intabulate] their *Lessons* as *They Play'd them*, much less *Reveal* any thing (further than of necessity they must) to the very *Art*, or *Instrument*, which I shall *manifest* and very *plain*.^[44]

Nor was there, nor yet is there *Any Thing* more constantly to be observed among *Masters*, than to be *Very Sparing* in their *communications* concerning *Openness*, *Plainness*, and *Freeness*; either with *Parting* with their *Lessons*, or *Imparting* much of *Their Skill* to their *Scholars*; more than to shew them the *Ordinary way* how to play such and such *Lessons*.

This hath been, and still is the *Common Humour*, ever since *my Time*

So that it is no marvel, that it continues *Dark* and *Hidden* to *All*, excepting some *Few*, who make it their *Chief Work* to *Practice*, and *Search* into its *Secrets*.

Which when they have done, and with *Long Pains*, and much *Labour obtained*,
THEY DYE, AND ALL THEIR SKILL AND EXPERIENCE DYES WITH THEM.

The reality of a gap between tablature and performance remains clear, but we cannot find the term 'improvisation' *per se* in Mace's *Monument*. When I study the book, however, he seems to employ the expression 'voluntary play' synonymously. There are some hints in the lute part of the book where we find not only an elaborate ornament vocabulary with clear relations to the harpsichord and viol⁴⁵ but also remarks such as: 1) The musician must know his key well so he does not add *graces* that sound bad; 2) he must be aware of his *fuge*, *shape* and *form* so that it translates well to the audience; and 3), which is perhaps the most revealing, one must:

43 Dart, *Burwell*, 3–62, 14, 25, 44, 46, 51.

44 François Couperin suggests this is probably why, according to him, performers outside of France 'play our music less well than we play theirs [...] Our costum has enslaved us and we continue in it [...] Thus not having devised any signs or characters for communicating our particular ideas, we strive to remedy this by writing words like "tenderly", "quickly", etc. [...];' Couperin, F., *L'Art de toucher le clavecin*. Trans. M. Halford, 2. ed. (USA: Alfred Publishing Co., Inc., 1995), 49.

45 Mace does also include dynamics ('soft' and 'loud') and pauses in his listings of ornaments.

be able (upon the *Touch of any String, or Key*) so to follow such a *Touch, or such a Humour, as on the sudden, you either accidentally Hit upon or else shall Design for your self, to follow like a Master; the which shall be done [...]* in the Nature of *Ex tempore, or Voluntary Play*.

But the true support for my interpretation of voluntary play, as synonymous for what we now call improvisation, can be found in his theorbo section where he presents some *lessons* 'to show you the way and manner of Playing *Voluntary*, which you may imitate.' As we may call it axiomatic that improvisation is part of continuo practice (as put by Mace: 'when you can *Readily* perform, from off a *Song-Note*, you may be said to be a *Tollerable Performer* in a *Consort*'), we may transfer this use of 'voluntary play' onto other parts of the book. The overall impression upon reading the book is that 'performer,' 'improviser' and 'composer,' as entities, permeate into one another, and this not only makes it difficult to speak solely of one of the components but also implies a contemporary view of the 'whole musician.' This is especially the case if we consider his sections on improvising *interludes*, serving as bridges between one key and another so that the passing from one key to the next is not perceived as harsh.⁴⁶

Applying Conforto's pigliarne copia examples to French Baroque lute music

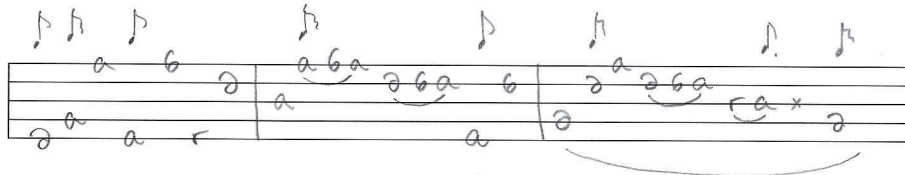
Previous descriptions and instructions on improvisation are open for interpretation and, in their more or less clear directions, one is left wondering *how* it was done in French lute music and not only *what* was done. Mignot de la Voye (1656) comments: 'Mais comme le silence dépend de la fantaisie du Compositeur, on n'en peut pas donner des regles certaines, il faut donc avoir recours à l'estude des partitions des bons Auteurs [...].'⁴⁷ (But as the [utilisation of] silence depends on the imagination of the composer, one cannot provide certain rules, it is necessary to resort to studying scores [and tablatures] of good composers.) As has been seen on numerous occasions throughout this article, improvisatory practice follows (as far as the musical situation allows it) the rules of composition. Simple logic, then, suggests that a good way to start acquiring a vocabulary is to turn to the composed repertoire, extracting figures and models from the composers at a given period of time. A full investigation of that sort does not serve the present context, but I will present some selected examples from the lute-related repertoire to show some key features that can be used on Conforto's examples to make them sound more Baroque. The first is from Francesco Corbetta's 'Caprice de chaconne' (1671; see Ex. 5 below)⁴⁸ where the legatos (which on plucked string instruments are produced by left-hand techniques called, in modern terms, hammer on and pull off) are written according to what is idiomatic to the instrument, rather than what suits the metre or phrase; the legato ends when a new

46 Mace, T., *Musick's Monument, or a remembrancer of the best practical musick, both devine and civil, that has ever been known to have been in the world divided into three parts...* (London: T. Ratcliffe and N. Thompson for the author, and are sold by himself-- and by John Carr, 1676), 40, 115, 134, 209, 217.

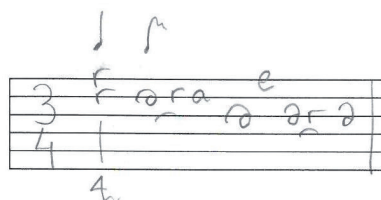
47 de la Voye, M., *Traité de musique* (Paris: Robert Ballard, 1656), Part 4: 17.

48 Corbetta, F., *La guitarrre royalle* (Paris: H. Bonneüil, 1671).

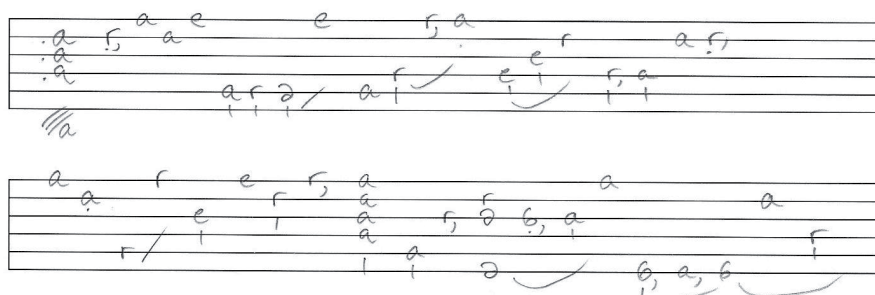
string is plucked. A similar case can also be seen in the lute repertoire (see Ex. 6 below), although it seems that slurs are even more frequent in the Baroque guitar repertoire. Idiomatic playing is a keyword in the French lute repertoire;⁴⁹ Example 7 below presents this statement clearly.



Example 5. Bars 23–26 in Francesco Corbetta’s ‘Caprice de chaconne,’ *La guitare royale* (Paris, 1671), 72.



Example 6. First bar from ‘Sarabande’ for Baroque lute, *Tabulatura lutniowa RM 4136 olim Mf 2003*, Lautenbuch nr. 3, 7r.



Example 7. Beginning of Mr. Gaultier ‘Prelude,’ *Livres de tablathutre...*, 6.

Based on my experience as a performer and scholar, and many examples such as those few given here (Exs. 5–7), I suggest that the Renaissance *passagi* practice, as presented by Conforto, can be made to sound Baroque in the following manners:

- Sometimes changing *figuetas* (i.e. the technique based on right hand thumb/index finger alternation) for idiomatic legatos.
- Sometimes playing a *passagio* more close to the vertical action it leads to, instead of being equally distributed between two points; that is, more like graces than evenly distributed *passagi*.

49 Of course, this applies to other national traditions as well, but given that France is my concern here, I choose only to focus on that.

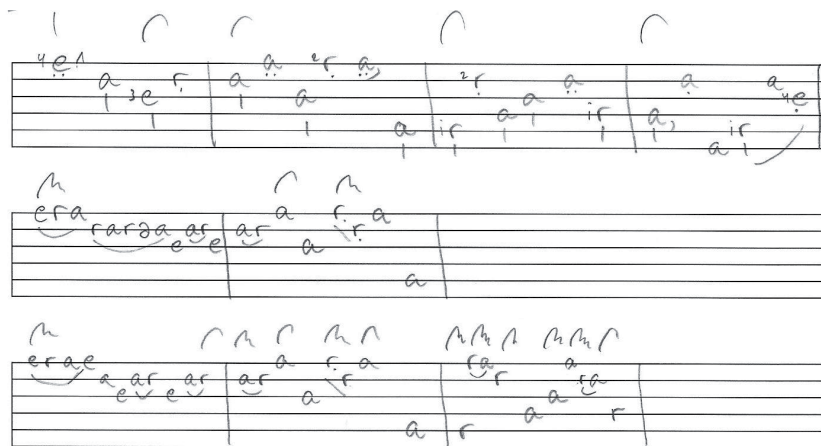
- Extracting short, suitable cells from Conforto's examples, rather than rushing to be able to fit all tones into a context that does not provide enough time for the performer to do so.
- Utilising *notes inégales* when aesthetically proper to do so.
- Mixing Conforto's examples with the popular graces of the Baroque composers (e.g. *tremblement*, *martellement* and *chute*).

Case: 'Canon de gautier'

To exemplify these points, I will apply a selection of them in order to accommodate Conforto's models to a French seventeenth century lute piece. I have chosen Monsieur Gaultier's 'Canon de gautier' (*Ms. Barbe*, Paris, Bibliothèque National, Département de la musique, F-Pn Rés. Vmb. ms. 7, p. 1) because it is not technically demanding and thus it leaves room for added melodic lines. To make my argument more effective I will only focus on the first bars in the aim of showing how the *pigliarne copia* mentality can be used; the same mentality can of course be tested on the rest of the piece where appropriate.

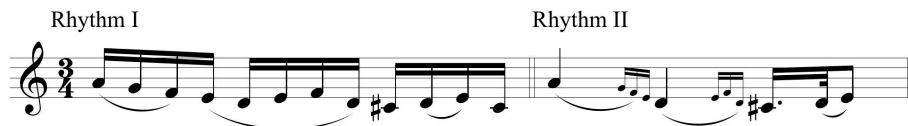
In Example 8 (see Ex. 9 for a Baroque lute tablature version) I have followed Conforto's method by looking up intervals and choosing examples, or parts of examples, to copy-paste into the melody of the 'Canon de gautier.' The first line of the examples shows the original piece and the two lower versions show variations made from extracting Conforto's examples. Slurs have been added according to instrument idiomatics to create the typical, rhythmic syncopation seen in French repertoire, particularly that of the Baroque guitar (cf. the music of Corbetta and de Visée).

Example 8. Bars 1–4 of 'Canon de gautier,' *Ms. Barbe*, Paris, Bibliothèque National, Département de la musique, F-Pn Rés. Vmb. ms. 7, 1; with possible variations.



Example 9. Bars 1–4 of ‘Canon de gautier’ with possible variations; Baroque lute tablature version.

The cells extracted for Examples 8 and 9 are quite literate in terms of rhythm and by using more Baroque-like techniques, such as left hand legatos, to produce the figures. The figures then become more like graces than *passagi*. It is also possible to further elaborate on the rhythm (see Ex. 10 below) drawing both on the aesthetics of graces and inspiration from the French *notes inégales* practice in which a steady eighth note progression can be played straight (as written) or dotted (stressing either the first or second note of each pair of eighths).



Example 10. Selected tones from bar 1 of ‘Canon de gautier’ with one possible rhythmic variation.

Concluding thoughts

As we recall, *Grove music online* spoke of improvisation as ‘[t]he creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed.’ Through this article I have tried to present a systematic practice of teaching ornamentation and improvisation; a practice that gives the performer a sense of comfort, and extended vocabulary, to be a valid methodology in tuition. It can provide the student, as well as the teacher, somewhere to start building an improvisation vocabulary, to better grasp the logic behind improvisation and starting to connect melodic points linearly without being too much hindered by authenticity related questions. Of course improvisation, embellishing and *passagi*-practice stand in proportion to the abilities of the performer. This is why I found the methodology interesting; it can be adopted to the performer’s individual skill and a vocabulary can be gained systematically (without necessarily

having to follow tuition). If the methodology is used correctly, it can provide a vocabulary not only in the Renaissance, but also in the Baroque and this becomes a highly effective methodology seen in a pedagogical context.

This article has highlighted three interesting perspectives and values of such a methodology. First, a *pedagogical value*: Not only is Conforto's treatise useful to learn Renaissance *passagi*, but it can also be used in Baroque music. Having Conforto's treatise, as well as his contemporary colleagues' treatises, as part of the curriculum in today's lute education can thus prove quite useful. Recall Simpson who suggested performers lacking sufficient improvisation skills, in 1665, to play '[...] such Divisions as himself or others have made for that purpose.'

Second, a *methodological value*: The *pigliarne copia* strategy can systematically increase the improviser's vocabulary, widening the horizons of what can be accomplished in the Baroque lute repertoire beyond common ornaments.

Third, a *historical value*: The study also emphasises the need for, and usefulness of, regarding performance practice over time, and not only in its own genre or time.

Acknowledgement: I wish to extend my gratitude towards Noroff University College who funded my participation at the Seventeenth Nordic Musicological Congress 2015, leading to this article.

Abstract

Early seventeenth century lute improvisation — a phrase that by its mere utterance may cause debates full of uncertainties, fears and fantasies. What is proper improvisation? How did they do it 360 years ago? In this article I seek to revive a systematic practice of teaching ornamentation and improvisation from the Renaissance scholars — i.e. the *passaggi* practice — and adopt it to function as a methodology for Baroque music. This is done in order to present a practice that can be used in tuition, to have new generations of musicians improvise in a comfortable manner using a broad vocabulary; to present a methodology with pedagogical, methodological and a historical value.